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To the Grand Rapids City Commission:

I am tired. I am tired of wanting better for a place that seemingly does not want to better itself. Grand Rapids is the urban center of a million-person metropolitan region, but it does not act like one. What should be thriving, walkable, diverse neighborhoods in the urban core are held back time and time again by ancient zoning practices, onerous regulations and reviews, and overly-involved citizens and commuters who want to freeze things as they are without regard for anyone else. In this new Master Plan I see some great things: calls for more inclusive street design, varied housing types, and a city shining with vibrancy. I also see, however, a city that will largely look the same in 20 years as it does today. The plan caters to too many and thus largely lacks the vision that the city needs to grow in a robust and sustainable way.

For example, there is no call to eliminate parking minimums citywide. Instead, parking minimums are recommended to be “reduced,” which I read as catering to those who drive. There are many in the city who cannot or do not want to drive, and as an urban center these are the people we should be prioritizing. I ask you: for whom are we building the city? The people that live here or those who drive into or through it? So long as Grand Rapids lacks the courage to create an environment that puts driving (whose users command the highest public subsidy and take up the most space) as the lowest transportation priority the city will continue to struggle with income inequality and traffic violence. You are on the verge of adopting this new plan full of shiny ideals, and yet you have approved a \$30 million dollar parking garage. I ask again: for whom are we building this city?

The plan also fails to adequately envision the amount and types of housing that are already needed to address the shortage-turned-crisis. The map of future land use shows a dense City Center, Monroe North, and near West Side, but how will this tiny area be enough to meet the demand? “Neighborhood Centers” will not be enough to fill in the gaps. Neighborhoods across the city must confront the uncomfortable process of change and densify. By-right development for denser housing should be greatly expanded, even (especially) in the wide swaths of single family homes that make up most of the city. Cities are not static. They grow and change. The Grand Rapids area has seen a great deal of growth in the last 15 years and there are no signs that it will stop. Our diverse economy presents a multitude of job opportunities, and the City government needs to step up to meet the demand for housing that economic opportunity creates. Without substantial change the city will become exponentially more unequal, and gentrification will push out all but the most financially-secure residents. While this will be incredible for property values it will not work toward the egalitarian ideal that the plan strives for and the city deserves.

Despite these critiques I think that the plan gives us a framework for a better city. I urge you in your future decisions about the city to not consider the plan as a strict standard but as guidelines. Yes, we should pay heed to Great Neighborhoods, Vital Business Districts, A Strong Economy, Balanced Mobility, and Desirable Development Character. Yes, we need to do even more.

The best time to act was ten years ago, and the next best time is now. I am asking you to do the hard work of standing up for what will create a great city. Do not cave to those who whine about traffic, parking, noise, and crime. Know better and do better. Adopt these guidelines understanding that \$30 million dollar parking garages and the occasional approval of a mixed use building aren't enough to make Grand Rapids a great place. I choose to live, work, and invest in Grand Rapids not just because it offers some amenities now, but because I see the potential for what it can become. That potential will be squandered if we put neighborhoods under glass and lack the courage to do better by ourselves and future generations.

Thank you,

Michael Hilden