

Subject: Suggestions For Comprehensive Plan
Attachments: Leaf-Levine Comprehensive Planning Memo.pdf

Will Leaf

Sent: Tuesday, March 26, 2024 12:06 PM

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Cc: Jonathan Levine

Subject: Suggestions For Comprehensive Plan

Dear members of City Council and the Planning Commission:

We are excited that the city has [asked](#) the Planning Commission and Interface Studios to create a new comprehensive plan that allows more housing density throughout the city, with fewer, more flexible, zoning districts.

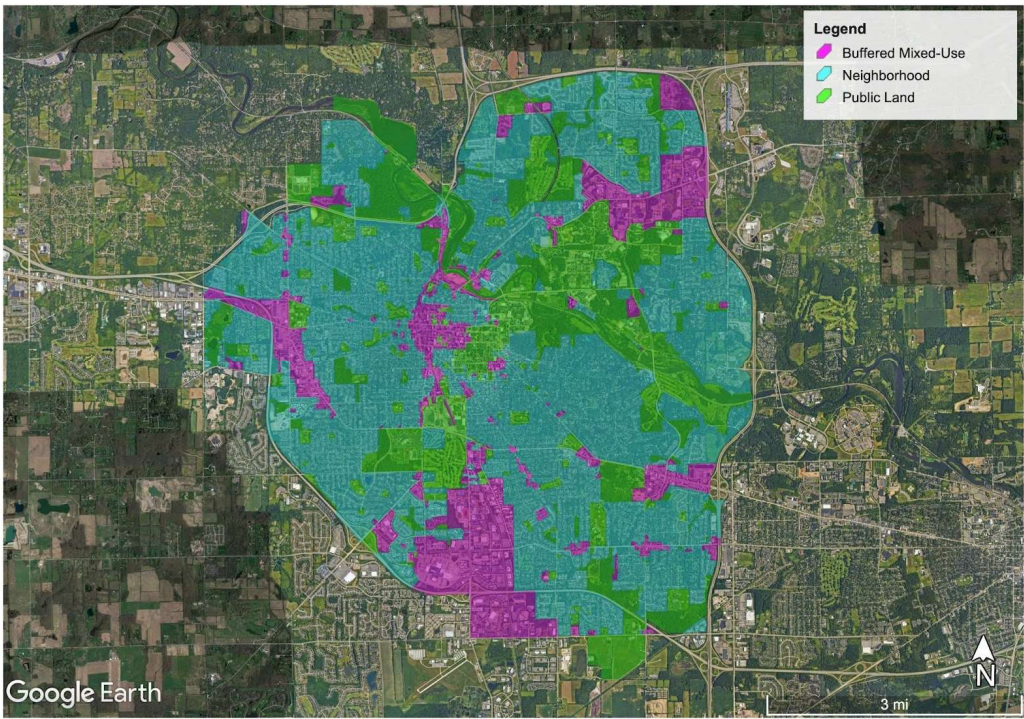
In the attached memo, we suggest a strategy to implement these goals, along with a proposed future land use map.

Thank you for your time,

Will Leaf and Jonathan Levine

Will Leaf has written about zoning for Real Estate Law Journal and can be reached at willeaf@umich.edu.

Jonathan Levine is a Professor of Urban and Regional Planning at the University of Michigan and can be reached at jnthnlvn@umich.edu.

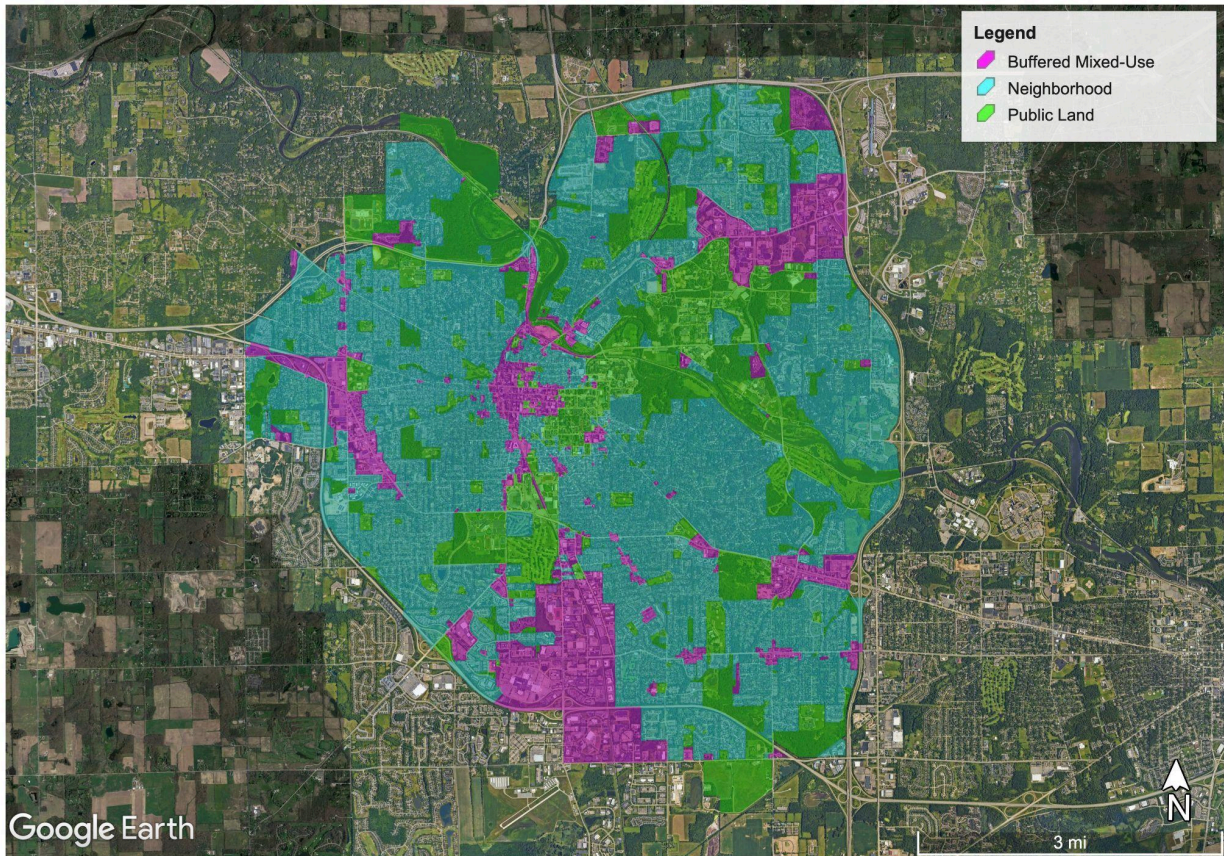


Ann Arbor's New Comprehensive Plan

This year, the city of Ann Arbor is creating a new comprehensive land use plan, which will guide planning and zoning decisions for decades to come.

City Council has already committed to ambitious housing affordability and carbon emissions goals. Below, we give suggestions for how the new comprehensive plan can further these goals.

Suggested Future Land Use Map



[\(PDF\)](#)

Suggested Land Use Categories

Buffered Mixed-Use

The city currently has two types of downtown zoning districts, along with more than a dozen suburban-style commercial districts, which are [designed](#) for easy vehicle use. We believe these districts should be consolidated into one “Buffered Mixed-Use” district.

In the Buffered Mixed-Use zoning district, the rules for a parcel would depend on the parcel’s distance from other zoning districts. For example, the maximum height of a building might be 35 feet within 50 feet of a Neighborhood district and incrementally increase at greater distances from the Neighborhood district. Setback requirements, building mass standards, and noise rules would also be stricter near Neighborhood districts.

This sort of internal buffering already exists in the city’s TC-1 zone, where heights and setbacks vary depending on the distance to the nearest residential district.

In a Buffered Mixed-Use district, developers could build badly needed housing with minimal restrictions at the center of downtown or a commercial corridor, while homeowners in nearby districts could rest easy, knowing that highrises would not be built at the edge of the district near their homes.

The city’s industrial districts should also be included in the new Buffered Mixed-Use District. As this [2021 memo](#) explains, many other cities have converted former industrial districts into mixed-use districts that allow inoffensive light industry along with homes and stores. Noxious industrial uses that endanger neighboring business or homes should not be permitted anywhere within the city.

As an alternative to creating a single Buffered Mixed-Use district, the city could establish a small number of zoning districts that all follow the principles of internal buffering, but a single district would be simpler and more equitable.

Neighborhood

Most privately held land in Ann Arbor is [currently zoned](#) R1-Single-Family Residential. R1 districts have use restrictions that ban duplexes, apartments, condominiums, and shops. These restrictions limit the supply of housing and exclude traditional neighborhood grocery stores and retail, making neighborhoods less walkable and convenient.

R1 districts also have minimum lot sizes ranging from one-tenth to one-half acre. These density restrictions forbid modest-sized, closely spaced homes, making housing needlessly scarce and expensive and [contributing](#) to economic and racial segregation.



An R1 district on the north side of Ann Arbor, which only allows single-family homes.

The new comprehensive plan should direct the Planning Commission to allow for diverse, walkable neighborhoods by replacing the city's residential districts with a new Neighborhood district that has the following characteristics:

- Single-family homes, duplexes, apartments, and condominiums are all permitted.
- Inoffensive businesses, like grocery stores, coffee shops, and corner stores, are allowed so long as they follow strict rules about noise, odor, and other performance standards.
- Minimum lot sizes are eliminated, and setbacks are reduced, but a 35 foot height limit is maintained.
- Restrictions on the number of unrelated persons per dwelling unit are eliminated. Maximum occupancy would still be limited by Ann Arbor's [minimum space and facilities requirements](#) and the [overcrowding section](#) of Michigan's Housing Law.

Rezoning

The comprehensive plan should anticipate and plan for future zoning changes, rather than treat zoning as fixed until the next comprehensive plan is made at some indefinite future time. Specifically, the plan should encourage rezoning requests to the Buffered Mixed-Use district.

For example, ten years from now, a developer might buy up a block of low-density student housing at the edge of campus, and request that it be rezoned to Buffered Mixed-Use in order to build a 60 foot mixed-use building on the campus-side of the block.

The comprehensive plan should encourage requests like this. The city would benefit from the new housing and commercial space, and nearby residents could be confident that highrises would not be built next to their homes, regards of how close the Buffered Mixed-Use district was to their property.

Through gradual rezonings to the Buffered Mixed-Use district, the city could grow and evolve with minimal disruptions for longtime residents.

Will Leaf has written about internally buffered zoning districts in the Real Estate Law Journal and can be reached at willeaf@umich.edu.

Jonathan Levine is a Professor of Urban and Regional Planning at the University of Michigan and can be reached at jnthnlvn@umich.edu.