

Subject: Ecological Stewardship, Housing Affordability, and Resilient Placemaking - Strengthening the "Ann Arbor for All" Comprehensive Plan

From: Brian Chambers

Sent: Sunday, April 27, 2025 7:08 PM

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Mayor Taylor, City Administrator Dohoney, City Council, and Planning:
(please share with the Planning Commission)

The *Ann Arbor for All* Comprehensive Plan represents major progress toward a more equitable, vibrant, and resilient Ann Arbor. I fully support its direction. However, to secure broad public credibility and achieve our stated goals, I respectfully recommend key enhancements that integrate ecological stewardship, housing affordability, market enablement, and nature-centered placemaking.

Key Recommendations Followed by Integrated Conclusion

1. Stewardship of Natural Systems with Placemaking

Integrate and update the *2004 Natural Features Master Plan* into the Comprehensive Plan, treating tree canopy, wetlands, permeable surfaces, and native biodiversity as critical urban infrastructure.

Embrace a **both / and** framework: protect high-value ecosystems and leverage them as cornerstones of public life and sustainable development.

Pursue placemaking strategies that integrate ecologically-enhanced restoration, public access, and resilient housing development:

- **Enhanced Huron River habitat restoration with ecological sensitivity** — balanced with thoughtfully designed public spaces that encourage recreation, education, appreciation, and stewardship without diminishing the natural systems.
- **Boost connectivity** through safe and convenient multi-modal transit, B2B trails, bike parking, and artful, authentic amenities that celebrate Ann Arbor's natural and cultural identity.
- Support mixed-use, mixed-income housing placed **strategically beyond the 500-year floodplain** to advance both social and environmental resilience.

- **Incentivize density** in walkable areas near natural corridors, integrating green infrastructure, stormwater management, and nature-based design into new development. (Incentivized density examples are provided below in a post-script.)

2. Delivering Housing Affordability through Proven Mechanisms

Embed practical tools to deliver affordable and workforce housing, including:

- Community land trusts.
- Public-private land lease models.
- Tax increment financing (TIF) strategies for housing and ecological infrastructure.

3. Zoning Reform Paired with Market Enablement

Complement zoning changes with strategies that make responsible, climate-smart density financially feasible:

- Streamline permitting for missing middle housing.
- Provide incentives for modular and net-zero construction.
- Address financing constraints that prevent small-scale multifamily development.

4. Expanding Middle-Income Homeownership Pathways

Finally, the Comprehensive Plan should champion expanded pathways to ownership for middle-income households, through programs like the Ann Arbor Community Land Trust. Our critical workers — teachers, healthcare staff, transit operators — deserve the opportunity to live and thrive in the city they serve.

Conclusion

Ann Arbor does not have to choose between growth and sustainability, or between density and environmental health.

We have the opportunity — and responsibility — to lead with a vision where:

- Ecological stewardship strengthens housing and walkability.
- Housing strengthens equity.
- Nature strengthens place.
- And growth strengthens community.

By strengthening the Comprehensive Plan in these ways, Ann Arbor can model how a world-class, resilient, and inclusive city builds for the future.

Thank you for your leadership and your service to our community.

Brian Chambers, Ph.D.

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### Post-script on ‘incentivized density’:

In support of a *both/and* strategy that advances ecological stewardship *and* sustainable housing growth, the Comprehensive Plan should specifically promote **incentivized density models**. These models have enabled cities to expand housing supply while enhancing livability, walkability, and environmental resilience.

### Examples:

## 1. Portland, Oregon — Residential Infill Project (RIP1 and RIP2)

### Incentive Mechanism:

- **Bonus units** granted for affordability or smaller home sizes:
  - o Up to **four units** on lots previously zoned for single-family, with **bonus fifth or sixth units** if affordable to households at 60% AMI or below.
- **No parking minimums** near frequent transit.
- **Floor Area Ratio (FAR) scaling** that allows more building area if homes are smaller or affordable.

## Results:

- Triplexes, fourplexes, and cottage clusters have steadily replaced tear-down single-family rebuilds.
- In the first two years of RIP1, *Portland permitted more housing units through infill than through large-scale apartment projects.*
- Significantly more small-scale, naturally affordable housing has been created while limiting displacement

source: Portland Bureau of Planning and Sustainability reports

## 2. Minneapolis, Minnesota — 2040 Comprehensive Plan

### Incentive Mechanism:

- **Eliminated single-family-only zoning**, allowing **triplexes by right** on every residential lot.
- **Density bonuses** near transit and in areas with greater walkability scores.
- Encouraged **reduced setbacks** and **modest height increases** for multi-unit structures meeting affordability or sustainability criteria.

### Results:

- Between 2020–2023, Minneapolis saw a measurable **increase in missing middle housing permits** and **moderation of housing prices** relative to peer cities.
- Despite rapid growth, the city had a lower housing cost escalation rate than other fast-growing metro areas

source: Urban Institute and City of Minneapolis annual reports】 .

### 3. Seattle, Washington — Mandatory Housing Affordability (MHA) Program

#### Incentive Mechanism:

- **Upzoned areas** allow taller and denser development, *but only* if projects either:
  - o Include **on-site affordable housing units**, or
  - o Contribute to an affordable housing fund.
- MHA overlays prioritize **density increases** near major bus lines, light rail, and green spaces.

#### Results:

- As of 2023, **over 8,000 affordable homes** have been funded or created through MHA contributions.
- Encouraged development in high-opportunity, walkable neighborhoods while funding preservation and new affordable units.

source: City of Seattle Office of Housing Annual Reports

#### Implications for Ann Arbor:

Ann Arbor can lead by adopting similar **incentivized density tools**, such as:

- **Allowing duplexes, triplexes, fourplexes** near parks, river corridors, and trails with bonus FAR if homes are smaller, affordable, or net-zero.
- **Bonus units** for proximity to multimodal transit and natural features (e.g., B2B Trail, Huron River restoration).
- **Increased density allowances** tied to affordability or sustainable design certifications (e.g., Passive House, LEED, Enterprise Green Communities).

By strategically **incentivizing** density — not just permitting it — we can foster beautiful, climate-resilient neighborhoods that enhance walkability, ecological restoration, and affordability *together*.