

Subject: One Hub District vs Many

From: Will Leaf
Sent: Monday, May 4, 2026 9:33 AM
To: Planning <Planning@a2gov.org>
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I saw a public comment suggesting that the commission create many customized hub districts rather than one. I would like to offer an alternate perspective.

The argument for many districts rests on a core assumption: Different areas with different characteristics need regulations custom-tailored to those characteristics. If you accept this assumption, it is common sense that a strip mall should receive different zoning from a downtown block.

This assumption was shared by the Godfather of American zoning, Edward Bassett. In his [1922 Zoning handbook](#), he listed the following as one of his principles: "Zoning when applied to existing cities should be adapted generally to existing conditions but should endeavor to check undesirable tendencies."

I don't know if this assumption has ever been named, but we can call it the conservative principle, since it aims to conserve what already exists.

But does the conservative principle actually make sense? I think no. A zoning district is a set of laws, and laws should exist for good reasons. Preventing new structures and activities simply because they are different than what currently exists is not a good reason. The rigidity and intolerance of American zoning has created serious problems, including housing shortages in many cities, along with urban forms that are far more car-dependent than they might have been with more flexible regulations.

Instead of the conservative principle, we should be following a different principle--that people should be allowed to start businesses and build homes unless there is a good reason to forbid them from doing so. You could call this the "abundance" or "tolerance" principle.

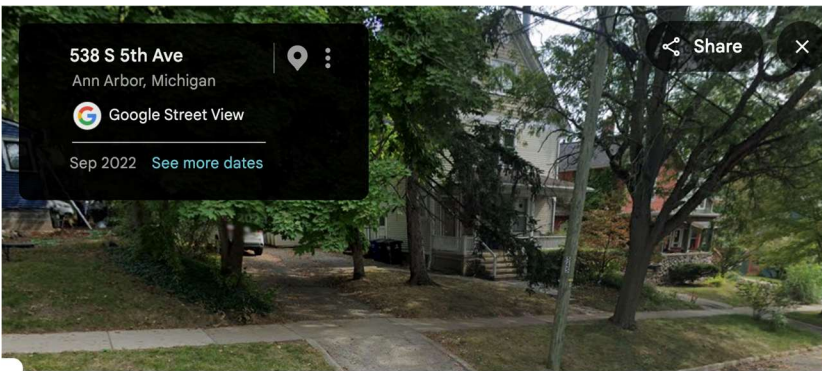
The simplest way to apply the tolerance principle to the Hub category would be to create a single Hub zoning district that allows both lower and higher density development. The other commenter is concerned the commission may choose to create overly restrictive rules that make every shopping center a non-conforming use, and I share this concern. But the solution is not to selectively grant flexibility where it is most obviously needed--it is to be generally flexible by creating one flexible hub district.

Is creating such a district an impossible task? Not at all. In fact, many of the rules that would be overly restrictive on Stadium or Plymouth would also be too restrictive near downtown, so we need flexibility in all those locations. For example:

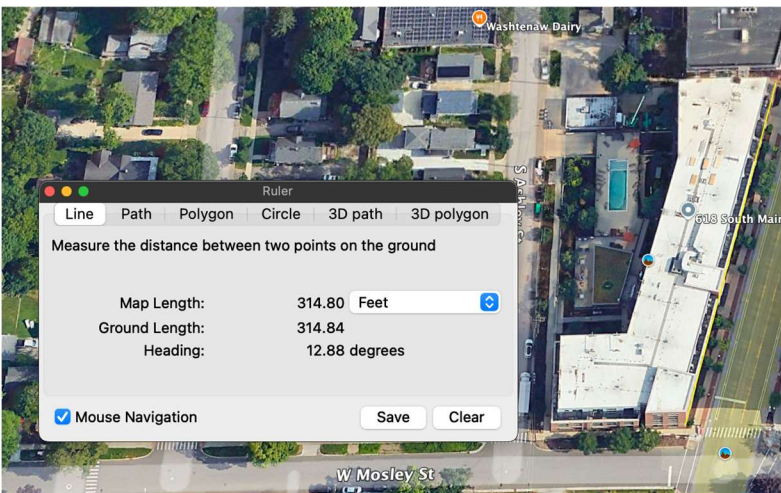
1. A rule requiring ground floor transparency would probably make hundreds of detached homes in the downtown Hub area non-conforming.



2. A rule enforcing a maximum setback downtown would make many homes in the Hub category non-conforming and would require property owners to destroy mature trees in front yards in order to redevelop or add onto their homes, rather than build up or in the rear yard.



3. A limit on the maximum building width would make long apartment buildings in the Hub category like 618 South Main St non-conforming.



These examples show that flexible rules are not just needed in the corridors--they are needed downtown as well. A single mixed-use district for the Hub category could provide this flexibility. In fact, one of the main advantages of creating a single district is that it will encourage the commission to intentionally be flexible when designing it.

Woodbury Gardens Example

The other commenter states that the Woodbury Gardens rezoning request shows that a self-adjusting height limit is excessively complicated. But the request would not have been complicated had special conditions not been attached to it. The problem is the special conditions, not the tapering height limit.

It is true that the tapering height limit requires the property owner to include the buffering parcel in the rezoning request, rather than just the parcel they hoped to build on, but this requirement is not actually a complication or a problem. The rezoning of the buffering parcel reflects an actual change: The buffering parcel is no longer going to be treated as a residential parcel that is isolated from taller buildings.

Not every apartment complex has a buffering parcel like Woodbury Gardens does, and in these other cases the advantages of a self-adjusting height limit would be obvious. You could rezone the whole parcel and have a height taper built-in, rather than choose between 85 feet or nothing, or else try to split a parcel with multiple zoning districts. Trying to buffer residential districts from tall buildings with hand-drawn concentric circle zoning districts is far more complicated than just using a self-adjusting height limit.

Thank you for your consideration, and thank you to the other commenter for discussing this topic. It would be great if the rezoning process was filled with good-faith policy debates like this one.

Will