

4. Communications (4) received offering perspective on the Community Master Plan update.

**From:** Lee

**Sent:** Monday, November 18, 2024 12:06 PM

**To:** City Clerk <[cityclerk@grand-rapids.mi.us](mailto:cityclerk@grand-rapids.mi.us)>

**Cc:** Bliss, Rosalynn <[rbliss@grand-rapids.mi.us](mailto:rbliss@grand-rapids.mi.us)>; Ysasi, Milinda <[mysasi@grand-rapids.mi.us](mailto:mysasi@grand-rapids.mi.us)>

**Subject:** GR Master Plan Input - Concerns Regarding Tree Protections and other items

**[Stop. Think. Read. This is an external email. Please use caution when clicking on the links and opening attachments in unsolicited email.]**

Mayor and Commissioner,

I am writing to offer a perspective on the Bridge to Our Future community master plan update.

I first want to applaud the efforts to explore additional density and options to improve housing affordability in our community. I think the drafters of this plan seriously listened at community sessions and offered a number of tools that will be productive going forward. I could certainly nitpick at details, but that's beside the point. What matters is that, on the whole, our approach to building our community includes increased density, more options for housing, and relaxing some restrictions to allow for new housing models.

That said, I did want to write about some of my concerns in relation to sustainability, trees, and ultimately Green Grand Rapids. Unfortunately, it appears that Green Grand Rapids is missing and/or wasn't included as part of the review process. What little is included in this plan tied to sustainability and environmental initiatives is weakly worded and lacking in imagination. Considering all of our City's sustainability initiatives, urban forestry, parks and recreation, transportation issues, etc. I'm dismayed that findings in Green Grand Rapids were not more fully incorporated into this plan.

Indeed, Green Grand Rapids wasn't even reviewed during the plan scoping process - despite being an amendment to the City's 2002 master plan... and it shows. I think this plan takes it for granted that a number of sustainability and environmental initiatives are inherent to City programs. Yet, this is the master plan and it needs to set some better guidance and/or more directly incorporate findings and objectives from other plans (green grand rapids, parks master plan, etc.).

This is a fairly nuanced view, built on my experience in this issue. However, one prescient example of this issue is recent legal challenges to tree protections in Michigan.

Over the last several years, there have been successful challenges in State and Federal court to tree ordinances in Canton Township, Michigan. These court cases made fourth amendment claims against Canton Township's tree protection ordinance, both as written and as applied.

Ultimately, Canton Township failed to demonstrate that their approach was reasonable. From this, a number of lessons have been learned about the application and defense of tree protection ordinances.

Why is this important? Grand Rapids adopted a tree protection ordinance based on goals and objectives outlined in Green Grand Rapids. This ordinance was co-developed by the Planning Commission and the Urban Forestry Committee. One of the key recommendations coming out of Canton's experience, is that such ordinances need to be housed within the local planning framework in order to improve their defensibility. As written, the Bridge to our Future is vague on the topic of tree protection requirements/ordinances (Green Grand Rapids was specific). This may weaken Grand Rapids' position in regards to its tree protection/preservation requirements in the zoning ordinance, should it be challenged.

I'm linking a recent (published yesterday) paper on this topic: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01944363.2024.2404970>

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All the best,  
Lee

he/him

November 1, 2024

Steve Fridsma  
2036 Joan Avenue NE  
Grand Rapids, MI 49505

City of Grand Rapids Planning Committee and City Commissioners, c/o Elizabeth Zeller  
1120 Monroe NW  
Grand Rapids, MI 49503

Dear Planning Commissioners,

I am a licensed architect and studied new urbanism at the University of Michigan as part of my Master's Degree. I have visited Seaside, Florida and Stapleton, Colorado merely as an urban planning "geek". I would point to Celadon New Town in Grand Rapids Township as a positive local example of similar principles. I also participated in some Community Master Planning workshops.

I am concerned about the **lack of clarity around the language regarding the CMP Compact Neighborhood Designation** as they relate to housing density in particular to the Huff Park and Cattail Crossings Nature Preserve.

Huff/Cattail is different from Riverside, Briggs, and Aberdeen parks, which are mown and developed with playgrounds, shelters, bathroom facilities, etc. At Huff Park, only the Northeast corner of the property, approximately 20% of the total land, is developed in this way. The majority of the park is a designated Nature Preserve.



In the map in the adjacent photo, north is down. The nature preserve is accessible from the parking lot on Aberdeen NE (bottom). The area in yellow is the wetlands. Knapp Street forms the south (top) border. There is a paved trail through the wooded portions of the preserve, and a boardwalk system through the wetland that the City improved in 2018 for over \$2 Million from the 2013 Park Millage and the Michigan DNR.

I live adjacent to this park in the southwest corner and daily see deer, wild turkeys, and many bird species. It is considered a "Birding HotSpot" by Audubon.com. Occasionally, we see opossums, skunks, foxes, wild turkey, barred owls, sandhill cranes, and mink. It is a much beloved oasis in the heart of the NE quadrant of Grand Rapids, one where users can feel far from the city when on the trail and boardwalk.

The proposed **Compact Neighborhood** zone is shown to surround this nature preserve, and appears to permit Multi-Family Housing. As the Master Plan cites, I too, would normally support changes that allow for more diversified housing types. However, the main reason for my letter is that I oppose permitting multi-family housing right up against the Nature Preserve, which I believe would wreck the experience of users of the park and discourage wildlife due to the increase of cars, noise, artificial light, and human activity.

Currently, the homes that border Huff Park/Cattail Crossings are on approximately 1/3 to 1/2 acre lots and are +/-2,000 sf ranches and split-level homes with quiet, deep backyards harmoniously facing the park, blurring the edges of backyard and park. Some homes are visible from the trail, especially in winter; however, most are far from the trail. My own home is approximately 900 feet from the Huff Park trail.

Neighbors and I are aware that a developer stated at a Creston Neighborhood Association Land Use Committee meeting that they wish to develop 35-45 townhouse condominiums on the property behind the farmhouse at 1435 Knapp Street NE which is only 2.5 acres, bordering Huff Park/Cattail Crossings. Because of the geometry of the Huff Park trail in this area and the location of 1435 Knapp Street NE, it would be possible to build townhomes within only 300 feet from the Huff Park trail using current set backs. While a specific proposal has not yet been submitted, I would like to believe that our City's leaders would agree that this degree of density and height would not be harmonious or compatible with the other properties adjacent to Huff Park and I believe would ruin people's experiences of Huff Park and its wildlife.

This same developer has also purchased 1491, 1449, 1443, and 1335 Knapp NE, as well as 2027 Joan Ave NE, in some cases under pseudonyms. Neighbors have reason to believe there is a deal in place for 1431 Knapp NE. This is about half of the properties between Ontario NE and Ball NE on the north side of Knapp NE that have been turned into rental properties. While these homes have been improved, they are being rented, not sold, and our community has become more transitional. There have been 3 different renters in 2027 Joan Ave NE alone with the past year, which makes it hard to build community.

We and neighbors have received requests to buy our homes from a number of different realtors. We and our neighbors are nervous that eventually these properties will be ganged together and torn down. The site is currently zoned low-density and I believe for good reason, and that is to keep the scale of buildings and density of human activity down for the wildlife and users of Huff Park, for it to remain a respite in the city. I am not opposed to single family homes behind 1435 Knapp Street, which would remain compatible with the scale and density of adjacent homes and not encroach upon Huff Park/Cattail Crossings with buildings, noise, glass, and artificial light at night.

I would like to suggest that there should be additional language specifically protecting our set-apart Nature Preserves, as opposed to more generic descriptions of "Open Space" or "Neighborhood Park", from adjacent dense development, which could defeat the purpose of our Nature Preserves, especially one as well-used, special, and recently invested in as Huff Park/Cattail Crossings, which is already bound on all four sides. There is general language about development being "Compatible" and "relating to the local development patterns" which can be VERY open to interpretation whether you are a bird watcher, neighbor, or a housing developer seeking to maximize profit for their investors.

Please consider using the Bridge to Our Future Community Master Plan to protect Huff Park, a jewel in our community, and other nature preserves from the encroachment of too much density and human activity, preserving them for the community's and wildlife enjoyment.

Thank you for considering this matter.

Respectfully submitted,



Steve Fridsma  
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Grand Rapids, MI 49505

**From:** Jim VanderMolen

**Sent:** Monday, November 18, 2024 12:45 PM

**To:** Steve Fridsma

**Cc:** Zeller, Elizabeth <[ezeller@grand-rapids.mi.us](mailto:ezeller@grand-rapids.mi.us)>; Ysasi, Milinda <[mysasi@grand-rapids.mi.us](mailto:mysasi@grand-rapids.mi.us)>; Turkelson, Kristin <[kturkelson@grand-rapids.mi.us](mailto:kturkelson@grand-rapids.mi.us)>; Knight, Lisa <[lknight@grand-rapids.mi.us](mailto:lknight@grand-rapids.mi.us)>

**Subject:** Re: Community Master Plan - designation of Nature Preserves

As Steve Fridsma's neighbor, I'd like to second the issues raised in his letter and encourage increased protection in the Master Plan and Zoning Ordinance of nature preserves and adjacent properties from insensitive, out-of-scale and out-of-character development. While we both strongly support efforts to improve access to housing in our city, we do not believe that goal should be met at the expense of rare community assets like Huff Park. Yes, as direct neighbors of Huff Park and a potential large-scale development site along Knapp Street NE adjacent to Huff Park, we have a personal and financial stake in preserving our relationship to the park and the neighborhood, but that does not minimize or negate the soundness of our cause. This is not merely a case of NIMBYism (despite being literally in our backyards), but a valid concern shared by thousands of our neighbors who have supported our preservation efforts.

Thank you for your consideration.

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November 18th, 2024

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