

Subject: Please support more housing and fewer restrictions on housing supply

From: Jamie Fogel

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To: Planning <Planning@a2gov.org>

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Comprehensive Plan Feedback — Advocating for Flexibility, Abundance, and Affordability in Ann Arbor's Future

Dear Planning Commissioners,

First, thank you for your hard work, commitment, and civic leadership throughout the process of updating Ann Arbor's Comprehensive Plan. I know how complex and difficult these decisions are, and I am grateful that you are taking on this responsibility.

I'm writing both as a lifelong Ann Arborite and as someone deeply invested in the city's future. I grew up in Ann Arbor, attended the University of Michigan, moved to the Boston area after college, and returned to Ann Arbor for graduate school. I would love to raise a family here someday. However, I am deeply concerned about the direction of housing affordability — not just for myself, but for everyone who wants to be part of this community.

When I was growing up, Ann Arbor was a diverse, dynamic, and inclusive place. Increasingly, however, we are becoming a city that only the relatively well-off can afford to call home. This is a crisis. It undermines our values, our economy, and our future.

Living in the Boston area underscored for me just how bad this crisis can become. Boston, like Ann Arbor, is a thriving intellectual and economic center. Yet despite widespread rhetoric about inclusion and affordability, the cost of housing there is overwhelming — because cities like Boston have simply not allowed enough new homes to be built. Construction remains limited and difficult, even as prices soar and communities become more exclusive and less vibrant.

I don't want Ann Arbor to follow the same path. I want us to follow the example of places like Austin, Texas — another university town that, by embracing abundant housing development, has achieved both booming growth and (until very recently) falling rents. Austin shows that by allowing housing to grow with demand, a city can stay dynamic, inclusive, and affordable.

That should be Ann Arbor's goal too.

The Core Principle: Flexibility Enables Affordability and Dynamism

At the heart of my perspective is a simple but powerful idea:

Every restriction we place on land use imposes costs on new development. Those costs reduce housing production, raise housing prices, and limit opportunity.

If we are serious about making Ann Arbor a welcoming, affordable, and sustainable city, we must prioritize flexibility over restriction. Housing abundance is not something we can achieve by managing scarcity more cleverly — it must be built by allowing more homes, more density, and more adaptability across the city.

The Hidden Danger: Accumulation of Restrictions

Individually, restrictions may sound reasonable:

- A parking mandate here,
- An affordability requirement there,
- A rule about building height or ground-floor commercial elsewhere.

Each can seem harmless.

But collectively, these rules form enormous barriers to new housing. They make construction slower, more expensive, riskier, and less likely to happen at all. The result is a shortage that prices out families, young people, seniors, and workers of all incomes.

The Comprehensive Plan must recognize this dynamic — and guard against it.

Specific Opportunities to Strengthen the Plan

There are several key improvements I respectfully urge the Commission to consider:

1. Maximize Flexibility in Transition and Hub Areas

- Transition areas should not have arbitrary medium-height caps.
- Where buildings are not immediately adjacent to sensitive low-rise neighborhoods, allow high-rise construction by right.
- Allow the market to meet the urgent need for more homes — without needless limits.

2. Expand Transition Zones More Broadly

- Nearly all existing R3–R5 multifamily zones and older commercial areas should be included in the Transition category.
- Avoid subjective carve-outs based on "character" or "context." Housing opportunity should be distributed fairly across the city.

3. Eliminate or Redefine the Flex District

- The Flex District creates confusion and uncertainty, potentially deterring housing development.
- Instead, allow residential, retail, and office uses flexibly throughout Transition zones, supported by strong nuisance and performance standards.

4. Rethink "Active First Floor Commercial" Requirements

- Ground-floor retail mandates often do not succeed unless market demand already exists.
- Mandatory active use requirements can delay or derail new housing and should be applied carefully, not universally.

5. Be Cautious About Counterproductive Affordability Requirements

- If affordability mandates raise the cost, complexity, or uncertainty of building housing, they may ultimately reduce the supply of affordable homes rather than increase it.
- The most powerful affordability policy we have is allowing more total housing — at every income level.

The Bigger Picture: Housing Abundance Supports Climate, Equity, and Economic Goals

Allowing more homes near jobs and amenities reduces car trips and emissions, advancing our climate goals. It supports economic opportunity by enabling more people to live near work, school, and public services. It fosters a diverse, resilient, and welcoming community.

Abundant housing is not in conflict with Ann Arbor's values — it is a fulfillment of them.

Closing: A Call to Be Bold and Hopeful

This Comprehensive Plan is a once-in-a-generation opportunity. I urge the Commission to embrace a vision of Ann Arbor that is:

- Flexible in its land use policies,
- Abundant in its housing options,
- Inclusive in its economic and social fabric,
- Dynamic in its capacity to welcome new generations.

Thank you again for your service to our community and for considering these perspectives. Ann Arbor can lead — not just in aspiration, but in action — if we are willing to choose flexibility over restriction, abundance over scarcity, and openness over fear.

I appreciate your time, thoughtfulness, and dedication.

Sincerely,
Jamie Fogel