

**To: Mayor Taylor and City Council Members**

**Subject: Environmental Commission Recommends the Inclusion of Natural Features Sustainability in Ann Arbor City Planning and Development**

**From: Environmental Commission**

**Date: 4/24/25**

The Environmental Commission is fulfilling its mission according to the City Code to develop comprehensive, integrated environmental policies for implementation by the City to protect and enhance our air, water, land, and public health. The objective of the attached resolution is to elevate the importance of natural features and biodiversity in the new Comprehensive Plan to bring balance to the anticipated changes and to support sustainability.

Natural Features and the ecosystem services they provide are critical to humanity's lifeline. The resolution seeks to ensure that the 2004 Natural Features Master Plan (NFMP) is incorporated into the New Comprehensive Plan, as with the other plans that are being integrated.

We agree that the city should update the Natural Features review standards and should expand the review process and Natural Features protections to **all** projects, in addition to those based on site plans.

The Institute of Sustainable Communities n.d. "What is a Sustainable Community" accessed at <https://sustain.org/about/what-is-a-sustainable-community/> defines a sustainable community as one that manages its human, natural, and financial capital to meet current needs while ensuring that adequate resources are available for future generations. Healthy functioning natural systems integrated with the built environment are essential to support healthy, sustainable communities. Planning in harmony with nature is foundational to creating sustainable, resilient, and equitable communities.

The current NFMP contains six overarching goals and aspirations that remain relevant today:

- Improve Water Quality
- Inventory Natural Features
- Foster Stewardship through Education and Outreach
- Minimize Invasive Organisms

- Update Local Ordinances
- Anticipate Climate Change

The NFMP provides descriptions, goals, and implementation strategies for the following:

- The watershed of the Huron River
- Wetlands, ponds and lakes
- Floodways and floodplains
- Groundwater and groundwater recharge areas
- Landforms and steep slopes
- Woodlands, savannas and prairies
- Landmark Trees
- Native plant and animal ecosystems
- Greenway linkages between natural features

In addition to the goals in the NFMP and the improvements being worked on by the Biodiversity Work Group, we have attached a list of specific example tasks that should be completed in Appendix.

The Draft Comprehensive Plan, released on April 9, 2025, acknowledges Natural Features in generalized terms. The Environmental Commission believes that protections for Natural Features in the draft document are insufficient. The goal is to anticipate and address challenges related to climate change in a holistic manner that will support quality of life in an increasingly urban city.

The Environmental Commission is aware that a key part of the new Comprehensive Plan is to rezone much of the City in ways that increase the density of buildings in the substantial portions of the City that are now zoned R1 or R2 and contain a large portion of the City's permeable surfaces and tree canopy. As density increases on residential properties, we will lose open spaces that provide permeable surfaces for water absorption as well as spaces for trees and other vegetation.

We are concerned that significant changes in the City code to permit denser development in well-established residential areas will require effective protections for Natural Features in order to continue to provide nature-based benefits, from stormwater management to support of biodiversity and human health.

As the Ann Arbor Planning Commission prepares the Comprehensive Plan that will guide its direction in the coming years to support an increased population density, it will be necessary to incorporate and improve upon the environmental ethic and regulations. The Environmental Commission recommends that the City act to include support for biodiversity and Natural Features as essential and integral to support both green infrastructure and quality of life.

Currently, these specific Natural Features, Landmark (Heritage) Trees, Native Forest Fragments and Woodlands, Waterways, Floodplains and Floodways, Wetlands, Steep Slopes, and Endangered Species Habitats have some protections that are limited to projects that require a site plan.

We must find balance to meet both our current and future needs. If we don't make saving natural ecosystems a critical goal, there will be no balance and thus we won't have a sustainable future.

Our sustainable future will be significantly enhanced by the integration of Natural Features and biodiversity and is symbolized by the name of our city and our recognition as Tree City.

We recommend incorporation of the current NFMP into the new Comprehensive Plan and updating of protections, strategies, and actions to sustain Natural Features, balancing biodiversity, protection, and stewardship with ongoing development.

For these reasons, the Environmental Commission strongly recommends that the City Council direct the Planning Commission and Planning Staff to incorporate the NFMP into the Comprehensive Plan and take actions to elevate Natural Features to a priority in the sustainability program.

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## Appendix: 4/24/25 Environmental Commission Message to Mayor Taylor and City Council Members

### A List of Potential Tasks to be Completed:

- Identify non-motorized routes from high-density housing to the nearest park and nature area;
- Identify wildlife corridors (public and private land) throughout the City;
- Work to complete and publish the Urban Forest Management Plan, and ensure that its goals and strategies address all of the City's forests;
- Increase protections for all native trees to reflect the biodiversity value of native trees versus non-native trees
- Incentivize development in areas with low Natural Features values yet high in other desirable values such as walkable / bikeable / public transit to areas with employment opportunities and other amenities.
- Broaden work across the City to control invasive species, especially in high value areas.
- Increase the efforts by NAP and its volunteers to broaden effort on the City's Park Natural Areas to restore and enhance native biodiversity and broaden the number of Parks on which that work is done.
- Increase understanding and develop goals and strategies to upgrade the quality of life in the City's less advantaged areas
- Encourage the use of nature-based design to provide solutions for existing and new buildings:
  - Install rain gardens
  - Install rooftop gardens
  - Conversions of mowed grass areas to native plantings
  - Reduction in impervious surfaces
  - Remove invasive species
  - Emphasize and encourage the use of native plants

- Identify, protect and restore Woodlands, old trees and Native Forest Fragments
- Endeavor to educate contractors across the construction and green industry on how to update their procedures and operations to greatly reduce their incidental damage to Natural Features, especially trees;
- Encourage the local food system
- Develop goals and strategies to reduce mortality of birds across the City from collisions with windows
- Encourage actions to support pollinators.
- Develop regulations to reduce compaction of soils and prevent the unintended loss of Landmark and Heritage Trees.