



CITY OF ANN ARBOR, MICHIGAN

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Community Services Area

Meeting Summary

Date: December 7, 2009

Time: 7:00 pm to 8:30 pm

Location: Washtenaw County Building, 200 N. Main St.

Re: R4C/R2A Zoning Study – Hybrid Focus Group

Attendees: (see attached sign in sheets)

Focus Group – Panos Tharouniatis, Aaron Miller, Rebecca Lopez Kriss, Eleanor Linn, Andrea Van Houweling, Lisa Jevens

City of Ann Arbor—Matt Kowalski, Connie Pulcifer, Chelsea Burket (intern)

Comments and Questions from the Focus Group:

*Send summaries to meeting attendees

Occupancy

- Occupancy limits – in R2A we have a number of duplexes and rental units and there's really never a problem unless it's over-occupied because 4 is the limit. 6 occupants are more like a rooming house. Chapel Hill and Madison – a house with 6 bedrooms is called a rooming house. The housing that's being built now that's 6 bedrooms is not designed as a single living unit - makes for a different dynamic. The other two towns have different limitations for how many can live in a place if it's owner-occupied. Madison has been able to keep conversions under control. If the owner is living there it's a much different thing. We should look to other communities to see how they deal with these problems.

If this summary does not agree with your records or understanding of this meeting please advise the City of Ann Arbor in writing within seven days of issuance; otherwise, we will assume this document is accurate.

Enforcement

- Don't want to raise R2A occupancy to 6. Will enforcement change? House converted to two apartments and it's over-occupied. Is there some way within zoning review to include enforcement?
- There are a lot of enforcement issues – how do you write it into zoning?
- With a lot of the problems there are already laws on the books - it's just hard to enforce.

Density

- There's pressure from the students to increase density and that's why you see density where it shouldn't be. If we are a little more creative in increasing density in R4C (no more than 6 bedrooms), ease up what is conforming and what's not, houses are landlocked – can't do anything to them and can't increase density – if focus of increasing density is just in R4C it will alleviate pressure in other areas.
- Increasing density in R4C is in conflict with CAP.
- Conflict between R4C and R2A because to protect R2A district, density would have to increase in R4C because students want to live close to campus with more than 4 people.
- If we decrease size of units, they become more livable but the code controls density by units, what if we control density by number of bedrooms – become stricter with number of bedrooms. Non-conforming would become conforming. . . zoning used to be that way.

Student Preferences/ Transit

- Logistically the students need to be where they're at – they won't have cars if they're close to campus and will have access to amenities – don't want to push them out.
- In the AHP meetings there's been talk about building apt houses along main bus routes so that it's possible for students to find lower cost, accessible housing. There are areas outside of downtown that could lend itself to student housing.
 - County is working on infill development along Washtenaw. Ann Arbor is stalling efforts. Community needs to support public transportation.
- If you look at the Courtyards building on North Campus it's not at full capacity because demand for student housing is not in areas away from campus, especially for high density student housing. As much as transit is important, most students don't use AATA – there's a stigma. Even if you take the bus out to areas along Washtenaw – it's still strip malls and it's difficult to walk between shopping centers.

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- Almost all students bring cars – even those who are right by central campus.
- There are options in the city for transit that are not taken advantage of (e.g. zip car). But there's not enough disincentive to bring a car.
- Transit is the choice of last resort – the vision of the city to be walkable and transit-oriented is utopian.
- It's not fair to just expect students to be using transit and zip-car, everyone, should be doing that.

Parking

- Parking in terms of zoning – consider parking by bedroom, not unit – requirement right now is unrealistic given the reality.
- At the same time you don't want to see every square inch be a parking lot – need setback and open space regulations.
- Lots of back yards are turned into parking lots – preservation of trees becomes an issue.
- 1200 sq feet is a parking lot – making back yards parking lots should be regulated.
- There are regulations for number of curb cuts and width of driveways – enforcement is the issue.
- Don't want to see sloped down parking because it's dangerous.
- In denser cities people are finding ways to park their cars – if students are figuring out ways to keep cars out of the way, why can't we just be more lenient?
- Look at some of the parking garages that already exist and if they aren't meeting capacity maybe they could permit parking to students. Street parking could be permit only.
 - There's not capacity in downtown garages; there's already a waiting list.
- When you consider increasing the amount of parking, you're enticing people who don't bring their cars to bring them – consider the consequences.
- If you increase parking but also increase green space, you have to loosen up on how cars are parked or you'll run out of space to build, or if you increase density you can go into more expensive parking solutions. If you mandate more parking, price of land might go down.

Affordable Housing

- Having affordable housing is positive. When in the R4C you combine lots to build a new building, it's much more expensive than the house that was there. Older homes can be improved without adding to them.

- A lot of students will pay a lot for a not nice house because of the location, new development in areas around Oakland, Tappan, and Hill - price isn't really increasing that much because it was so inflated before, some of the new development comes in without provisions for affordable student housing, pushing some students out further. I don't think that keeping the houses where they are is helping the problem because they aren't affordable already.
- People will live in run-down houses that are expensive because it's walking distance. Students are highly subsidized and can afford it so that's what drives up the price. It's not economically viable to build small buildings.
 - In order to break even you have to rent at 900/bedroom for tall buildings.

Combining lots

- Dangerous in R4C because it could take away from neighborhood-scape to allow developers to buy up several houses in a row and put a bigger house there – the city should forbid combining lots. Combining lots shouldn't be administrative, public should have input.
- In order to tear things down and combine lots you need adequate parking (beyond what's mandated), green space and setback requirements, congruence with surrounding structures → would lessen push-back from community.

Design

- Design guidelines are important. Most college towns have cheap looking houses, in Ann Arbor even if houses are run down, they were initially quality. New housing has fit in decently well, but design guidelines would be appreciated.
- If you increase density horizontally, there's conformity visually and there's conformity feeling-wise. Active open space is on the right track. Projects that look conforming can be non-conforming because they have no active open space – no place for people to congregate and interact out front. One of the biggest assets of the city is the student population and you should interact rather than corral.
- Should there be min/max setbacks? It should match the street.
- We don't want student ghetto areas to be the gateway to our city. If there were appropriate new development, some of those issues would be eliminated.
- In a 6 bedroom, living rooms work quite well and can be intimate and have community; can be high quality of life with right design.

Definitions/Language

- The definition of a duplex in R2A needs clarification on what that is and the definition of an addition. The slippery definition of duplex/addition causes development that shouldn't be allowed (attaching two houses with a breezeway).
- Garages – older houses have small one-car garages, some have been made into little apartments, some are falling down, and some have become parking. There needs to be some thought on what's a garage and what can it be used for.
- Two words that are bothersome – “non-conforming” and “development”. Non-conforming makes it sound like a threat – didn't become non-conforming until 1963 – bad terminology especially when area plan says that we want to retain the historic character (that's now labeled non-conforming). Development really means demolishing something that is somebody's home and putting something up in its place that is bigger, tackier, and more expensive – it's not development.

Other Thoughts

- Diversity – it's really important to have long-term residents and students together (with well-intended land-lords) and this will alleviate student ghettos. We don't want to write zoning so areas will only be student housing. Housing should be flexible – to be rented by students or families. Having students and families live together promotes maintenance, high quality of life, and understanding. Size of households can also contribute to the student ghettos.
- On smaller properties (non-conforming) if you put more on the lot you don't have as much open space and it changes the character and feeling. A bigger lot makes it more reasonable to do additions. It's good that they have to go through a lot of hoops for additions.
- Garbage/ dumpsters – shared dumpster between two lots, if there are x number of people living in one building, maybe a dumpster should be required.