

Comprehensive Plan Presentation by Michelle Bennett and Jill Thacher
Introduction by Moderator, Jeff Crockett
March 5, 2025 at 6:00-7:30 pm

Presenters Bios

- *Jill Thacher* has been a City Planner and the Historic Preservation Coordinator for the City of Ann Arbor since 2006. Her favorite part of the job is helping people accomplish changes to buildings that don't compromise their historic integrity. Jill has a master's degree in urban and regional planning from the University of Michigan and a graduate certificate in historic preservation from Eastern Michigan University. **Email:** jthacher@a2gov.org
- *Michelle Bennett* has been at the city since 2022 in roles as a City Planner and Community Engagement Specialist for infrastructure projects. Prior to that, she worked as a planning consultant across the state primarily working on comprehensive planning projects. She has a master's degree from the University of Michigan in urban and regional planning. **Email:** mbennett@a2gov.org

Q&A Prepared

1. Studies have shown how historic districts significantly contribute to economic development, sustainability (through embodied energy), and a community's heritage. How will the Comprehensive Plan address the standing of existing residential historic districts 1) upon its adoption? 2) in the long term?

The Comprehensive Land Use Plan does not propose any changes to the historic district boundaries or processes to protect a structure's appearance. The Planning Commission and City Council's directive is to allow greater density in all areas of the City. This means that there could be greater development pressure on the historic neighborhoods to build more units per parcel. However, upon adoption of the Comprehensive Plan zoning does not change. The Zoning Ordinance would need to be amended to enable greater residential density. The Zoning Ordinance does not change the Historic District guidelines, so in these areas, any development activity will continue to comply with historic preservation ordinances.

The *Ann Arbor Historic District Design Guidelines* will apply the same way they do now for new and existing structures. Contributing historic structures may not be demolished in order to be replaced with structures with more units. In the longer term, allowing higher density may entice owners of non-contributing (i.e. non-historic) structures to be removed and rebuilt, but the *Design Guidelines* would still apply.

2. What zoning changes are proposed for individual parcels in historic districts and in other older neighborhoods in terms of 1) lot sizes? 2) number of units? 3) number of buildings? 4) height

The Planning Commission has requested that staff explore different regulations that focus on the scale of buildings and not consider a limit on the number of units. For example, form-based code

is one way that allows the Zoning Ordinance to focus on a structure's physical form. It is felt that this is a more effective way to regulate housing so that it fits into the neighborhood and disincentives developers from maximizing the number of units and bedrooms per unit.

The Comprehensive Land Use Plan will not get into the level of detail to describe exact square footage of lot sizes and height limits – that is left to the Zoning Ordinance. At previous public engagement sessions, city planners had used images and suggested height limits to convey what a change in scale would look like in an established neighborhood. Those types of details (unit numbers and height limits) were used to spark a discussion and ultimately educate residents and commissioners so that they could guide staff in what regulatory direction they felt suitable to meet the goals of increasing housing supply. The Planning Commission has generally identified four stories as an appropriate height and scale for the City's lowest density areas.

3. Would the Comprehensive Plan address the procedure for a property owner in a historic district to be able to 1) make an addition to an existing structure? 2) build a new structure? 3) demolish a structure?

Comprehensive Plans do not address work proposed in historic districts, though they will speak more generally on the value of historic districts to city residents by preserving their architectural heritage, fostering a sense of place and community pride, providing tax incentives, etc. The Historic District Commission will continue to review and approve additions, new structures, and demolitions based on their standards of review: The Secretary of the Interior's Standards and Guidelines for Rehabilitation, local ordinances (Chapter 103 Historic Preservation of city code), and the *Ann Arbor Historic District Design Guidelines*.

4. How will the city's existing Design Guidelines be incorporated in the Comprehensive Plan?

The *Ann Arbor Historic District Design Guidelines* will not be incorporated directly into the Comprehensive Plan; they are used solely by the Historic District Commission to inform residents and property owners and guide their decision making.

Similarly, the *Downtown Design Guidelines* are also a stand-alone reference document used by the City Planning Commission and City Council which will also not be incorporated directly into the Comprehensive Plan.

5. How does the Comprehensive Plan reflect the University's "Campus Plan 2050" ?

City staff has met with the university planners and attended their public engagement sessions. We support their five planning themes: Life-Changing Education, Human Health and Wellbeing, Democracy, Civic and Global Engagement, Climate Action Sustainability and Environmental Justice, and Collaboration and Connectivity.

The city has proposed mixed-use hub districts, one of which is located on Plymouth Road near north campus. The initial idea was to provide additional space for University of Michigan's

investments into startups. While most of those would take place on the campus, if these businesses needed space to expand, it would be available to them in the city.

Campus Plan 2050 gives the city an indication of where they plan to grow so that we can collaborate on transportation and utility infrastructure. It also can help with, for example, where the city can upzone near proposed university transit centers.

Having said that, there are some challenges to planning with the University. Their planning strategy optimizes for flexibility. Because they are subject to enrollment numbers, federal and state funding, endowments, and research breakthroughs, their plan does not offer specifics around employment projections or land use. Their plan shows proposed buildings but does not necessarily know what the proposed land use is. This can make it harder to coordinate development from the city's perspective.

6. Will there be public input “workshops” with the Planning Commission before adopting the Comprehensive Plan? If so, when do you expect these might be?

The plan is currently being drafted. If this process follows the schedule outlined, then the draft will become available to the public this spring.

- Over the spring and summer of 2025, the plan will go to the Planning Commission and City Council to be reviewed and discussed publicly. This is an avenue for residents to engage with the plan and share their input.
- During that same time frame, the planning team is going to take the future land use map and draft plan to the four library branches in the city to share and listen to public input. Those dates have not been scheduled yet but once they are, we can share them with you via the neighborhood association, the [project page](#), and the [Comprehensive Plan newsletter](#).
- There is a state mandated 63-day review period. State legislation requires that the plan be open to the public prior to adoption. This is scheduled to be from August through October. This is another period where residents can attend Planning Commission and City Council meetings to offer their feedback.

Q&A In Person:

1. **I'm trying to understand how you increase height without changing character.**
Increasing the height of a historic building is challenging based on regulations designed to maintain the integrity of structures. Land use plans and zoning are separate from historic district regulations, which may be more limiting. For downtown buildings, additional stories can sometimes be added if they are pushed back from the front, so they have less impact on the historic view of the street. For residential structures, additions are generally lower, so they don't overwhelm the historic house or drastically change its appearance.

2. **Who are the drafters of the plan now and after the comment period?**
The city hired a consulting firm called Interface Studio (Philadelphia, PA) to be the primary drafters during all phases of this process.
3. **Any thoughts on expanding existing historic districts?**
Expanding or adding districts has not been mentioned by the Planning Commission. Our community engagement reflected a desire to preserve historic districts. There were a few voices during engagement advocating for the elimination of historic districts, but this is not something that received widespread support.
4. **Who has the final decision role?**
The Planning Commission will make a recommendation to City Council and City Council is the final decision-maker.
5. **Is there a third possibility of Council sending the plan back to the Planning Commission?**
Yes, the City Council has the authority to approve or reject the Plan. If rejected, they will communicate the reasons for rejection to the Planning Commission for consideration.
6. **What does it mean to make the city denser?**
Most simply, it means to increase the number of units permitted on one parcel. This can be done many ways, for example, increasing height limits, increasing the number of occupants permitted in a home, reducing setbacks, decreasing the size requirements for a lot or structure, and increasing the number of units per parcel.
7. **What about R2B Fraternities or Sororities? Will future permits be restricted by this use? What about co-ops and boarding houses?**
Group housing has not received a significant amount of discussion over the past year. Staff will work with the consultant to consider Plan language that addresses group housing, likely with a starting perspective that it has a place in the City, particularly close to campus.
8. **What are the height regulations for accessory dwellings units (ADUs)?**
The maximum height limit for a detached ADU is 21 ft tall at the midpoint of the roofline. An attached ADU must meet the height limits for the zoning district in which it is located (and historic district regulations if it is in a local historic district).
9. **Does form-based zoning address setbacks and side yards?**
Yes. In addition to conventional zoning that looks at dimensional standards (height, setbacks), form-based code (FBC) often adds an additional layer of design-based regulations. Some of the professional resources available about FBC are the [Form Based Code Institute](#) if you'd like to explore this topic more.
10. **What level of discretion does a planner have around form-based code (FBC)?**
The application of form-based code would be same as our current code where there is no discretion built in.

11. What is driving the push for increasing density?

The core principles of the Comprehensive Plan are affordability, sustainability, density, and a dynamic city. Increasing density can help expand housing supply, the types of housing available, and the realization of more homes close to jobs, schools, and services.

12. How will sustainability be addressed? Specifically natural features?

We have worked with our Office of Sustainability and Innovation to ensure that our plan aligns with the A2 Zero Carbon Neutrality Plan's goals. Any large-scale development proposal addresses sustainability in numerous ways. The City shares resources and information to encourage property owners to begin thinking about such measures early in the process. This Comprehensive Plan seeks to create the opportunity for more housing to be built in the City, near job centers and connected to robust multi-modal transportation networks. This enables homes to be built in a system that provides alternatives to vehicular travel, to help reduce or eliminate transportation-oriented emissions. Developments that are reviewed through the site plan process also consider the impact to a wide variety of natural features, and at times provide protections or mitigation when impacts occur.

For the question specifically about whether trees are regulated, in local historic districts trees are a historic resource if they were present in 1944. That year marks the end of the period of significance, and anything present in 1944 or earlier is considered to be contributing to the historic character of the district. If someone wants to remove a tree and its age is unclear, the HDC will ask the property owner to get the opinion of an arborist, and they will also look at aerial photographs from 1947. If the tree is visible, the HDC considers it to be contributing to the character of the historic district.

13. Is there natural features protection from neighbor's construction impact on the root system?

The Zoning Ordinance provides tree protection, including the critical root zone. Section 5.23.6D states the following: "All construction activity (including the effects on soil moisture and drainage of grading changes in the area) should be excluded from the critical root zone of trees to be preserved according to submitted plans. These activities should be avoided to prevent and minimize damage or destruction of tree roots, threatening the life of trees: soil compaction from vehicle and machine parking and traffic, excavation or filling, storage of materials, grading changes that affect soil moisture in the root zone at any time, and insensitive landscape design and installation techniques (including irrigation)."

If you feel that construction on another property is impacting a tree on your property, contact the Interim Urban Forestry and Natural Resources Planning Coordinator, Nick Jacobs, NJacob@a2gov.org.

14. Regarding ADUs that are too close to trees, what happens in this instance?

On properties in historic districts, trees present in 1944 are expected to be retained. The HDC will consider mitigation practices proposed to minimize the impact on these trees in its decision making.

15. Is the City moving to a new kind of zoning?

Yes. The city wants to densify neighborhoods and transit corridors, along with redeveloping some of the shopping centers. Zoning updates will be determined after adoption of Comprehensive Plan.

16. What is the process to create historic districts? If the City's goal is as much housing as possible, does Council have the power to remove historic districts?

It is the same process to create and to eliminate historic districts. In both cases, study committees are appointed by City Council to write a report and make recommendations. City Council then decides whether to create or eliminate the district.

17. Are the number of unrelated adults in the plan?

This has been discussed by the Planning Commission and could result in recommendations as part of the Comprehensive Plan.

18. State legislation addresses the need to have zoning as a component of the comprehensive plan.

Yes, the [Michigan Planning Enabling Act](#) requires that the Comprehensive Land Use Plan contains a Zoning Plan to outline how our future land use categories relate to the current zones. This is why best practice is to complete the Comprehensive Plan prior to the Zoning Ordinance. They are two very related documents that rely on each other.

19. The previous Comprehensive Plan included reference to historic preservation; should this be in the new plan? If so, what is the correct wording?

I would need to look at the exact language that is in the current plan to see if it needs updating, but I encourage you to review it also and see if you agree with what it says. If there are areas that are particularly relevant or outdated, please email me:

jthacher@a2gov.org. For discussion of historic districts and properties, the 2009 Land Use Element document is available here (link below).

https://www.a2gov.org/media/e02froy2/land_use_plan_nov09.pdf

20. With so many projects in the pipeline, when would precepts of the new plan take effect?

The draft Comprehensive Land Use Plan is scheduled to go to City Council for a final decision November 2025 at the earliest. The Plan will not change current zoning and would therefore not affect the development that is currently in the pipeline.

21. Once the Plan is adopted, does the current zoning remain in place?

Yes. The adoption of the Comprehensive Plan does not change zoning. The current zoning will remain in place until the Zoning Ordinance is adopted. The zoning map and text would both need to be revised and adopted at the same time.

22. Co-ops and Fraternities/Sororities are in current zoning.

At this point in discussions, the Comprehensive Plan may call for one residential land use district. Future changes to zoning may incorporate one or more residential zoning

districts to realize the plan's vision. The intent is to reduce the number of zoning districts overall.

23. How can the Comprehensive Plan NOT include group housing?

Michelle asked what type of regulations residents would like to see for group housing. See response to question 7 in this section.

24. Is the Comprehensive Plan useless if not followed up by zoning?

No, while the primary purpose of a Comprehensive Plan is to provide guidance for zoning updates, it also features research on current trends, touch points with the community, and other recommendations to the city that are not related to zoning. During this time, the city departments come together to discuss how to plan holistically and could develop a set of goals or actions for itself that are not tied to zoning. For example, planning could have goals to work with engineering to determine how to select projects that invest in the water or sewer infrastructure.

25. Why isn't the Zoning Ordinance rewrite happening concurrently to the development of the Comprehensive Plan?

This work may start concurrently, but it is not possible to be inclusive of all recommendations until the plan is finalized and adopted. Before the city approves zoning, which is local law, it spends time investigating its policy direction and a set of recommendations based on researching demographic, housing, land use, transportation, and economic development trends. That way, when it gets to its Zoning Ordinance, we have a better idea of what the law should look like to serve our residents.

26. What is the timeline for writing the new Zoning Ordinance?

The planning staff will likely hire outside consultants to assist with rewriting the Zoning Ordinance. Consultants can assist in research about how other communities zone and what the outcomes have been. This process usually takes at least a year or two after adopting the Comprehensive Land Use Plan.

27. We have tended to look at goals bulwarking sustainability, etc. without addressing the flow of goods and services to the buildings that will be developed and built under the new provisions. Based on existing situations, it would be beneficial to understand how plans/provisions take into account the delivery economy. Residents may walk to various destinations but it is almost certain that that same resident will require trucks and vans from Amazon, DoorDash and Xfinity. Are these being provided for as goals and expectations are set and we gain an idea of what sites may look like?

Yes, curb management has been difficult to regulate. There is more demand for the city's roads than when they were planned for; for example, Uber Eats didn't exist during the writing of the last Comprehensive Plan. In addition to land use regulation, it is also an enforcement issue as even when space is provided for delivery trucks, they may choose the fastest option which may include stopping in the traffic lane. This will be called out as a challenge to development in the Comprehensive Plan.

As for recommendations to mitigate this problem, this has been studied in more detail by the Downtown Development Authority. You can review its [Curb Management Plan](#) for more information.

28. Where can additional questions be submitted?

Jeff Crockett: Send questions to him (jeffcrockett8@gmail.com) and he'll forward them to Michelle Bennett (MBennett@a2gov.org).