

Subject: Be bold, be Ann Arbor, blaze our own trail: a Third-Way proposal for densification and affordable housing

From: Anthony Pinnell

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To: Planning <Planning@a2gov.org>; City Council <CityCouncil@a2gov.org>

Subject: Be bold, be Ann Arbor, blaze our own trail: a Third-Way proposal for densification and affordable housing

Dear Planning Commission members,
Mayor Taylor and all Ann Arbor City Councilmembers,

The draft Comprehensive Land Use Plan is causing uproar all across the city. Residents - voters - who staunchly support progressive policy-making are shocked by its top-down, heavy-handed design, and fear it will damage and even destroy the fabric of our existing communities. Ann Arbor has never shied away from positive change. But this plan's crushing scope forces on us too many of the proven failures of Seattle and the Twin Cities. Every positive gain in those large cities also brought tragic, irreversible loss of neighborhood unfitting to America's most desirable college town - and upzoning there failed to produce affordable housing.

Nobody in Ann Arbor want's to copy and repeat other city's mistakes. We learn, look beyond the horizon, think ahead of the game, and do it our way. We are not NIMBYs: anyone using that term to write-off opponents to this plan is way behind the times. We all say "YES" to densification and we don't reject low-rise and high-rise buildings - but it's gotta be smart, pointalistic and ergonomically sited; it has to keep our wonderful old housing stock, while creating real opportunities for affordable housing. "My back yard" is not my literal back yard, but rather the pub/cafe we love just 2 blocks away on Packard, the grocery store we love on Stadium. Yet, a Jimmy John's and marijuana dispensery two doors down on our quiet residential street corner? NO.

So just scrap the plan for now. There is no shame in that. Shelve it. Keep certain elements. Change your process to gather local, smart intel from the myriad homeowners' associations. Get the grassroots backing you absolutely must have. We all want to help, and together We Can Do This!

This plan holds the potential of driving harmful reactionary voting that would reverse all the progressive good achieved in the past 20 years.

Please don't accuse residents of being non-attentive the past two years. Ann Arborians simply did not know the tack your work was taking. We were too distracted with coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic, getting school-age kids back on track, paying for our kids' college education when our incomes had dried up, helplessly watching the national political disaster unfold, and then waking up to a worst-case election outcome that has now thrown even financially stable Ann Arbor into turmoil.

It's not your fault, but **your current plan could not have come at a worse time**. However well-meant your efforts, the timing now is terrible, and the plan as produced is tone-deaf to the very real fears of residents already facing job loss, collapse of research labs, possible forced moves to faraway places. Selfless, dedicated physicians in this town are being hunted down by Trump's henchmen for possible criminal prosecution. And now, to add insult to injury, a local plan wants to shoe-horn their homes into a one-size-fits-all corridor high-rise district. It ain't right.

So scrap the plan, just forget it. You and we have learned. Carry over the good elements, and let's do it right.

Here's an overarching Ann Arbor-style proposal that will work.

Main point of departure: Growth in A2 comes primarily from the UofM's increase in student body: 11,000 more students in just over ten years, and the UofM cannot build dorms fast enough to accommodate them, and students don't want to live in those dorms after a years or two. Population growth in A2, unlike Seattle or the Twin Cities, is not driven by other industries moving in. The housing "shortage" is caused by the pricing pressure of 11,000 more students whose parents will pay anything to get their young scholars housed. It's driving rental and thus housing prices through the roof.

Last night at the Planning Commission meeting a young, starting-out school teacher in Ann Arbor put the whole affordable housing issue in a nutshell: we all need and want him teaching our children in our schools, yet he cannot afford to live here on his salary. Where, in times past, could he have bought a first-time home? In our current situation, here's a really good answer.

- **Allow developers to build low-rise and high-rise apartment blocks pointalistically at strategic intersections and along specific, limited stretches of A2's corridor roads:** the Briarwood area, at Packard and State, and pointalistically along Packard, Stadium, South Main, South Industrial, and along Plymouth. This may primarily be for students, but well designed and *acoustically well-insulated condos* will attract working families, too. Don't infringe on existing, intact mixed R1 and R2 neighborhoods, but fill-in and re-vitalize empty and underutilized zones along the corridors. At the right locations, where fitting and where step-downs allow, let developers build even higher than your consultant has advised.
- **Rather than incentivizing landlords and developers to buy up and teardown housing stock in our already intact residential neighborhoods, incentivize the return of old, existing city-center rental houses to owner-occupant ownership.** We've done this on our street, Minerva Road. We pro-actively turned back the tide, young first-home buyers moved back in, and returned our street to almost all owner-occupant residents: young families, young children who can walk to school - and we still have two rentals with compliant landlords, who are very welcome: precisely the Ann Arbor mix you seek to achieve. We confronted absentee landlords who refused to comply with A2 laws, ordinances and building codes, and made clear: you comply, or you get out, or you get sued - big time. And it works. **The too-oft-repeated adage "you can never convert those houses back" is dead wrong. People seeking affordable housing will gladly buy and turn these homes back into the gems they once were - and this housing is tight-knit and dense. Many of these homes can be family duplexes.** It takes more elbow grease than money, but that's exactly what pioneering homeowners do. This way, Ann Arbor retains its scenic older housing stock. **And these homeowners will gladly live amongst a rental neighborhood if the City practices pro-active compliance with city rules.**

So, you create the mixed neighborhoods you seek not by up-zoning existing core residential neighborhoods, but by keeping and revitalizing existing housing stock. The City kick-starts this by pro-actively enforcing strict compliance with rules. No more passive, complacent "complaint-driven" enforcement by the city. You do it by pro-active patrolling for violations, inspections, and aggressively pursuing landlords who fail to comply with all rules: illegal parking, snow removal, illegal occupancy, health & safety violations. The judiciary must get aboard and not look on violations as cavalier delicts. Some landlords in the old North End are blatantly, fragrantly letting their properties crumble into ruin. You can see it from the sidewalk. The city cannot allow this. Just because a landlord *owns* a house does not give them an absolute carte-blanche right to run the property into the ground. You have rules in place to combat this. Enforce those rules on the books.

We welcome all compliant landlords, truly. But we're fed up with predatory landlords and property managers who thumb their noses at us and the city authorities. Now is the time to act boldly, decisively, proactively.

- The upshot: Ann Arbor can sue and force out **repeatedly non-complaint** landlords of student rental properties, and **incentivize affordable housing for purchase by working folks like school teachers through public-private partnership with banks.** Mortgages at favorable rates for people with steady jobs. We don't have to build highrises to create affordable housing for hard-working, modestly earning people. For public service workers like schoolteachers, voters may even agree to have the city actually pay a portion of the home purchase price. That is a method of direct, efficient action promoting home ownership among people doing vital services at very modest payscales (e.g. school teachers).

So change gears, take a new path. You're at a fork in the road, and the road less taken is our best option. Don't copy other cities: create our own solution based on our given specific situation. Create affordable housing by stepping up to the plate and pro-actively enabling wanna-be homeowners to revitalize our *existing city-center housing stock*. At the same time, build low-rise and high-rise apartment blocks for student housing with groundfloor retail at smartly targeted locations. **There is more than enough space - selected carefully and pointalistically - to permit adequate capacity of low-rise and high-rise apartment blocks for rental housing** - and even attach permit conditions requiring construction of affordable condos.

You can start a whole new movement not only for students seeking housing, but also for revitalizing Ann Arbor's legendary *existing* housing stock for people seeking affordable homes. Instead of absentee developers taking charge, *we, the city and the people*, take charge of our cityscape. This will give you the demographic mix that you seek:

young professionals, UofM faculty and staff, non-Uof-M workers, students, families with children and retirees. More densification than that is not needed, it won't derail our progressive track, and it benefits all of us (and not just wealthy absentee developers).

Thank you for reading this. Please give it some thought.

Best regards,
Tony Pinnell

1328 Minerva Road
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48104 USA
phone: +1 734 757-0849
e-mail: tony.pinnell@gmx.com
