

Subject:

Thoughts on Comprehensive Land Use Plan

From: Birgit Rieck**Sent:** Wednesday, July 16, 2025 10:32 AM**To:** Planning <Planning@a2gov.org>**Cc:** City Council <CityCouncil@a2gov.org>; John Godfrey**Subject:** Thoughts on Comprehensive Land Use Plan

Dear Planning Commission Members,

I understand that predicting future developments for our city is difficult and you put a lot of time into the Comprehensive Land Use Plan, but I think you left out several major issues:

Just because you want to change zoning for the whole city doesn't mean that new developments will be fairly shouldered by all. I am convinced low-cost neighborhoods will be the ones developed, leaving the better income neighbors in more expensive and quiet areas of town mostly untouched. In my opinion, it is a very unfair proposal.

We can safely assume that developers, wanting to make profits, will not buy \$1 million-plus houses in neighborhoods like Arbor Hills or Geddes to demolish them and build even a quadplex, much less a triplex or duplex. It is simply bad business with too little profit. Also, most of these neighborhoods are further away from regular public transport and without grocery or other shopping opportunities in walking distance. Large parts of the Westside are a historic district, and many other higher priced homes are part of Condo communities or HOAs who can easily change their bylaws to mitigate the worst of the new proposed zoning laws.

Then there are these pockets in Ann Arbor, with smaller houses close to major roadways, still affordable for us to maintain and for newcomers to afford, precisely because they are not in prime areas of town; neighborhoods that have organically grown, but are not protected by a Condo-community or HOA that can keep new development at bay or at least control appearance. This is where developers will come in. They can easily outbid the young families and first-time buyers looking for a home. Even local small businesses who make their income renting out properties around town, will not be able to compete with larger national or even international companies. Because of the free market forces, it is highly questionable if these new developments would be affordable to your target residents, those with lower incomes.

It is people like my neighbors and me, mostly residents of the lower to mid-middle class who will have their neighborhoods destroyed disproportionately. People who buy their groceries at Aldi, not at Plum Market or Whole Foods. People who wait for the reduced-in-price left-over perennials for their front yard in the middle of the summer. People who felt extremely thankful and lucky to be able to afford a place in Ann Arbor allowing them to take part in

homeownership in a stable, diverse and safe neighborhood. People who don't have and never had the financial means to buy most of the houses on the market in our town.

The new plan does not acknowledge us, neighbors who are firmly at or below average household income and who have decided living in Ann Arbor is worth cutting out other expenses like regular vacations or kitchen remodels. We should be taken into account as equal residents of our city, too. It feels like our lives, aspirations and well-being are always first on the chopping block. And when pointing that out, we are called NIMBYs. We are the ones already affected by rising prices in grocery stores and soon to come higher medical insurances. We are the ones fearing for our earned benefits like Medicare and Social Security, having budgeted carefully to live and keep living in our neighborhoods.

I do not understand the premise for the plan you have put forward: AAPS just decided to not build the promised additional elementary school and dedicated Pre-K and Young 5s Center in Northeast Ann Arbor because they don't see a need to provide for more students. Ann Arbor's planning commission however plans for up to 97,000 new residents. All this, while our biggest employer, the University of Michigan, is going to be impacted by federal politics, losing money for research and from international students, just like other higher learning and research places.

You seem to think that everybody who drives to Ann Arbor for work wants to live in Ann Arbor. Most of the people I know who drive into town rather not live here. They might prefer living in a smaller town, by a lake or in a more rural area or close to family already established in other towns; they might have spouses who commute to their workplaces in Detroit, Toledo, Brighton or Lansing -- there are lots of reasons.

A cursory look at the current members of the planning commission shows all but one living in neighborhoods (Condos, HOAs, Historic District) that will barely be impacted by any plan and zoning changes, and all seem to have an annual household income over \$200,000, several well above that. Former members were apparently disproportionately linked to construction and development businesses, according to many social media comments. Where are the representatives of other groups living in Ann Arbor? While it is certainly good to have a couple of specialists or theorists on the team, it gives me pause when I see Ann Arbor compared to cities like Minneapolis or Seattle; especially since their rezoning only happened a few years ago and was hampered by the pandemic. It is still much too early to see the fall-out from the changes made there. Looking at places like Austin and Berkeley however shows how terrible open zoning can turn out.

To illustrate my concerns, a word about my own neighborhood, Thurston, in NE Ann Arbor:

We are watching most of our nature center getting destroyed. This center was not just another park; it helped stabilize the Miller Creek watershed and mitigate flooding in the neighborhood. Since the footing drains were disconnected around 2010, we all must regularly pay to have our sump pumps replaced. Before that time, my house had no history of flooding, now the sump pump works continuously every time we have a stronger rainstorm or

snowmelt. (And I had two flooding incidents when my neighbors' sump pumps were installed, while I was still waiting for mine though I only have a half-basement!)

With many of the green spaces of the Thurston school property being paved plus new bigger housing, where will the water go? And who will pay for the necessary infrastructure? For the near future, climate scientists forecast more intense storms, increased droughts and flooding which in turn increases the risk of erosion and flood damage for Ann Arbor and the whole Great Lakes region (<https://forestadaptation.org/assess/ecosystem-vulnerability/urban/ann-arbor>). Already losing part of Thurston's flood mitigation areas to the new school construction we cannot afford more paved, tree-less spaces. In addition, several neighbors already wonder about the idea of solar energy. Who is willing to now put solar panels on their roof anticipating that by the time they finally profit from this installation, the panels might be in permanent shade from new buildings and with that producing less energy?

When I asked council representatives how they will try to preserve the integrity and culture of our neighborhoods, I was asked why I wouldn't want to share my own experiences with more people. But this won't be possible: the new proposition for zoning eliminates front yards and parking. This means many more cars on the streets with less safety for kids to play outside, to ride their bikes etc. More people needing access to their homes means streets might not be able to be closed for Halloween Parades, block parties etc. (these events propagate safe neighborhoods with neighbors looking out for each other). On top of that, there will be an influx from cars of residents moving into the mid- and high rises going to be built on Plymouth Road looking for free parking in our neighborhood. Our neighborhood is close to UM's North Campus, so new apartments will be rented mostly to individuals (up to four per unit) and probably few families. And again, why isn't there any provision in your plan to make sure residents of other neighborhoods will "share their experience" with the new residents?

The market prices for Thurston houses are on average about \$100,000 cheaper than Logan and at least \$200,000 cheaper than King (https://bestneighborhood.org/best-neighborhoods-ann-arbor-mi/#google_vignette). While Thurston kids have to go through years of construction right next to their school, Logan and King students are spared. While Logan and King houses are less interesting to developers because of price, location and the Condo and HOA communities, Thurston, especially the houses closest to the school and Plymouth Road, are very much of interest. In our neighborhood, families with three, four and five members live in houses of 1,200 to 1,600 square feet, well below the national average. Even compared to Logan and King, these are small spaces. Why do we, who worked hard to have a slice of Ann Arbor life, too, have to take the fall-out put into place based on the proposed comprehensive plan for our city? We are the residents you pretend to support and make room for. Most of your lives will not be impacted in ways our lives will be. And you talking about economical inclusion when it barely changes your lives and neighborhoods is only lip service when the residents who already are on the lower end of income, property value and property size are the ones having to give up even more. So far, I have not met a developer or construction company owner who doesn't look for the highest possible profit and instead

builds to provide affordable housing. There is a reason organizations like Habitat for Humanity depend on donations, grants and volunteers.

I very much hope you listen to those of us who feel that it would be a good move to step back and reassess your plan, especially considering our new political reality that will have an impact on the numbers of employees and students at the University, by far our biggest employer, for years to come. A fresh look with present and new realities in mind would give you a chance to put forward proposals that help make new developments truly affordable for people like my neighbors and me. A modified plan could ensure that all residents fairly shoulder the impact of the changes you want to bring to Ann Arbor. We all love Ann Arbor and our lives here. Let's make sure that it can stay this way for all of us!

Sincerely,

Birgit Rieck

Cc:

City Council (CityCouncil@a2gov.org)

Ann Arbor Neighborhood Network