



Item Number: 2

# CITY OF GRAND RAPIDS AGENDA ACTION REQUEST

**DATE:** March 25, 2025

**TO:** Mark Washington, City Manager

**COMMITTEE:** City Commission Meeting

**LIAISON:** N/A

**FROM:** Kristin Turkelson, Planning Director  
Planning, Design & Development

**SUBJECT:** **Ordinance amending Sections 5.8.03. "Grand River Overlay District" and 5.11.15. "Alternative Energy" of the Zoning Ordinance (Chapter 61 of the City Code)**

On March 11, 2025, the City Commission set March 25, 2025 as the date to consider an ordinance that included proposed amendments to several sections of the Zoning Ordinance, including provisions regarding basement window well requirements, front yard parking provisions, the Grand River Overlay District and provisions regarding alternative energy. At the March 11 meeting, the Commission directed that the provisions related to basement window well and front yard parking requirements be remanded to the Planning Commission for consideration of further streamlining the approval processes in certain cases. The remaining two sections are now proposed for adoption in the attached ordinance and are described in more detail below.

Zoning Ordinance Sections 5.8.03. "Grand River Overlay District" and 5.11.15. "Alternative Energy". These text amendments would reinstate to the Grand River Overlay District section language inadvertently removed under a previous amendment and would allow street-facing rooftop solar panels by right, streamlining the approval process.

## Grand River Overlay District (OD-GR)

The proposed amendment reinstates building elements, parking, and landscaping requirements that were inadvertently eliminated in a 2023 amendment that allowed additional building height in the TN-TCC (Traditional Neighborhood-Transitional City Center) and TN-CC (Traditional Neighborhood-City Center) Zone Districts, eliminated the height bonus structure in the Downtown Height Overlay District, and simplified the height bonus structure within the Grand River Overlay. The amendment also modifies the permitted uses in the OD-GR District from the TN-TCC to the use regulations of the base Zone District of the property.

### Alternative Energy- Solar Energy Systems

In an effort to support green initiatives and alternative energy systems, the proposed amendment eliminates language prohibiting rooftop solar panels on street-facing sides of the structure, currently only permitted with an Administrative Departure. In recent years, there have been a number of approved Administrative Departure requests for solar panels located on the side of the roof facing the street. With this amendment, rooftop solar panels may be placed in a location best suited for energy collection, without additional financial cost to the property owner or staff review time of an Administrative Departure application.

### **Planning Commission**

At their meeting on February 13, 2025, the Planning Commission held a public hearing on the proposed amendments, at which time all interested parties had an opportunity to be heard. No members of the public were present to speak; two letters of support for the proposed change to solar panel location were received. After discussion, the Planning Commission voted 7-0 in support of the proposed amendments, citing their alignment with the new Community Master Plan and the reduction of barriers for residents.

### **City Commission Action**

Please forward the attached ordinance for consideration at the next scheduled City Commission meeting.

**SUMMARY OF ORDINANCE AMENDING SECTIONS 5.8.03. GRAND RIVER  
OVERLAY DISTRICT AND 5.11.15. ALTERNATIVE ENERGY,  
OF CHAPTER 61, TITLE V OF THE CODE OF THE CITY OF GRAND RAPIDS  
ENTITLED “ZONING ORDINANCE”**

The City of Grand Rapids is requesting amendment of several sections of the Zoning Ordinance (Chapter 61 of the City Code). The amendments would revise the Grand River Overlay District section to allow the uses permitted in the base Zone District of the property and reincorporate text inadvertently eliminated; and permit solar panels on the street-facing side of residential structures.

The proposed Zoning Ordinance text amendments are available at the City's website at <https://tinyurl.com/textamend2025> or may be examined by contacting the Planning Department at (616)456-4100 or [planning@grcity.us](mailto:planning@grcity.us) during business hours.

**ORDINANCE AMENDING SECTIONS 5.8.03. GRAND RIVER OVERLAY DISTRICT  
AND 5.11.15. ALTERNATIVE ENERGY OF CHAPTER 61, TITLE V OF THE CODE OF  
THE CITY OF GRAND RAPIDS ENTITLED “ZONING ORDINANCE”**

**ORDINANCE NO. 2025-\_\_**

**THE PEOPLE OF THE CITY OF GRAND RAPIDS DO ORDAIN:**

Section 1. That Title V, Chapter 61, Subsection C. of Section 5.8.03. of the Code of the City of Grand Rapids be amended to read as follows:

**Sec. 5.8.03. Grand River Overlay District (OD-GR).**

C. “Uses. Any lot or parcel within the OD-GR District shall be subject to the use regulations of the base Zone District.”

Section 2. That Title V, Chapter 61, Subsection E. of Section 5.8.03. of the Code of the City of Grand Rapids be amended to add Sections E.2.to E.9., to read as follows:

**Sec. 5.8.03. Grand River Overlay District (OD-GR).**

E. *Building Elements.*

- “2. *Materials.* As required in the base Zone District, except that at least 60% of the building wall facing the river, exclusive of wall areas devoted to meeting transparency requirements, shall be constructed of brick, glass, fiber cement siding, wood lap, stucco, split-faced block, or stone.
3. *Façade Variation.* As required in the base Zone District, except that the requirements for building walls facing a street shall also apply to the building wall facing the river.
4. *Entrance.*
  - a. All office buildings, retail sales and service establishments shall have a visible and usable building entrance for customers on both the building wall facing the street and the building wall facing the river.
  - b. Primary building entrances, including those entrances facing the river, shall be clearly identified using an awning, paving treatments, change in roofline or other features, such as canopies, porticos, arcades, arches, wing walls, and integral planters.
  - c. Primary building entrances and exits shall be located on the primary street. Doorways that open to the sidewalk or multi-use trail shall be recessed.
5. *Expression Line.*
  - a. An expression line shall be provided to distinguish the base from the remainder of the building to provide a design element that enhances the pedestrian environment. If applicable, the height of the expression line shall meet the prevailing scale of development in the area.

- b. The expression line may be created by a change in material, a change in design, or by a continuous setback, recess, or projection above or below the expression line. Elements such as cornices, belt courses, corbelling, molding, stringcourses, ornamentation, awnings or canopies, and changes in material or color or other sculpturing of the base, are appropriate design elements to include with an expression line.
- 6. *Transparency.* As required in the base Zone District, except that the requirements for building walls facing a street shall also apply to the building wall facing the river.
- 7. *Streetscape Plan.* Standards used by the City Engineer to determine appropriate street tree plantings, walking surfaces and parkway landscaping shall be used where a City-recognized streetscape plan for a defined area has not been adopted (see Section 5.11.13.C.).
- 8. *Parking.* Parking areas and parking structures shall be separated from the river by intervening buildings, except:
  - a. Where retail space is provided on the ground floor of the parking structure, and at least fifty (50) percent of its façade facing the river is used as display windows; or
  - b. Where a mural or other public art approved by the Planning Commission is provided on the parking structure on the river side of the structure, or in a landscaped area along the river.
  - c. Where a. or b. above, apply, the parking area or structure shall have a minimum required front setback of thirty (30) feet from the Grand River.
- 9. *Landscaping and Access.*
  - a. Land between the building and the river shall be landscaped and designed as an urban open space for pedestrian use meeting the requirements of Section 5.11.14. Parking areas shall meet the minimum screening requirements of Section 5.11.11.C.
  - b. Pedestrian walkways that connect to the river's edge shall be provided between buildings, parking areas or structures, and other built features such as outdoor plazas and courtyards.
  - c. Service areas and mechanical equipment shall be visually unobtrusive and shall be integrated with the design of the site and building.
    - i. Utility boxes shall be positioned so they cannot be seen from the river or Primary Street by locating them on the sides of buildings and away from pedestrian and vehicular routes.
    - ii. Air intake and exhaust systems, or other mechanical equipment that generates noise, smoke or odors shall not be located on the river side of buildings.”

Section 3. That Title V, Chapter 61, Subsections 3. and 4. of Section 5.11.15.B. of the Code of the City of Grand Rapids be amended to read as follows:

**Sec. 5.11.15. - Alternative Energy.**

**B. Solar Energy Systems.**

*"3. Placement.*

- a. Solar collection systems shall be placed so as not to adversely affect the pleasure and enjoyment of nearby residential uses.
- b. Ground-mounted equipment. Ground mounted equipment for the collection of solar energy is permitted to the side or rear of the main building, but not within five (5) feet of a side or rear property line, shall be otherwise sited to minimize view from the public right-of-way and adjacent properties, and shall be camouflaged to the extent that the equipment can function normally.
- c. Rooftop equipment. Rooftop equipment for the collection of solar energy may be installed on the roof of a main or accessory structure, including carports or similar structures, when:
  - i. The panels do not extend more than two (2) feet above the height of the structure upon which it is placed.
  - ii. The panels do not project beyond the eaves of the roof.
  - iii. The panels are integrated, to the extent possible, with the architectural character of the building or structure on which the equipment is affixed.No unfinished lumber is permitted.

4. *Administrative Departure.* An Administrative Departure may be approved for a location not meeting the requirements of this Section after considering the following:

- a. Potential on-street glare from the solar energy system;
- b. Alternative on-site locations, and;
- c. The extent to which neighborhood character may be compromised."

CORRECT IN FORM  
  
CITY ATTORNEY