



**City of Grand Rapids
Planning Commission
FY21 ANNUAL REPORT**



**CITY OF
GRAND
RAPIDS**

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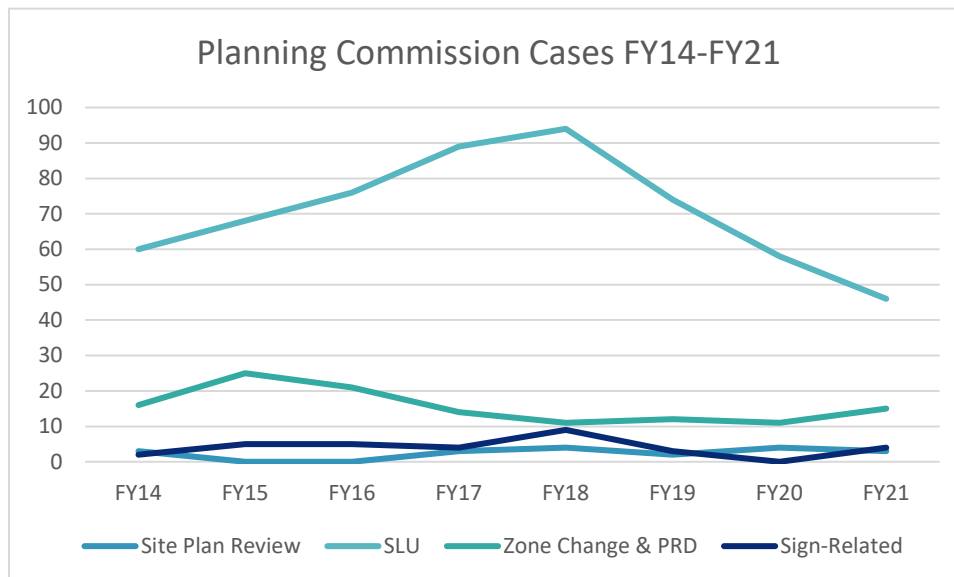
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OVERVIEW

This report provides an overview of the activity of the City of Grand Rapids Planning Department in FY21 (July 1, 2020 – June 30, 2021). Under the direction of the City Commission, three appointed boards (Planning Commission, Board of Zoning Appeals, and Historic Preservation Commission), and the City Master Plan, the Planning Department guides public and private development efforts in the City of Grand Rapids.

PLANNING COMMISSION CASES

The volume of cases heard by the Planning Commission has decreased in FY21 compared to the previous year.



Special Land Uses

There were approximately forty-six (46) Special Land Use (SLU) applications considered by the Planning Commission in FY21. Of these, forty-three (43) were approved, or approximately 93%. Some of the Special Land Use requests included the following:

- **Alcohol Uses:** Nine (9) SLU applications regarding new or expanded alcohol uses were considered by the Planning Commission.
 - **Outdoor Dining Services:** Five (5) of these SLU requests were for outdoor seating with alcohol service.
- **Ground Floor Office:** In many commercial zone districts, active ground-floor uses are encouraged. As such, office on the ground floor in the TBA Zone District, within twenty feet of a front lot line abutting a Neighborhood Business or Urban Center Street, requires Special Land Use approval. Four (4) SLU applications for ground floor office were considered.
- **Parking-Related:** Four (4) cases for parking as a principal use were considered.

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- Density-Related: Six (6) SLU applications related to increasing density were considered, from two-family to multifamily uses.

Cannabis

On December 28, 2018, City Commission adopted Zoning Ordinance amendments to allow medical cannabis uses in the City. Subsequent to the City Commission’s adoption of this ordinance, additional zoning amendments (“fast-track” amendments) were approved on July 7, 2020 to allow recreational cannabis uses in Grand Rapids. Finally, a last round of zoning amendments that needed further analysis and consideration (“deliberative” amendments) was approved on September 29, 2020 by the City Commission. The Zoning Ordinance now allows cannabis applications to be reviewed either before the Planning Commission or via Planning Director Review, based on the type of use and the Zone District.

Currently, the City has thirty-two (32) parcels with one or multiple (stacked and/or collocated) cannabis uses. Of these parcels, twenty-eight (28) received approvals in FY21. Seventeen (17) locations are operating medical and/or recreational cannabis facilities. Fifteen (15) parcels are still in development of a cannabis facility, either completing their buildouts, securing LUDS and/or building permits, or requesting extensions to the land use approval.

Sign-Related Requests

Four (4) applications were considered for Planned Sign Programs (Optional Plan Review), digital message centers (Special Land Use), or amendments to previously approved sign packages (Site Plan Review).

Zone Changes

Fifteen (15) of the cases brought before the Planning Commission were either for rezonings to another zone district or for Planned Redevelopment District rezonings and amendments.

Text Amendments

The Zoning Ordinance is a set of laws that regulates land use within the City of Grand Rapids and endeavors to promote great neighborhoods, vital business districts and a strong economy, and balance with the natural environment. In FY21, the Planning Commission considered several amendments to the Zoning Ordinance.

Youth Center as a Sensitive Use

- On August 13, 2020, the Planning Commission considered a text amendment to the Zoning Ordinance to consider establishing Youth Centers as a Sensitive Land Use in the Marijuana Facility land use regulations of Section 5.9.19.

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- The amendment would have required a 1000' separation distance between a Youth Center and a new medical and/or recreational marijuana facility. The amendment would have also established a definition for Youth Centers.
 - This text amendment was denied by the Planning Commission because of the limitations that it poses for the cannabis sector and the potential for significant nonconformities.

TBA and C Zone Districts

- The challenges of development have been a big topic of interest within the community. Developers pose that they have experienced challenges with construction cost and the footprint of allotted space within the TBA and C Zoning Districts.
- These challenges have been heightened due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- On November 12, 2020, the Planning Commission considered a text amendment to the Zoning Ordinance that would allow ground floor residential and office uses as permitted uses in the TBA and C Zone Districts under certain conditions.
- The amendment would allow ground floor residential as a permitted use in the TBA and C Zone Districts while ground floor office would be permitted in the TBA Zone District when located on secondary/side streets and when located at the rear of the building (more than twenty feet from the front lot line).
- The Planning Commission approved this text amendment in order to support additional investment in housing supply in hopes to provide more residents that can support commercial businesses.

Vintage Sign Designation

- Vintage Signs can be found throughout neighborhood business districts in the City. The term "Vintage Sign" was not defined in the zoning ordinance, making it difficult for the Planning Commission to protect such uses.
- On June 10, 2021, text amendments to the Zoning Ordinance were considered to define and allow for the designation of Vintage signs and to facilitate the restoration of non-conforming signs under certain conditions.
- The Planning Commission approved this text amendment in order to support and maintain neighborhood character by expanding the types of signs allowed in each district.

SLU Extensions

- On June 10, 2021, the Planning Commission also considered the extension of Special Land Use approvals longer than the current six-month period.
- This additional extension was found to be necessary due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The proposed amendment would allow the Planning Commission to grant up to two 6-month extensions when warranted due to circumstances beyond the control of the applicant.

- The Planning Commission approved this text amendment in order to support applicants who have previously attained Special Land Use permits who are experiencing impacts beyond their control.

BOARD OF ZONING APPEALS CASES

The Grand Rapids Board of Zoning Appeals considered twenty-four (24) cases in FY21. Of these, fourteen (14) cases, or 58% were approved. The approved cases included:

- Dimensional Variances: Eleven (11)
- Use Variances: Three (3)
- Appeals: None
- Sign: None
- Use & Dimensional: None

Appeals

The Board of Zoning Appeals considered one Appeals case in FY21. The case was an appeal on May 20, 2021 of the Planning Commission’s decision to deny a request to convert a portion of an existing commercial building in the MON-C Zoning District into a self-storage facility. The Board of Zoning Appeals unanimously affirmed the Planning Commission’s decision.

PLANNING DEPARTMENT CASELOAD

Below is a table showing both the administrative and legislative permit caseload of Planning Department staff. Additionally, staff reviews building and Land Use Development Services (LUDS) permits, demolition permit applications, lot split/combination applications, and applications for business and alcohol licenses.

<i>Approval Process</i>	<i>Application Type</i>		<i>#</i>
Administrative	Zoning Permits	Accessory Structures	81
		Driveway/Paving	109
		Fence	426
	Administrative Departure		104
	Backyard Chickens		50
	Event/Temporary Use Permit		164
	Sign		216
	Property Use Verification		105
	Director Site Plan Review (mostly alcohol at restaurants)		33
	Historic Preservation Certificate of Appropriateness **5-10% are referred to the Historic Preservation Commission		338

Board or Commission	Board of Zoning Appeals		23
	Planning Commission	Special Land Use	46
		Marijuana Special Land Use	28
		Planned Sign Program & Amendments	4
		Rezoning & PRD	15

PLANNING PROJECTS

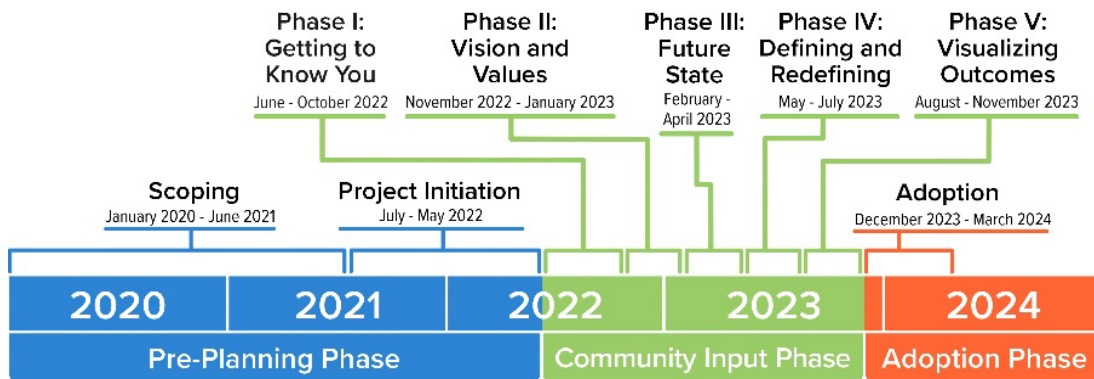
In FY21, the Planning Department worked on a number of long-range planning projects. These include:

Master Plan Updates

The City has begun the process to create a new Community Master Plan (CMP). In 2020, 20 facilitators, hired and paid by the City, hosted a variety of meetings with their communities to review the 2002 Master Plan. This program, part of the pre-planning phase of the CMP, gathered information from the community on the successes of the 2002 Plan and where improvements could be made. From this review, six themes emerged: equity, housing, mobility, safety, environmental justice and health, and climate change mitigation and adaptation. City staff incorporated these themes, as well as other facilitator program feedback, in the request for proposals to hire a consultant team. The consultant team will provide professional and technical expertise for the new CMP.

Additionally, in FY21, City staff created a list of potential CMP Steering Committee members for the Mayor’s review and selection. SC members will support the Planning Commission by guiding the process to create the Community Master Plan.

Community Master Plan Timeline



South Division

The South Division Corridor Plan was adopted in 2019 and progress continued in FY21. This Area Specific Plan covers a 3-mile segment of South Division, stretching from Wealthy Street to 28th Street. A strong concern has emerged about maintaining the culture, people and places that make the neighborhood unique, and leveraging these resources within an equitable development plan. This process will focus on six important themes, including: Meaningful Engagement; Development without Displacement; Economic Opportunity; Transportation; Health, Environment and Quality of Life; and Build and Preserve Community Identity.



In FY21, the focus has been on implementation. Work on the Rapid's Transit-Oriented Development Study was still in progress during FY21. Other goals of encouraging transit-oriented development and assisting with Planning Commission item staff reports are ongoing milestones in this project.

Division United

The Division United project, led by The Rapid, collaborated with the cities of Grand Rapids, Kentwood, and Wyoming to create a transportation and development plan for the South Division corridor. The project includes the Rapid's Transit-Oriented Development Study. Multiple stakeholders from neighborhoods, businesses, non-profits, and advocacy groups were involved in the community engagement portion of the project. Key issues that emerged were the need to increase housing choice and employment opportunities, as well as making the Silver Line a convenient transportation option. The project focused on fostering affordable housing, accessible employment, and diverse transportation options along South Division Ave from Wealthy St in Grand Rapids to 60th St in Kentwood. These goals were accomplished by leveraging and building upon the success of the Silver Line Bus Rapid Transit service along South Division Ave. *The Division United project was completed in FY21 and implementation will begin in 2022.*

Age-Friendly Communities

In the beginning of FY19, the Mayor's Age-Friendly Advisory Council began meeting to identify action steps and oversee the efforts of four work groups: Housing, Transportation, Outdoor Spaces & Buildings, and Communication. The work groups convened August through January, and the goals were delivered to the City Commission in February 2019. *In FY21, the city began implementing the Action Steps outlined by the work groups. This implementation phase will continue for the foreseeable future.*



Southtown

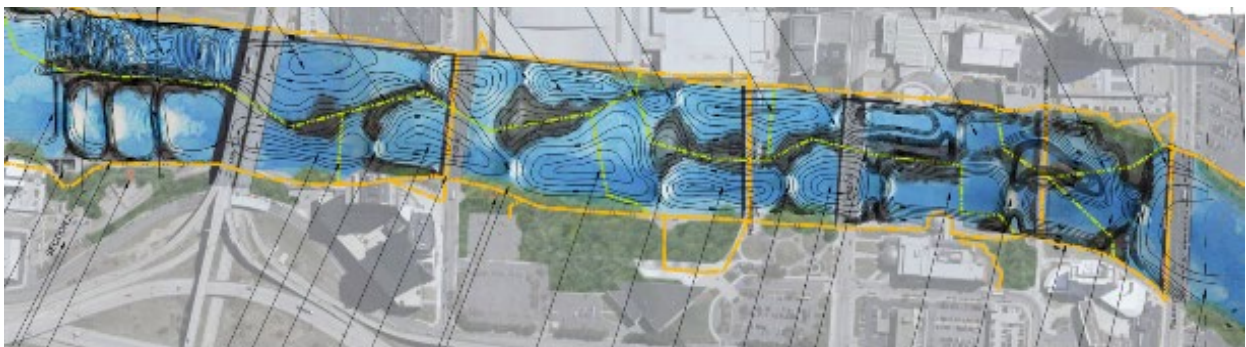
The Southtown Business Area Specific Plan kicked off in the fall of 2017 and focuses on the business districts of Alger Heights, Boston Square, Franklin and Eastern, Madison Square and Seymour Square. The first round of public engagement was held in April 2018, which included a three-day workshop and a community survey. The second round of engagement was held in August of 2018 and featured pop-up workshops in the business districts and meetings geared towards community partners, residents, and business and commercial property owners. The Southtown Corridor Improvement Authority approved the Southtown Business Area Specific Plan in April 2019. The Planning Commission adopted the Southtown Business Area Specific Plan on December 3, 2020.



Multiple projects were completed between 2020 and 2021 in FY21. Some of the completed projects include holiday décor and façade improvement programs. These projects have accomplished improvements to windows, signs, paint, murals, doors, roofs, and other structural elements in the Southtown project area.

Grand River Restoration

Supported by the GR Forward Downtown & River Action Plan of 2015, the Grand River restoration project continued in FY21. The \$43M river restoration initiative will create 9,400 feet of whitewater rapids in the downtown, entailing the removal of five dams between Sixth and Pearl streets to restore an 18-foot elevation change across a 2.2 mile span of the Grand River. A new adjustable hydraulic structure is proposed one mile upstream from the existing 6th Street dam. New riverside parks are also proposed. The restoration will occur in three phases, the first of which, focused between I-196 and Fulton Street, is in the pre-permitting stage with an anticipated completion date of December 2022. The second phase will focus on the construction of an Adjustable Hydraulic Structure (AHS), which is to be completed by December 2023. The final phase, from the AHS to I-196 could be completed as early as 2025.



Many milestones were accomplished in FY21. In 2020, the project secured easements for the Regional Conservation Partnership Program, received the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Biological Opinion, and submitted the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy (EGLE) permit application. In 2021, milestones include the EGLE permit for lower reach RCPP (Bridge St. to Fulton St) in March 2021 – June 2021. Construction mobilization was scheduled to begin in May 2021 - June 2021, with year one construction starting June/July 2021 – January 2022.

ZONING VIOLATIONS

Enforced by Code Compliance with the assistance of the Planning Department, the following zoning violations were filed in FY21:

Type	#
Driveway	19
Fence	78
Illegal Business	109
Overcrowding	42
Vehicle Parking	131
Yard Sale	0
Other*	160
Total	539
*Does not include violations of the sign ordinance, which were enforced by the Planning Department	

PLANNING DEPARTMENT ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGES

Several changes and improvements for the Planning Department occurred in FY21, including:

- Due to the increasing workload of Medical Marijuana Special Land Use cases, the City created a new position, Cannabis Manager, to serve as the point person regarding marijuana in the fall of 2020. The Cannabis Manager is tasked with administering and enforcing the City’s codes and policies around recreational and medical marijuana. Al Romero-Gibu took over this position in FY21.
- Board and Commissioner resource pages were maintained to consolidate relevant documents and resources in one place to aid board members in their duties.
- Due to challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, Planning Department staff adapted to the unprecedented circumstances by working from home in some parts of FY21. The Development Center, where the Planning Department is located, was closed to the public until December 2021. City staff incrementally returned to the office by alternating in-person and work-from-home, as well as requiring vaccination in order to return to the office.

STAFF & COMMISSIONER TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

Planning staff began offering a list of opportunities for training and ongoing development in July 2017. This was done in part to satisfy a strategy that the City proposed as part of its certification as a Redevelopment Ready Community, and in part in response to requests by members of the Planning Commission and City Commission for more such opportunities. This list, typically updated quarterly, included webinars, educational meetings, training programs, and conferences. Due to challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic and limited staff capacity, the list was last updated in March 2020.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there were challenges in implementing training opportunities. Therefore, no opportunities to train Zoning Board of Appeals or Planning Commission members were offered in FY21. However, training has since resumed for the next Fiscal Year.



PLANNING COMMISSION ESTABLISHMENT AND OPERATION

About the Board

The City of Grand Rapids Planning Commission works with the Planning Department, the City Commission, and other appointed boards to guide public and private development efforts and carry out the City's Master Plan. Members seek to administer the Zoning Ordinance fairly and equitably, and to understand citizens' interests and concerns with respect to development. The City Planning Commission is comprised of nine members who can serve up to three 3-year terms. As of June 30, 2021, the Planning Commission roster was as follows:

Kyle Van Strien, Chairperson
Paul Rozeboom, Vice Chairperson
Laurel Joseph, Secretary
Stacie Behler
Walter M. Brame

Paul Greenwald
Adrienne Wallace
Susan Shannon
Lawrence Williams

Planning Commission Attendance Record – FY21	
Number of Planning Commission Meetings Held	18
Number of Meetings Where Quorum was Affected	0
Average Commissioner Present Rate	91%
Average Commissioner Absent Rate	9%

Enabling Legislation

Chapter 62 of the City Code addresses the Planning Commission. Key components of the ordinance include provisions that:

- Planning Commission members be representative of important segments of the community.
- Bylaws be adopted by the Planning Commission, including conflict of interest provisions.
- Planning Commissioners must vote unless a conflict of interest exists.
- A Planning Commissioner may be removed from office for malfeasance, misfeasance and nonfeasance, following written charges and after a public hearing before the City Commission.
- An annual report be submitted to the City Commission.
- Describe the contents of the Master Plan, detailed procedures for adoption of the Master Plan, and requirement for an update every five years.

Planning Commission Bylaws

Planning Commission bylaws include rules regarding membership, duties, term of office, operating procedures for meetings and public hearings, voting, conflict of interest standards, and removal from the Planning Commission. The Planning Commission bylaws govern the body’s operating procedures. The bylaws had last been updated on March 26, 2009 to conform to the Michigan Planning Enabling Act of 2008. Two amendments to the bylaws were adopted in FY18, including an amendment to institute a more relevant measure of commissioner attendance and an amendment to eliminate the two-year maximum term limit for Planning Commission officers (Chairperson, Vice Chairperson, and Secretary). No additional amendments to the bylaws were adopted in FY21.