



City of Grand Rapids Planning Commission

FY23 ANNUAL REPORT (7/1/22-6/30/23)



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OVERVIEW

This report provides an overview of the activity of the City of Grand Rapids Planning Department in FY23 (July 1, 2022 – June 30, 2023) as required by the Michigan Planning Enabling Act (Section 125.3819):

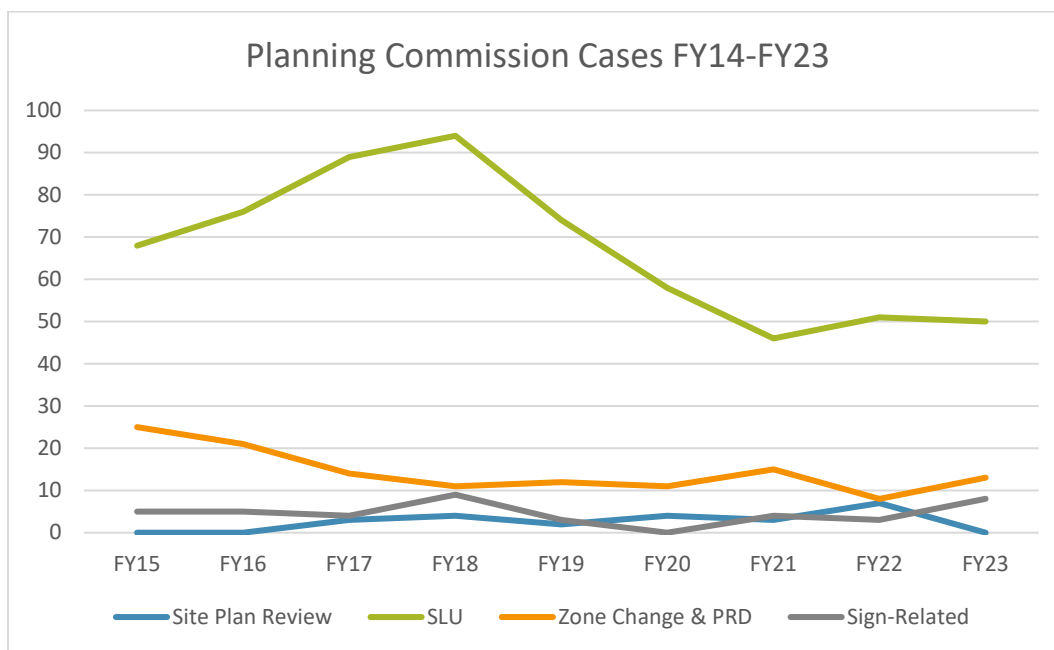
(2) A planning commission shall make an annual written report to the legislative body concerning its operations and the status of planning activities, including recommendations regarding actions by the legislative body related to planning and development.

This report is also required by the Planning Commission’s bylaws and for the Development Center’s certification by the Michigan Economic Development Corporation as a Redevelopment Ready Community.

Under the direction of the City Commission, the Community Master Plan, and three appointed boards (Planning Commission, Board of Zoning Appeals, and Historic Preservation Commission), the Planning Department guides public and private development efforts in the City of Grand Rapids.

PLANNING COMMISSION CASES

The Planning Commission reviewed eighty-eight (88) cases. With twenty-one (21) meetings held, the Planning Commission averaged four (4) cases per meeting. A majority of these cases and considerations were Special Land Use requests. Additionally, four (4) sets of zoning ordinance text amendments were passed through the Planning Commission. The overall number of Planning Commission cases increased between FY22 and FY23.



Special Land Uses

Approximately fifty-one (51) Special Land Use (SLU) applications were considered by the Planning Commission. Of these, forty-seven (47), or 92%, were approved. Some of the Special Land Use requests included the following:

- Amphitheater: A request for a new 12,000-seat outdoor amphitheater, including alcohol service and a streetside plaza with mobile food vending, was considered.
- Alcohol Uses: Nineteen (19) SLU applications regarding new or expanded alcohol uses were considered by the Planning Commission.
 - Outdoor Seating: Eleven (11) requests were for outdoor seating with alcohol services.
 - Package Alcohol/SDM: Five (5) requests were for the sale of wine and beer at gas stations or convenience stores.
- Parking-Related: Fourteen (14) requests for parking waivers or reductions, and four (4) requests for new or expanded surface parking lots were considered.
- Density-Related: Two (2) SLU applications related to increasing density were considered, one (1) two-family and one (1) multiple-family development.
- Self-Storage Facilities: Three (3) requests for self-storage facilities were considered, two (2) of which were integrated as part of a larger development.
- Social Services: Seven (7) requests considered were related to community, education, childcare, religious, or social services.
- Ground Floor Office: In many commercial zone districts, active ground-floor uses are encouraged. As such, office on the ground floor within twenty (20) feet of a front lot line abutting a Neighborhood Business or Urban Street Center requires Special Land Use approval. Three (3) SLU applications for ground floor office were considered.

Optional Plan Review

The Optional Plan Review establishes an alternative process by which the Planning Commission may evaluate and approve a development project that cannot otherwise be accommodated using the minimum standards of certain Zone Districts. Three (3) Optional Plan Review applications were considered: one (1) to allow for additional building height, one (1) to allow for increased density, and one a modification of a previous OPR approval (1) to allow for changes in building placement and building height.

Planned Redevelopment District (PRD)

Two (2) new PRD rezoning cases, and five (5) PRD amendments were considered.

Zone Changes

Four (4) Zone Change applications were brought before the Planning Commission.

Text Amendments

In FY23, the Planning Commission considered four (4) sets of text amendments to the Zoning Ordinance.

The first set of amendments considered by the Planning Commission was adopted by the City Commission on August 23, 2022. These amendments included:

- A new Administrative Departure for a reduction in lot area, similar to the recently approved text amendment that allowed an administrative departure for a reduction in lot width;
- Clarification that no alcohol uses are permitted in the Neighborhood Office Service (NOS) Zone District; and
- Extension of the existing one-year approval to allow up to two six-month extensions for Site Plan Review and Optional Plan Review approvals, similar to what was previously approved for Special Land Use approvals.

Floodplain Overlay District: Amendments to bring the Floodplain Overlay District (Sec. 5.8.05.) into compliance with the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) regulations, were adopted by the City Commission on February 21, 2023.

Downtown Height Overlay District: Sections of the Zoning Ordinance pertaining to height in the TN-TCC (Traditional Neighborhood-Transitional City Center) and TN-CC (Traditional Neighborhood-City Center) Zone Districts were amended to allow additional building height, were adopted on July 11, 2023.

Billboard Exchange Program: As a result from a collaborative process between Progressive AE, the City of Grand Rapids Planning Department, and Outfront Media, amendments to several sections of the Zoning Ordinance pertaining to the Billboard Exchange Program with the intent to further incentivize voluntary removal of off-premises sign were proposed. These amendments were adopted by the City Commission on August 8, 2023.

Sign-Related Requests

Eight (8) 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).

Extension Requests

Six (6) extension requests were considered, four (4) of which were for the second, six-month extension.

BOARD OF ZONING APPEALS CASES

The Grand Rapids Board of Zoning Appeals considered nine (9) cases in FY23. Of these, three (3) cases were approved. The approved cases included:

- Dimensional Variances: Two (2)
- Sign: One (1)

Appeals

The Board of Zoning Appeals considered one Appeal case, on December 15, 2022. This was an appeal of Planning Staff determination that two statues in front of the Mr. & Mrs. Crab restaurant would be considered signs, rather than art, and thus regulated by the Zoning Ordinance. The Board voted to affirm the Planning Staff determination.

PLANNING DEPARTMENT CASELOAD

Below is a table showing both the administrative and legislative permit caseload of Planning Department staff. Not shown in the table are reviews for Building, Land Use Development Services (LUDS), and demolition permits, and applications for lot split/combination and business licenses.

| Approval Process | Application Type | | # |
|---------------------|--|--|-----|
| 4Administrative | Zoning Permits | Accessory Structures | 69 |
| | | Driveway/Paving | 96 |
| | | Fence | 403 |
| | Administrative Departure | | 104 |
| | Backyard Chickens (Renewals) | | 67 |
| | Recreational Fire Permit (Renewals) | | 149 |
| | Event/Temporary Use Permit | | 102 |
| | Sign | | 296 |
| | Property Use Verification | | 71 |
| | Director Site Plan Review (Restaurants w/Alcohol, Billboards, Child Care) | | 23 |
| | Historic Preservation Certificate of Appropriateness **5-10% are referred to the Historic Preservation Commission | | 334 |
| Board or Commission | Board of Zoning Appeals | | 8 |
| | Planning Commission | Special Land Use | 40 |
| | | Optional Plan Review (density, height, sign) | 6 |
| | | Planned Sign Program & Amendments | 1 |
| | | Zone Changes & PRD | 17 |
| Text Amendments | | 3 | |

PLANNING PROJECTS

Community Master Plan Updates

Work on the new Community Master Plan (CMP), begun in 2020, continued.

As part of the scope of work, three Area Specific Plans (ASPs), one in each ward of the City, will be developed. City staff, the CMP consultant team, led by Planning NEXT, and the CMP Steering Committee identified three areas of the city for this work.

On January 26, 2023, the three areas were presented to the Planning Commission for review and input: the Butterworth area in the First Ward, the Creston neighborhood in the Second Ward, and the Southtown neighborhoods in the Third Ward. The Commission supported the areas proposed.

On April 13, 2023, City staff and the consultant team updated the Planning Commission on the first engagement round, which began in February and ended in late March. More specifically, this presentation described the demographics of the participants as compared to the overall community, the outreach and communications methods used, high-level findings from the engagement activities, and what is planned for the second engagement round, beginning in May.

ZONING VIOLATIONS

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

| Type | # |
|--|------------|
| Driveway/paving | 15 |
| Fence | 61 |
| Illegal Business (incl. Airbnb, nightclub, auto repair) | 121 |
| Overcrowding | 29 |
| Vehicle Parking | 78 |
| Yard Sale | 5 |
| Other* | 135 |
| Total | 445 |
| *Does not include violations of the sign ordinance, which were enforced by the Planning Department | |

PLANNING DEPARTMENT ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGES

In October 2022, Laura Wahamaki was hired as Planner I, to fill the previously vacated position.

STAFF & COMMISSIONER TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

The Planning Commission held a retreat on August 25, 2022, during which the Community Master Plan, FY21 and FY22 Annual Report presentations, and review of process changes were discussed.

One Planning Commission member attended the Michigan Association of Planning Virtual Housing Conference on January 25, 2023.

Several staff members attended the Michigan Association of Planning’s state conference on Mackinac Island in October 2022 and the National Planning Conference in Philadelphia in April 2023.

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, 2023, the Planning Commission roster was as follows:

| | |
|---------------------------------|-------------------|
| Kyle Van Strien, Chairperson | Aaron Jonker |
| Paul Rozeboom, Vice Chairperson | Susan Shannon |
| Laurel Joseph, Secretary | Adrienne Wallace |
| Salim Al-Shantel | Lawrence Williams |
| Kristine Bersche | |

| Planning Commission Attendance Record – FY23 | |
|--|-------|
| Number of Planning Commission Meetings Held | 21 |
| Number of Meetings Where Quorum was Affected | 0 |
| Average Commissioner Present Rate | 75.5% |
| Average Commissioner Absent Rate | 24.5% |

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 FY23.

