



Washtenaw County
Department of Planning & Environment

July 3, 2008

DRAFT

Wendy Rampson, Systems Planner
City of Ann Arbor
100 North Fifth Avenue
P.O. Box 8647
Ann Arbor, MI 48107-8647

RE: City of Ann Arbor Downtown Plan Amendment

Dear Ms. Rampson:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the proposed amendment to the City of Ann Arbor Downtown Plan. In accordance with the Municipal Planning Act, Public Act 285 of 1931 as amended, the amendment was reviewed by Washtenaw County Planning Advisory Board and the Board of Commissioners. The Washtenaw County Department of Development Services, Department of Parks and Recreation, Road Commission, Department of Public Health, Office of the Drain Commissioner and the Washtenaw Area Transportation Study (WATS) were also given the opportunity to comment on the update.

The City is seeking review and comment on amendments to the Downtown Plan. The amendments are intended to create a policy for public and private investments in the downtown area. Specifically, the plan presents guidelines to address land use, design, parking, pedestrian orientation, and sense of place.

Based on the staff review of the proposed update in the context of the County Plan, it is determined that the amendment is consistent with the County Plan. The proposed amendment is also consistent with the plans of contiguous local units of government.

The following opportunities do not impact consistency with the County Plan yet warrant exploration to improve the document:

- The use of brownfield redevelopment, obsolete property or other financial incentives should be explored to support goals relative to attracting targeted active businesses and encouraging a diversity of housing in the downtown area in a sustainable development approach.
- The plan balances a stated desire for adding population, particularly in the core area, while being sensitive to the existing building context for design cues. This balance could be difficult to achieve on a site by site basis, and it might warrant additional discussion on factors or other tools that decision-makers might utilize to meet both goals when considering development proposals.

- As identified by WATS, more frequent use of “non-motorized transportation modes” (i.e. inclusive of bicycle and other non-motorized modes) in goals and action strategies and amenities rather than exclusive focus upon pedestrians.
- Incorporation of the Washtenaw County Non-Motorized Plan and Washtenaw County Transit Plan by reference in the Plan as identified by WATS.

Other opportunities for plan sections are identified in the attached staff report, which provides additional detail and background regarding County comments. WATS and the Washtenaw County Department of Public Health provided additional detailed recommendations which should be reviewed and considered.

On behalf of the Planning Advisory Board and the Board of County Commissioners, I would like to thank you for your contribution to promoting a shared vision for Washtenaw County. If the Department may be of assistance to the City as you work to implement the policies included in your plan, please call me at (734) 222-6809.

Sincerely,

Patricia Denig
Director of Planning Services
Department of Planning and Environment

Attachments
Staff Report

Cc: Ann Arbor Township
Barton Hills Village
Lodi Township
Pittsfield Township
Scio Township



Staff Report

RE: City of Ann Arbor Downtown Plan Amendment – Washtenaw County Review

Date: June 16, 2008

Background

Washtenaw County Department of Planning and Environment (P&E) received the draft amendments to the Downtown Plan (Plan) from the City of Ann Arbor on May 19, 2008. In accordance with the Municipal Planning Act, Public Act 285 of 1931 as amended, the County is to provide comments to the City, which must include two statements of consistency:

- A statement as to whether, after considering any comments received by contiguous local units of government, the proposed update is consistent with the plan of contiguous communities; and
- A statement as to whether the proposed update is consistent with the County Plan.

Summary of Update/Review in context of County Plan

The City of Ann Arbor is seeking review and comment on amendments to its Downtown Plan. The Downtown Plan was originally adopted in 1988 and updated in 1992 as part of the City's Central Area Plan. The proposed amendment is the result of a renewed focus on downtown development in the early 2000's that was influenced by planning initiatives by the City of Ann Arbor and Ann Arbor Downtown Development Authority since 2003.

The plan is concise, and well-organized to provide a user-friendly tool for decision-makers and the various stakeholders that contribute to a vibrant downtown Ann Arbor.

Existing Conditions and Characteristics

The first section, Existing Conditions and Characteristics provides an overview of the fundamental elements of downtown Ann Arbor that create a special sense of place. Historic Building Patterns, Pedestrian/Open Space System, Land Use, Existing Development Densities, and Land Form and Building Scale are some of the categories referenced as contributing to the unique character of the area.

While the plan should be commended for emphasis on pedestrian orientation, the plan could be strengthened in this category by providing some more general transportation system-related characteristics to the downtown. The historic grid-like street pattern is an important amenity to the walkability of downtown areas. The character of streets can also be impacted by the presence of on-street parking, minimum curb cuts, and consolidated loading/service entry through alleyways.

While recommendations regarding these do appear in the document, recognizing how the transportation system in general impacts the character of the downtown might be a worthwhile exercise.

Guiding Values

The next major section of the proposed Plan includes a series of values which are intended to articulate fundamental elements or principles that should be at the forefront of any decision-making process in the downtown area. The values identified include Diversity of Use, Diversity of Users, Pedestrian Orientation, and Sustainability. *These values relate to many County Plan goals and objectives including County Plan Landscapes 1.1 (Urban Infill Development Character and Design and Transportation) Objective 9 (Encouraging pedestrian and other non-motorized connections to educational, work and leisure opportunities).* While not explicitly referenced in County Plan Objectives, the proposed Downtown Plan identifies sustainability as a guiding value which is to be commended.

Areas of Downtown Character

After the introductory portions, the Plan is comprised of a series of goals and recommended action strategies relative to characteristics of the downtown area that are important to a sense of place.

Land Use

- The Plan encourages land use and development that draw people downtown and foster an active street life. This goal is supported by strategies that encourage housing within developments and the inclusion of new pedestrian-oriented uses such as live work units.
- The Plan promotes downtown as the center of commerce in the community and recommends expansion of active uses such as shops, services, restaurants and entertainment attractions. Recommended Action Strategies to support this goal include zoning ordinance amendments that require active uses at street level, streetscape improvement, and a market study to enhance the competitive advantages of downtown retailers.
- Encouraging a diversity of new downtown housing opportunities and an increased downtown population is a goal of the land use section. This goal is supported by strategies that reference zoning updates, premium incentives, the use of DDA funds, the prioritization of housing as a use of publicly-offered land, and a streamlined development proposal process.
- The Plan promotes a mix of office, service and cultural uses in the downtown to complement retail activity. The promotion of incentives to choose alternatives to parking downtown all day, mixed use land plans, and encouraging cultural and arts-oriented uses to located downtown are strategies identified to encourage this balance.
- The Plan supports the private development of a downtown conference/civic center within the core area and goes a step further to investigate the costs and benefits of public funding participation in such an effort. Strategies include the provision of a special exception zoning provision for the use in the core area and to encourage a facility design which can serve local and out of town meeting needs.

- The Plan includes a goal to maintain downtown as a center for government and community service. This goal is supported by recommendations to keep City offices downtown and ongoing dialogue with Washtenaw County on downtown expansion plans.

These goals and action strategies are consistent with County Plan Landscapes 1.1 (Urban Infill), and Economic Development 1.1 (Targeted business/industry support).

Land Use Opportunities:

- *The use of brownfield redevelopment, obsolete property or other financial incentives should be explored to support goals relative to attracting targeted active businesses and encouraging a diversity of housing in the downtown area in a sustainable development approach.*
- *The discussion for the conference/civic center is relatively detailed. The terminology of conference/civic center raises some question and might warrant further clarification or definition (e.g. would a government office campus meet the civic center definition). The recommendation that a conference/civic center contribute to the quality of pedestrian environment is an important reference, as some conference centers do not achieve this integration and are more oriented to a self-contained operation that discourages street activity.*

Development Character

This section of the plan describes two character areas of the downtown area, the Core Area which includes the largest retail areas, greatest concentration of office and civic functions, and major hotels. The second area, the Interface Area can be generally described as those downtown areas that transition from the Core to near-downtown residential neighborhoods. The section also includes other character-related goals that would apply to all areas of the downtown.

- The Plan encourages downtown's highest density and tallest buildings in the Core Area. Recommended Action Strategies include the revision and use of the premium system (e.g. density bonuses in exchange for design elements) to encourage residential development, green building, historic preservation, affordable housing and transferred development rights.
- The Interface Area goal is focused on supporting incremental transitions in land use, density, building scale and height. This is recommended by a maximum 600% floor area ratio, height limitations, use of the Premium System, and shifts in land use from fringe commercial and light industrial to residential and a mix of office, retail and business services.
- The Plan encourages the designation of historic buildings to encourage their preservation. Through collaboration with the Historic District Commission, the development of compatible infill design guidelines, and the potential of a transfer of development rights program to shift development rights from designated properties.
- The Plan supports protecting the livability of residential neighborhoods adjacent to downtown. This is intended to be accomplished through residential zoning

boundary confirmation, expansion of resident parking permit systems, and mitigating traffic impact to residential areas.

- The Plan identifies contextual design as an important element to the downtown as a special place. Articulation in building mass is encouraged to minimize any negative impacts from scale, shading, or blocking views. The creation of overlay districts covering areas of similar character, the development of design guidelines and site specific development area urban design plans for those areas with high potential for growth.

These goals and action strategies are consistent with County Plan Landscapes 1.1 (Urban Infill), and Historic Preservation 1.5 (Innovative Preservation Strategies).

Development Character Opportunities:

- *The Core Area discourages “fringe commercial” land uses, which isn’t adequately defined.*
- *Brownfield redevelopment incentives and transfer of development rights to preserve open space could be considered as other mechanisms within the premium system to achieve character goals.*
- *There are two major concepts in the Plan that could be perceived at odds. On one hand the Plan emphasizes contextual design where significant attention will be paid to existing form to determine the appropriateness of new development. This is balanced with the goals to add housing, new uses to attract users and help sustain existing businesses, which lead to a logical conclusion of increased development density in the downtown area. There is an opportunity in this section or in the guiding values section to further discuss how these two principles will be balanced.*

Pedestrian and Open Space System

The pedestrian character of the downtown area is important to the desired sense of place. The Plan includes several goals relative to maintaining the features that make the area walkable:

- The first goal of the section is to improve and extend pedestrian connections through streetscape improvements. Developing long term funding strategies to maintain the system, as well as coordination with private development to implement desired enhancements, are a few of the strategies identified.
- Development guidelines are also identified as important to maintain pedestrian scale and orientation as new development occurs.
- Open Space in the downtown is supported by goals regarding the development of parks, plazas, through-block arcades and atrium spaces, the rehabilitation/maintenance of existing spaces, and the development of a linked open space system on the floor of the Allen Creek valley.
- Improvement to the downtown’s entrance corridor is a goal supported by the effective use of Interface Areas to provide appropriate transitions.

These goals and action strategies are consistent with County Plan Transportation 9.4 (Pedestrian and Bicycle Infrastructure).

Transportation and Parking

The Plan includes several goals regarding the role of transportation and parking to the character and unique aspects of downtown:

- Ensure that traffic increases generated by future growth are accommodated without jeopardy to the pedestrian network. This is recommended to be accomplished through low traffic speeds, maintaining on-street parking, consolidate/limit vehicle access drives, and use operational changes (innovative signalization or other tools rather than street widening) to accommodate increased demand.
- Establish a physical and cultural environment that supports safe, desirable pedestrian and bicycle circulation throughout the downtown. Recommended action strategies to support this goal include the provision of bike and pedestrian routes on both sides of a street, application of design guidelines from the Non-Motorized Transportation Plan, and the provision of adequate parking for bicycles, motorcycles, scooters and the like.
- Improve transit service within the downtown area by adopting policies that enhance the competitiveness of automobile alternatives, support of AATA park and ride lots, encourage businesses and institutions to reduce the number of their employees arriving downtown each day in cars, implement rail service along the Ann Arbor Railroad ROW, and study connections between downtown and proposed commuter rail station.
- Parking is intended to be guided by a set of principles to recognize the role of parking, how parking relates to alternative modes of travel, and the provision of appropriate parking supply.
- Reduce parking pressures on neighborhood streets and discourage encroachment of off street parking into residential neighborhoods.
- Encourage structured parking, with emphasis on underground parking in all major projects. Develop design guidelines to encourage high quality design and function, and encourage public parking as part of large private development projects.

These goals and action strategies are consistent with County Plan Transportation 9.4 (Pedestrian and Bicycle Infrastructure) and Transportation 1.2 (Expand Transit Use for Commuters).

Transportation and Parking Opportunities:

- *The recommendation of public atriums, arcades, and other public spaces might be emphasized in relationship and connectivity to transit stations and/or high volume transit routes.*

Implementation

- Encourage improved cooperation between the City, County, University of Michigan, public schools, and state and federal agencies.
- Streamline the development proposal process.

Implementation Opportunities:

- *There are implementation opportunities throughout the plan. Implementation steps are generally included in action strategies, and the inclusion of a separate section suggests a more limited implementation effort.*
- *The strategy to encourage the University administration to address needs for additional student housing is vague. It is unclear what this strategy is intended to foster.*
- *More explanation of streamlining the development approval process would provide better focus. What are the desired outcomes (e.g. reduced cost, reduced timeframe, fewer steps). More information should be provided on how process mapping and technology improvements might lead to a streamlined process.*

Contiguous Community Land Uses

The Downtown planning area does not share boundaries with any other jurisdictions. Within the City, land uses patterns surrounding the downtown planning area are residential of varying densities and University of Michigan uses.

Contiguous Community Comments

None received.

Applicable County Department Comments

Washtenaw County Public Health: Attached

Washtenaw County Drain Commission (WCDC): None Submitted

Washtenaw Area Transportation Study (WATS): Attached.



**Public Health Checklist for Review / Comment of
 Washtenaw County Planning Documents
 Ann Arbor Downtown Plan – Draft 5/5/08
 Reviewed June 9, 2008 by Adreanne Waller, MPH**

	Not Addressed	Somewhat Addressed	Adequately Addressed	Not Applicable To this review
1. The plan includes elements that increase access to physical activity.				
A. Opportunities for use of non-motorized transportation are evident in the plan (bikeability, walkability, Multi-use paths)	1	3	5	N/A
B. Connectivity between schools and residential areas are promoted in the Plan (Safe Routes to School).	1	3	5	N/A
C. Preservation of green/open Space including parks is Evident in this plan.	1	3	5	N/A

Comments: **Connectivity between residential areas and downtown addressed; however, connectivity to schools is not addressed.**

	Not Addressed	Somewhat Addressed	Adequately Addressed	Not Applicable To this review
2. The plan includes elements that increase access to healthy eating resources.				
A. The plan promotes mixed use development (retail including access to grocery stores and residential).	1	3	5	N/A
B. Grocery stores and super-markets can be accessed by non-motorized transportation.	1	3	5	N/A
C. The plan includes elements that support or improves the local food system (including preservation of agricultural land / urban agriculture and community gardens)	1	3	5	N/A

Comments: _____

While there are numerous references to access to 'retail and restaurants,' there are no mentions of access to healthy foods or resources, with the exception of plans to retain space for farmers market.

	Not Addressed	Somewhat Addressed	Adequately Addressed	Not Applicable To this review
3. The plan includes elements that promote emotional well-being and social connectivity.				
A. The plan includes elements that promote the use of, and access to, public transportation.	1	3	5	N/A
B. The plan includes elements that promote connectivity between residential development and retail.	1	3	5	N/A
C. The plan incorporates affordable housing options into residential developments.	1	3	5	N/A
D. The plan includes built elements that increase community cohesion and neighborhood activities.	1	3	5	N/A

Comments: _____

References:

- 1) Washtenaw County Public Health comments for Environment and Planning Master Plan.
- 2) Design guidelines for Active Michigan Communities, 2006.
- 3) Robert Wood Johnson: Active Living Research
 - a. Designing for Active Recreation: February 2005
 - b. Designing for Active Transportation: February 2005

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WASHTENAW AREA TRANSPORTATION STUDY

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Planning Reviews

Community: Ann Arbor City **Date Received:** May 15, 2008

Complete Master Plan Update: **Complete Zoning Plan Update:**

Master Plan Amendment: x **Zoning Plan Amendment:**

Other:

Sections reviewed: x Goals (objectives) x Policies x Land Use Recommendations

x Transportation Recommendations Other

General Comments:

The Table of Contents does not list the maps included in the document.

There is little detail of how the conceptual action strategies will be used to accomplish the goals.

Consider a separate goal encouraging intermodal transportation transfers between, non-motorized, vehicular, and transit transportation, by itself and not within the parking section.

Land Use Implications:

The densification of the downtown area is critical for the reduction of future trips and to be able to make transit modes more efficient.

Transportation Component Implications:

Many references of only walking or walkways could be changed to non-motorized transportation and include biking. Consider incorporation of WATS Transit Plan by reference.

POLICY COMMITTEE MEMBERS

- CITY OF ANN ARBOR • ANN ARBOR TRANSPORTATION AUTHORITY • ANN ARBOR TOWNSHIP • CITY OF CHELSEA • VILLAGE OF DEXTER •
- DEXTER TOWNSHIP • EASTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY • MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION • NORTHFIELD TOWNSHIP • PITTSFIELD TOWNSHIP •
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AN INTERMUNICIPALITY COMMITTEE ORGANIZED UNDER ACT 200 OF PUBLIC ACTS OF MICHIGAN (1957)
REPRESENTING WASHTENAW COUNTY

Comments by Section:

Page 7 – Guiding Values, Pedestrian Orientation: Consider changing “convenient walking environment” to “convenient non-motorized environment” to include both pedestrians and bikers.

Page 9 – Land Use, Concentrated Diversity of Activity: Second Paragraph, last sentence; Consider changing “on foot” to “on foot and by bike”.

Page 9 – Land Use, Concentrated Diversity of Activity, Recommended Action Strategies, 1: The section that states “more use diversity” should be changed to “more land use diversity” or diversity of activity and modes.

Page 10 – Retail Environment, Goal: Using “pedestrian environment” as a description of non-motorized transportation is adequate in most cases, but since you are referring to transit and parking in the same sentence please change “quality pedestrian environment” to “quality pedestrian environment with bike parking amenities”.

Page 13 – There is not a title or service area listed before the Goal.

Page 14 – Development Character, Core Area: If you refer to map figure 6 there are two distinct Core Areas, not one Core Area. There is the Main St area and the South University Area. Consider changing the figure or changing the section title to Core Areas as the areas are not contiguous.

Page 14 – Development Character, Core Area, Description of Goal: As stated in the previous comment, the three paragraphs that describe the goal of the Core Area does not describe the South University Core Area on figure 6. Consider adding a description specific to the University area or dropping the South University area from the Core Area.

Page 14 – Recommended Strategies, (4) Consider adding “which includes bike, motorcycle and moped parking” to the end of the strategy.

Page 15 – Interface Area – Strategy (5) – This strategy speaks to allowing a mix of office, retail and business service functions but does not speak to “mixed use” within one development. Are you limiting the mixed uses to different developments?

Page 16 – Neighborhood Edges, Recommended Action Strategies, 3: Consider the addition of “automobile” to the strategy to make it clear that you only are hoping to limit auto trips. Also consider being more descriptive with Action Strategy 3. How will you minimize through traffic impacts? Consider adding to the sentence “by using traffic calming facilities such as raised pedestrian crossings, speed humps, etc.”

Page 20 – Development Guidelines, Goal: Consider changing “enhance the pedestrian scale” to “enhance the non-motorized scale”

Page 20 – Development Guidelines, Description of Goal: Consider changing “accommodate pedestrian activity” to “accommodate pedestrian and bike activity”

Page 22 – Allen Creek “Greenway”, Description of Goal: First paragraph, last sentence; Change “linked by walkways.” to “linked by non-motorized paths.” unless the pathways will be limited to walking only.

Page 23 – Transportation and Parking, vehicular Travel, Goal: Change “quality of the pedestrian environment” to “quality of the non-motorized environment”.

Page 23 – Transportation and Parking, vehicular Travel, Description of Goal: Change “objectives for pedestrian” to “objectives for pedestrian and bike”.

Page 23 – Transportation and Parking, vehicular Travel, Recommended Action Strategies, 3: Consider added that limiting access points minimizes conflict between vehicles, bikes and pedestrians and, reduces crashes.

Page 23 – Transportation and Parking, vehicular Travel, Recommended Action Strategies, 4: Consider changing “Encourage shared vehicular” to “Encourage access management techniques for shared vehicular”.

Page 24 – Non-motorized Travel, Description of Goal: Change all “pedestrian” uses to “non-motorized” where appropriate to not leave out considerations for bikes.

Page 24 – Non-motorized Travel: Consider referencing the WATS Non-motorized Plan for Washtenaw County for more specific goals and objectives.

Page 25 – Transit, Description of goal: Third paragraph, first sentence; Only the North-south rail corridor is referenced. Consider added reference to the Norfolk Southern East-west rail line for commuter travel.

Page 25 – Transit, Recommended Action Strategies, 4: Only the North-south rail corridor is referenced. Consider added reference to the East-west rail line for commuter travel.

Page 25 – Transit: Consider referencing the WATS Transit Plan for Washtenaw County for more specific goals and objectives.

Page 28 – Improve Design: Consider changing the title “Improve Design” to “Improve Design of Parking” as it is all that is talked about.

Page 28 – Improve Design, Recommended Action Strategies, 2: Add to the end of the sentence “including ground level retail.”

Page 28 – Consider adding a strategy that speaks more directly to parking for non-motorized modes including bike and moped parking.