Huron River Watershed Council

Protecting the river since 1965

1100 N. Main Street Suite 210
Ann Arbor, MI 48104
(734) 769-5123
www.hrwc.org

Tuesday, June 17, 2008

Dear Jeff:

I am writing to express the Huron River Watershed Council's support for the City of Ann Arbor's Proposed Revisions to Chapters 55 and 59 (Area Height and Placement). These changes are good because they will encourage density in a well planned way that is also protective of the important natural features in the City. By encouraging pedestrian-friendly, attractive, safe mixed use neighborhoods in areas already served by sewers, schools, and roads, the City is providing an alternative to the conventional sprawling development pattern that is eating away at our natural areas and polluting our rivers, lakes and streams. The changes, which boost walkable urban centers with density options and create mixed use opportunities, complement the City's Greenbelt program that protects important natural areas and farmland in surrounding rural areas.

The Huron River is the major source of drinking water in the area. The City of Ann Arbor gets 80% of its drinking water from the Huron, and the river offers beautiful scenery, unique wildlife, and great fishing, all of which draw visitors from near and far. The Huron is vital to our health and economy. The biggest threat it faces is sprawl.

Studies—nationwide and on the Huron—consistently show an alarming fact. Sprawl directly harms water quality. Volunteers with the Huron River Watershed Council (HRWC) have studied, for many years, 73 sites on the river and its streams. The worst conditions are invariably found in the locations with the greatest development.

What's the connection? Development creates impervious surfaces, such as roads, rooftops, and parking lots. When rain falls on these surfaces, it has no chance to seep into the soil or be absorbed into plants. Instead, it rushes quickly and directly into the nearest waterway, washing pollution and sediment in with it, and flowing so fast that it tears away the riverbanks and causes flooding.

Dozens of studies, including those done on the Huron, show with remarkable consistency when imperviousness in a watershed exceeds about 8-10% of the total area, water quality begins to suffer. A traditional residential development with one house per 2.5 acres already exceeds 10% imperviousness.

Building traditional cookie-cutter developments—where single homes sit on big lots along long streets—is one of the worst things you can do for water quality. In these low-density, auto-dependent subdivisions, imperviousness runs amok. It landscapes rural areas with tons of pavement: longer and wider roads, driveways, parking lots, plus new commercial and big-box retail centers with their own new roads and lots.

The best way to keep impervious surfaces below the crucial 10% threshold is to group development into higher densities on smaller areas—preferably areas that already have infrastructure in place and don't require, for instance, fresh roads.

Denser developments proposed in already urbanized areas (also known as "infill") can help reduce imperviousness watershed-wide. These developments provide housing, employment, recreation, and/or shopping for larger numbers of people on much smaller amounts of land than almost any automobile dependent suburban development could in the countryside. In addition, people traveling to and from these developments will either be able to walk, use public transportation, or will not have to drive as far, thus reducing the need for much new pavement to provide transportation or parking. Infill development often occurs on land that is already impervious, so the development will not add imperviousness to the watershed; it will instead reuse existing imperviousness.

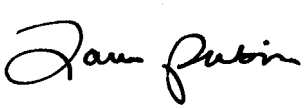
Denser developments have typically raised eyebrows (and hackles) among neighborhoods and environmentalists. However, as illustrated above, the only way to preserve open space and water quality watershed-wide will be to plan carefully to locate the majority of development in compact areas where infrastructure exists (or is planned for) to provide water, sewer, public transportation, and other services. Building up also helps reduce imperviousness. A four story residence or parking structure takes up only a quarter the impervious surface as a one-floor residence or surface parking lot built to accommodate the same number of people or cars.

Encouraging compact development particularly reduces area dedicated to transportation, which comprises about 75% of imperviousness associated with new development. Research shows that each doubling of average neighborhood density is associated with a decrease in per-household vehicle use of 20-40 percent, with a corresponding decline in emissions. This is one of the reasons that European cities, where development is much denser than in most American cities, typically exhibit only one-fourth the per-person emissions of carbon dioxide and other pollutants from transportation than are typical of American cities. (Also, residents in the U.S. spend about 20% of their annual income on transportation (and going up), whereas Europeans only spend 7%.)

Providing a mix of attractive housing, shopping, workplace, and transportation options, as the proposed amendments to Chapter 55 and 59 aim to do, is a necessary step in curbing the continued spread of low density suburban development that is consuming our remaining natural areas and beginning to poison our streams and lakes.

If we deal intelligently with the current onslaught of development, we have an opportunity to save vast amounts of money, beautiful riverscapes, a wonderful way of life—and our own drinking water.

Thanks,



Laura Rubin
Executive Director