

Natural Resources Focus Group

Summary

October 24, 2024

Natural Areas, Open Space, and Development

Balancing Protection and Use

- **Strong Existing Protections:** Ann Arbor already has robust protections for natural areas, and there's little push for additional regulation.
- **Tree Retention vs. Mitigation:** Current ordinances don't prioritize tree retention, limiting flexibility in site design and grading.
- **Quality vs. Accessibility:** Experts and the public may value different aspects of natural areas (e.g., ecological quality vs. frequent use). Even lower-quality areas can be ecologically important for species movement and community access.
- **Internal Rankings Outdated:** The city's natural area ranking system hasn't been updated in 25 years, raising questions about how quality is defined and prioritized. University students are working on updated assessments of natural area quality.
- **Limited City Control:** Ann Arbor Public Schools and the University of Michigan can develop forested lands without city oversight.
- **Need for Differentiation:** Not all public lands are equal—some are well-maintained, others are not, and this should inform planning decisions.

Park Maintenance and Resource Allocation

- **Maintenance Challenges:** The city struggles to maintain its many parks, raising concerns about how to prioritize resources.

Vision & Goals

Balance Development and Natural Features Protection

- **Transit and Regional Thinking:** Use transit to connect people to natural areas outside the city while developing lower-quality areas within.
- **Tree Canopy vs. Solar/ADUs:** Tensions exist between preserving trees and enabling solar energy or accessory dwelling units (ADUs).
- **Equity in Impact:** Calls for fairness in development—if past generations could build on forested land, future ones should have similar opportunities, within reason.

- **Forest Land Protection:** Interest in protecting larger forested areas, not just individual trees.
- **Hydropower and Dams:** Consideration of dam removal and hydropower as part of long-term environmental planning.
- **Alternatives Analysis:** Proposals for mapping development potential and requiring alternatives analysis early in the planning process.
- **Mitigation Beyond City Limits:** Suggestion to allow environmental mitigation (e.g., tree planting, flood control) outside city boundaries if it aligns with broader plans.

Parks Enhancement and Access

- **Strategic Access:** While citywide access is generally good, some areas may need targeted improvements.
- **Ecological Value:** Emphasis on increasing biodiversity and ecological function in open spaces.
- **Offset Mechanisms:** Ideas like buying credits or investing in high-quality natural areas outside the city to offset development impacts.
- **Park Land Use:** Consider whether underutilized park space could serve other purposes or be reserved for future needs. However, caution that once green space is developed, it's difficult to reclaim. Criticism of targeting low-quality parks for development instead of addressing low-value land uses elsewhere.

Additional Ideas

- **Incentives for Lawn Conversion:** Encouraging residents to convert lawns into more ecologically beneficial landscapes.