

The new Ann Arbor Comprehensive Plan: It stinks

You can see who controls Ann Arbor by looking at downtown. Now these developers are coming for your neighborhood. pg.112 This new Comprehensive Plan gives full control of A2 development to the developers, the “bulldozer boys”. And City Council wants to help them! (pg. 53,75,115) The Ann Arbor City Council is now putting forward a plan for our future that is absurd, unnecessary, and destructive. Much research proves that its ostensible goals of “equity and affordability” cannot be accomplished with this sort of plan! We will get gentrification, with older homes (and people) cleared away, and prices going up.

Council members are determined to push this through, even though voters mostly detest it, or are unaware. We should accept the essence of it and reject the excess! “Take the best and leave the rest”.

The central mistake of this plan is for city council to think they can change the most basic values of Ann Arbor voters. ... who relate to Ann Arbor's beauty and “character” and the fact that it really is “Tree City”. Now we are being told (pg. 21), to sacrifice these core values in order to uphold other values like equity and affordability and sustainability and dynamism. But, planners are now ready to wreck our city in service of their sellout to developers. The report states, (pg 21), that we must focus on these lovely new goals “rather than” worrying about old-fashioned things like “protecting the existing character and natural environment” (trees) “of Ann Arbor”. Sorry, any “value” they can think of is secondary to the trees and character of Ann Arbor. The defacement of Ann Arbor could go on until they “kill the goose“ that laid our golden egg.

On August 4, 2026 the voters must replace some of this city commission that thinks that trees and character are obsolete, and elect commissioners who will love and protect “tree city“. We still can enter the future dynamically and provide any middle level housing that we need.

Why is this comprehensive plan so dangerous?

1) It will make our great city congested and funny looking.

City planners want to put seven story apartment buildings along bus routes and four story apartment buildings within local neighborhoods. This is absurd. Four story apartment buildings, with no limit on units or any parking provided, are a terrible idea for residential areas. As I was walking door-to-door, a woman told me “that would cut off my sunlight”. Yes it would, along with making neighborhoods look so strange, and have few parking places.

Seven story buildings, by right, along every bus route, are equally poor planning. The report makes clear “downtown’s built form can serve as a model for hubs across the city”. (pg. 112). Astounding! How disconnected from the voters can you get! The very last thing that voters want is something in their neighborhood that resembles downtown, ... giant buildings belong downtown! A huge percentage of Ann Arbor citizens who pay big taxes will not go downtown anymore.

2) It is not needed!

The population graph of Ann Arbor (pg. 11), shows that the population of Ann Arbor has gone up very little since 1975, if at all. It has “plateaued”, (pg, 15), except for students “Ann Arbor households have actually declined in recent decades”. (pg. 49.) Any new population has been students, and plenty of new

buildings have been made for them. Yes, more mid-level housing is needed, and can easily be provided without the excess included in this “Comprehensive Plan”.

Referring to the housing situation as some sort of “crisis” or “emergency” is analogous to President Trump saying that immigration is an “emergency”. They are both problems that need to be solved, not exaggerated. Housing units could more than double in the new plan while population is stable. Does that make sense?

4) It will degrade our residential neighborhoods.

The plan says that it will “prefer developments that align with the existing scale” and, “maintain low rise development that is not a drastic change in scale from what exists in neighborhoods now”. Then they jam four story apartment buildings into every neighborhood! This would be ugly, and would not “align with the existing scale”. It would be a “drastic change”. (See photos of other cities.)

5) This plan could take out much of the tree canopy of Tree City.

This plan cannot go forward until we have a strong tree ordinance, like Evanston, Illinois, which actually protects trees on public and private land. In this new Ann Arbor plan trees are an afterthought, not a goal, and we should take this seriously.

Trees are not respected in Ann Arbor anymore. On Winchell Street, on my morning walk last year, a gigantic healthy sycamore tree was cut down right in front of me. I honestly wondered where I was, this could not be Ann Arbor! This perfect huge tree was in the way of no road or sidewalk, it was in violation of some sort of city rule by 1 foot, and it was destroyed. It should be alive! You can go look at the trunk of that tree in the owners front yard. She says it is “my silent protest”.

Thus I received a mission for the short time I have left. Nobody is going to wreck and “sell out” Ann Arbor! The more I dug the more real became the quote from Hamlet, “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark”. We learn that the chairman of the Planning Commission, [the authors of the Plan], is the development director for a local Real Estate investment company. The vice chair of the Ann Arbor Planning Commission believes that its mission is to enable development and growth “at a rate to be determined by investors, capital, and the market”. Where did this guy come from? The mission of the Planning Commission is to decide what is best for Ann Arbor!

In the new plan all residential zoning districts have been combined into one. The city will not say whether building setbacks will be relaxed in this new Residential district. That’s the key, if the city diminishes the setbacks in their new residential district, then much of “tree city“ will be lost for good. Current city council members want “growth”, they want more people to come here, on purpose! Voters hate that, we already have congestion and pay enough taxes.

Most of Ann Arbor's trees are in residential areas. The new plan “replaces” the “Natural Features Master Plan”, but with nothing. There is no tree protection strategy whatsoever! The city claims to have “strong natural features protections that mitigate the impact of development”. Sorry, not true one single bit. They will cut trees and take parks!

6) Parks – They will take Ann Arbor park land whenever they wish.

They repeatedly make it clear that they plan to “leverage”, that is to “use force”, to take land out of the Ann Arbor public park system to be used for their “growth”. This concept makes long time Ann

Arbor park lovers gasp in disbelief. What staggering chutzpah, what massive hubris... my dad would say “what unmitigated gall”!

This city council thinks their (fully illusory) special goals and their planning genius is so important that they plan to undo two centuries of loving dedication to parks by the citizens of Ann Arbor!

This is disgusting...let's stop them from ripping lands out of Ann Arbor parks, unless they at least have a vote of the people about it! We have to run for seats on city council!

This will be a 25 year raid to take land from our parks and open spaces.

- * they speak of “leveraging publicly owned land “to create “affordable housing”. Pg.55
 - * they will be “redistributing under utilized land and spaces”.pg 58
 - * they will create a building bonanza within parks “to encourage private development”. pg.59
 - * the city should “target” “publicly owned assets“, “to create growth space”. pg.74
 - * they say “quality (of land) is more important than quantity” as a pretext for taking parkland.
 - * City Council will make the judgment and get to take what they want. pg.78
 - * re: parks... they plan to “introduce new residential opportunities in parts of the city that have never had permanent residents”. Pg 107
 - *They also want “large scale solar power” in parkland. Also, city offices, police or fire stations, and libraries or schools would be allowed current city parks.
- Parks are on the chopping block. We say NO!

7) Infrastructure – There is no way to pay for this but us!

Two thirds of Ann Arbor’s revenue comes from property taxes (pg. 17). If the implementation of this plan will lead to a major tax increase for homeowners then the city should be honest about that.

A way to pay for all this is never explained, except that you and I will pay for it. The comprehensive plan does not try to hide the amount of infrastructure investment that would be needed to implement it.

A public comment: “we keep building but our infrastructure cannot hold all these people without terrible traffic and overcrowding“.

And another, “ there is concern over the high tax burden - that additional density would strain city infrastructure, or require unrealistic investment”, pg. 79

Infrastructure expense will be huge, that is made clear:

- * “public investment in infrastructure will also be required”, pg. 3
- * “the city will need to upgrade infrastructure and city services to support new uses and density”, pg. 72
- * - infrastructure investment is required to “shift transportation modes”, pg. 87
- * “new infrastructure investment will be needed to accommodate anticipated growth.” pg.92 This means water, sewer, streets, police, fire, schools, libraries, community centers, waste management, plus equipment, and vehicles... (all of these could also be put into public park land).
- * “investments are needed to achieve future land use vision”, pg. 106
- * “shopping centers and office parks will require significant redevelopment and infrastructure investment”.
- * “upfront investment may be necessary to support the increase in growth”.

Lot's of infrastructure spending will be necessary if they seize current parkland. All this will entail a massive amount of money, spent for people of the future, It is ludicrous to present this plan with no way to fund it except from the taxpayers’s pocket. It doesn’t seem to benefit the current taxpayer.

It is legal for the city to charge “impact fees” to cover the infrastructure cost of new building. This

plan never mentions it. This plan, is simply “more more more” (residential units) (that is a quote from a planning commissioner!)

8) FUTURE DISASTER FOR ANN ARBOR WILL BE LOCKED IN, “BY RIGHT”

This plan will be firmly in place for 25 years! When planning principles are codified in a master plan, it can be very difficult for citizens to influence anything. We must stop it now! For the next 25 years City commissioners could say “the comprehensive plan calls for this infrastructure and you get to pay for it” or “we will take any park we want”, or “this 48 foot tall 16 unit apartment building is going in next to your house”, or “those trees will have to come down”. There would be nothing you could do.

Commissioners can say that anything they want is “implied” in this plan. Citizens have been shut out, just like they lately have been shut out in terms of reviewing site plans; and just like the “design review board” (a group of expert design professionals working for free) was just disbanded...since it might delay developers a bit. Citizens will be effectively removed from the planning process if this comprehensive plan succeeds.

9) The city is so dominated by developers that City Council thinks we need to spend *tax money* to *help them*!

One citizen comment mentioned was “we distrust developers and city government”

Another citizen said,, “it is a top priority to preserve natural features and especially tree cover”

Instead, this comprehensive plan implies that developers are the new “oppressed class“ in Ann Arbor. Therefore, we must “streamline the development and review process to make it easier”, and, the city will proactively develop a strategy to “incentivize” contractors. Your taxes will also pay for the city to do “entrepreneurial training“ as well as “company development” for private developers.

Is this a joke? (pg. 53,75,115)

This isn't right, I was in government for 20 years and never saw anything like it.

What does it mean to say that we “accept the essence” of this comprehensive plan?

This plan was written by people with mostly good motives and we should adopt all the good parts. But, these planners together “drank the Kool-Aid” of “new urbanism”. Then, in their plan, they leapt overboard, with plans for more than 100% housing growth while population is stable.

(MANY planning commissioners have direct real estate connections, and lobbying by real estate oriented folks has been an incessant drumbeat of self interest, (...they often talk about affordable or middle income housing, not about “milking” huge profits from A2). This is the ultimate “wolf in sheep's clothing” scenario. Their plan would trigger the next Ann Arbor land rush, with bulldozers on your block; and radically raise your taxes.

ACCEPT THE ESSENCE!

We do need to adapt to meet new realities... to move forward equitably and sustainably.

Kids are growing up and leaving older homes. Many modern people are single or have small families. We do need more mid range and lower income housing, and we can do this. We can make our neighborhoods much more diverse, allowing apartments within homes, more residences on a single property, apartment blocks in residential areas, as well as small, neighborhood, commercial opportunities and amenities. We can have more “complete communities” where people can get most of their needs met without driving. (“Gentle Zoning” is their euphemism for allowing four homes on any lot.)

We can create “nodes” of walkable communities, *building upon locations where they are already forming naturally*. We can allow small businesses within neighborhoods if they are clean and quiet.

We could allow three story apartment buildings in residential neighborhoods, and four story apartment buildings along bus routes. All this housing would be plenty to meet any objective that the city has stated, without trashing Ann Arbor. We could smoothly move forward and make a good deal out of this.

The city has to drop the fourth story in residential, and the fifth, sixth, and seventh story along bus routes. (These absurdly big buildings are the “bulldozer magnets” touching off the feeding frenzy of developers.) City Council must stop fantasizing about stealing Ann Arbor parkland for development, with no vote of the people. And, they have to figure out a way to finance this social engineering that does not fall on the back of the homeowner. (Renters will simply be “collateral damage”, tossed right out.) If the city will make the changes to the comprehensive plan that citizens are demanding, it could be made to work. If city council insists on passing their current version of a “comprehensive plan” voters will revolt – (when they figure out what is happening). Members of city council and the planning commission will be voted out.

People who love trees and the character of Ann Arbor will serve in the next city Council, and they are being recruited for the “Preserve Tree City” slate of candidates.

Ann Arbor can move skillfully into the future and still forever be “tree city”.

PLEASE WAKE UP - TIME TO BE WOKE!

If we lose our city now to the investment companies, we will never be able to restore its character!

Please fight back! Please run for city Council in 2026! It's time to PRESERVE TREE CITY.

There will be no second chance.

ChatGPT says that “new urbanism” is very difficult to do in a city that is already built.

To make it work, you would need strong mandates about affordability, and strong protections for individuals to be able to remain in their homes ...along with financing.

The Ann Arbor plan contains nothing of this, since it is mostly a sell out to developers.

The plan says “existing affordable housing needs to be safeguarded” (p 54), but there's no plan.



ACCEPT THE ESSENCE - REJECT THE EXCESS! PRESERVE TREE CITY!

This huge mistake could control Ann Arbor's future, and wreck the magic