



City of Grand Rapids Planning Commission

FY24 ANNUAL REPORT (7/1/23-6/30/24)



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OVERVIEW

This report provides an overview of the activity of the City of Grand Rapids Planning Department in FY24 (July 1, 2023 – June 30, 2024) as required by the Michigan Planning Enabling Act (Section 125.3819):

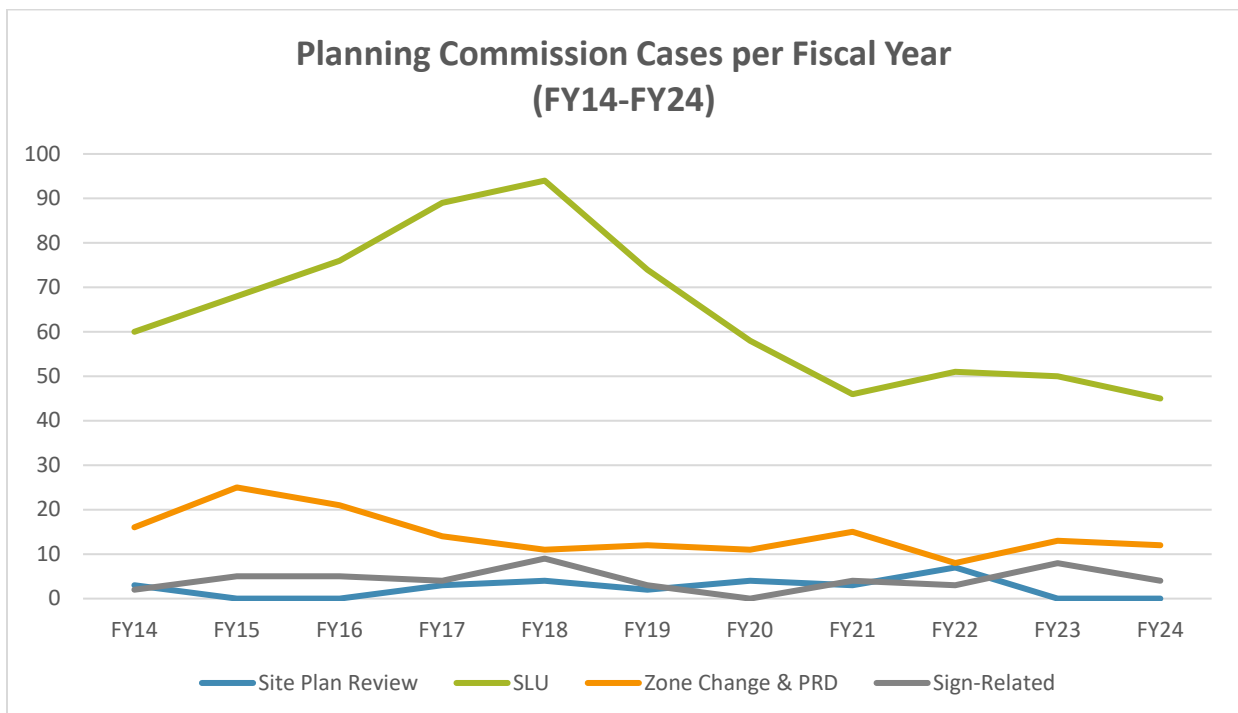
(2) A planning commission shall make an annual written report to the legislative body concerning its operations and the status of planning activities, including recommendations regarding actions by the legislative body related to planning and development.

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 sixty-seven (67) cases. With seventeen (17) meetings held, the Planning Commission averaged four (4) cases per meeting. A majority of these cases and considerations were Special Land Use requests. Additionally, two sets of zoning ordinance text amendments were passed through the Planning Commission. The overall number of Planning Commission cases has declined between FY23 and FY24, but only slightly. The number of cases has remained stable in the last four years. This trend is continuing into FY2025.



Special Land Uses

Approximately forty-five (45) Special Land Use (SLU) applications were considered by the Planning Commission. Nearly all of SLU cases were approved or augmented to approval under the guidance of the Commission. Of the two (2) requests with a postponed decision, one (1) applicant withdrew the request, and the other case was not reconsidered by the Planning Commission until FY25. Some Special Land Use requests of note included the following:

- Soccer Stadium: A request for a new 8,500-seat outdoor soccer stadium was considered.
- Alcohol Uses: Nineteen (19) SLU applications regarding new or expanded alcohol uses were considered by the Planning Commission, many of which were for a new bar or cocktail lounge.
 - Package Alcohol: Six (6) of these SLU requests were for the sale of wine and beer for off-site consumption at gas station convenience, grocery, or specialty wine stores.
 - “Eatertainment”: Five (5) of these SLU requests were in association with establishments offering indoor or outdoor activities as a primary use: golf (traditional & virtual), mini golf, pickleball, soccer stadium, and a laundromat.
 - Banquet Hall: Two (2) of these SLU requests were for banquet halls.
- Parking-Related: Sixteen (16) cases included a parking reduction or waiver request. One (1) request for a surface parking lot was considered.
- Density-Related: Four (4) SLU applications related to increasing density through multi-unit housing developments were considered; one (1) request for a duplex was considered.
- Community Services: Eight (8) SLU application requests would provide benefits to the community, such as health-based, social services, non-profit, childcare, church, and community organizations.
- 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. Two (2) SLU applications for ground floor office were considered.

Planned Redevelopment District (PRD)

There were four (4) new PRD rezoning cases, and two (2) PRD amendments brought to the Planning Commission.

Sign-Related Requests

Three (3) applications were considered, all of which were Planned Sign Program Amendments (Optional Plan Review). No new Planned Sign Programs or digital message centers (Special Land Use) were considered.

Zone Changes

Six (6) Zone Change applications were brought before the Planning Commission. Two (2) were Conditional rezoning agreements, and four (4) were to rezone to another zone district.

Text Amendments

In FY24, the Planning Commission considered one (1) set of text amendments to the Zoning Ordinance. The text amendments were adopted by the City Commission on April 23, 2024.

In response to a spring 2023 update to the 2020 Housing Needs Assessment, which determined that approximately 14,106 new dwelling units are needed in the City of Grand Rapids by 2027, the City Commission expressed a desire to evaluate the City's housing policies and requested that the Planning Commission provide them with recommendations.

The process kicked off with a joint Planning Commission/City Commission meeting July 13, 2023, around five categories identified by staff as starting points for consideration: Accessory Dwelling Units, Unrelated Occupants, Group Living Uses, Small Scale Residential Infill/Missing Middle Housing Types and Parking Requirements. The text amendments pertaining to the five categories held the potential to increase housing supply, diversify housing types, and increase housing affordability and were consistent with the ultimate outcome adopted by the City Commission.

Briefings on the proposed changes were provided several times to both the Planning Commission and City Commission, and a public educational session was conducted prior to a City Commission meeting in a neighborhood setting.

At the time the housing text amendments were brought forward, several additional unrelated text amendments were proposed and approved. Changes included clarifying that temporary assembly or fundraising events may be permitted in residential zone districts on lots approved for institutional, educational, or governmental uses (rather than on any residential property); allowing a height increase in the SD-IT Zone District with Special Land Use approval; and allowing limited parking in the front yard in the SD-IT Zone District; among other amendments.

Extension Requests

Two (2), second six-month extension requests were brought before the Planning Commission.

BOARD OF ZONING APPEALS CASES

The Grand Rapids Board of Zoning Appeals considered ten (10) cases in FY24. The cases included:

- Dimensional Variances: Six (6)
- Use Variances: None (0)
- Use and Dimensional Cases: Two (2)
- Appeals: One (1)
- Code Interpretation: One (1)

In the last several years, the BZA has considered a number of cases for legacy buildings and sites that do not conform to current Zoning Ordinance regulations, specifically the replacement of front yard parking and new basement egress window wells for single- and two-family structures in TN- Zone Districts located within the minimum five (5) foot side setback.

To address this, Planning Department staff will be preparing Zoning Ordinance text amendments to allow the replacement of non-conforming front yard parking and the reduction of the minimum three (3) foot setback for egress window wells by Administrative Departure.

Appeals

The Board of Zoning Appeals considered one (1) Appeal case. The applicant contested Planning Staff determination that a driveway shall not extend past the width of the garage and drive approach in residential zone districts, specifically Section 5.10.03 of the City Zoning Ordinance. The ruling declared that the applicant’s driveway did not meet the intentions of the ordinance and could not meet the requirements for a residential turnaround space due to front yard depth of the parcel. For these reasons, the Board of Zoning Appeals voted unanimously to reaffirm the original Planning Department Staff determination.

Code Interpretation

The Board of Zoning Appeals considered one (1) Code Interpretation case. The applicant requested code interpretation of two sections of the Zoning Ordinance relating to private gatherings and fundraising activities.

Section 5.5.05. – Uses of Land in Residential Zone Districts

The Board unanimously upheld the Planning Director’s interpretation of Sec. 5.5.05. to allow private personal, non-commercial gatherings at “household living” uses, subject to:

1. That a private personal gathering shall be an accessory use to the principal residential use and time spent preparing for and hosting private personal, non-commercial gatherings shall not exceed the time spent using the property as a residence.

Section 5.9.35.(H). – Temporary Uses

The Board unanimously upheld the Planning Director’s interpretation of Sec. 5.9.35.(H). that assembly and fundraising activities are only permitted on properties with an approved educational or institutional use and are within a mixed-use commercial or residential zoning district.

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	#	
Administrative	Zoning Permits	Accessory Structure	70
		Driveway/Paving	61
		Fence	275
	Administrative Departure		71
	Urban Agriculture (Bees, Chickens, Renewals)		74
	Recreational Fire Permit (Renewals)		121
	Event/Temporary Use Permit		88
	Sign		229
	Property Use Verification		67
	Director Site Plan Review (Restaurants w/Alcohol, Billboards, Child Care)		25
	Historic Preservation Certificate of Appropriateness **5-10% are referred to the Historic Preservation Commission		302
	Board or Commission	Board of Zoning Appeals	
Planning Commission		Special Land Use	60
		Alcohol-Related	19
		Zone Changes	16
		PRD Rezoning and Amendments	6

PLANNING PROJECTS

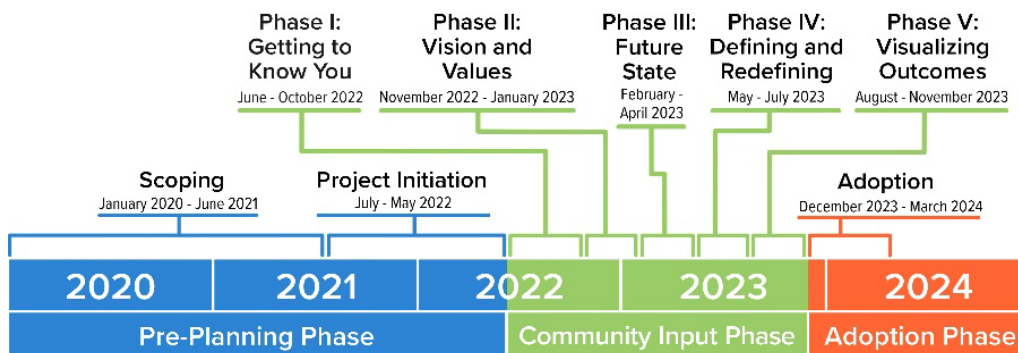
Community Master Plan Updates

The City continued the process of creating a new Community Master Plan (CMP) begun in 2020

Commissioner Paul Rozeboom was a member of the Steering Committee.

During FY2024, updates on the second and third rounds of public engagement were provided to the Planning Commission, as well as to the City Commission.

Community Master Plan Timeline



Urban Agriculture Amendments

Under the guidance of the Urban Agriculture Committee, the City Commission adopted updates to the City Code to support cultivating a more sustainable Grand Rapids. Chapter 155 – “Animals” was renamed “Urban Agriculture.” Further Ordinance changes now allow for Beehives or a Chicken Coop in the rear yard of a residential property without neighbor veto powers imposed upon them. A streamlined zoning permit process was established which helps guide residents through the placement, design requirements, and maintenance of chicken coops or beehives to ensure wellbeing and safety.

AWARDS & DISTINCTIONS

Viva La Avenida Area Specific Plan

In partnership with Williams & Works, Aligned Planning, and Nederveld, the City of Grand Rapids received an *Outstanding Planning Project: Implementation* award from the Michigan Chapter of the American Planning Association for the *Viva La Avenida, Grandville Avenue Area Specific Plan*. Since its 2017 adoption, the Area Specific Plan has resulted in a wide range of implementation efforts, including updates to the City’s Zoning Ordinance to protect existing homes and encourage redevelopment with missing middle housing at key transit nodes, the transition of Cesar E. Chavez Avenue from a MDOT business route to a city street, and major multi-modal road reconstructions with enhanced streetscapes. These efforts are intended to proactively ensure that future investment reflects the needs and wishes of the community members already in the neighborhood amid encroaching development pressure.

ZONING VIOLATIONS

Enforced by Code Compliance with the assistance of the Planning Department, the following zoning violations were filed in FY24:

Type	#
Driveway	5
Fence	67
Illegal Business (Airbnb, auto repair, nightclub, mobile food, animal)	165
Overcrowding	35
Vehicle Parking	88
Yard Sale	5
Backyard Chickens	80
Other*	144
Total	505
*Does not include violations of the sign ordinance, which were enforced by the Planning Department	

PLANNING DEPARTMENT ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGES

At the start of FY23, Planning staff were each assigned various neighborhood associations and began attending at least one association meeting a month to meet one of the Planning Department's Division Operational Goals, specifically to increase Planning's involvement with the community to increase collaboration and build trust. Staff continued to attend monthly meetings.

The Planning Department experienced several retirements and new hires.

Plan Reviewer (Planning Supervisor) Andy Bowman and Senior Planner (Planner II) Dale Fitz retired.

Brent Geurink, a former Planner I in the department, and Rowan Brady were hired as plan reviewers (Planning Supervisors).

Avery Koan, a recent graduate of Grand Valley State University, was hired as a Planner I.

Evan McCarthy, a student at Grand Valley State University, served as a summer intern.

STAFF & COMMISSIONER EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

Several staff members attended the Michigan Association of Planning's state conference in Traverse City in October and the National Planning Conference in Minneapolis in April.

On October 9, 2023, several staff members heard Majora Carter, urban revitalization strategist, environmental justice champion, and author of *Reclaiming Your Community: You Don't Have to Move Out of Your Neighborhood to Live in a Better One*, speak at the Grand Rapids Chamber of Commerce.

On November 16, 2023, Shane Phillips, author of *The Affordable City*, and "UCLA Housing Voice" podcast host was invited to speak to staff and Commissioners on topics related to housing supply, affordability, and development. In the evening on the same day, Mr. Phillips presented to the community at a Community Master Plan neighborhood outreach event.



PLANNING COMMISSION ESTABLISHMENT AND OPERATION

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.

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, 2024, the Planning Commission roster (8 out of 9 members, one vacancy) was as follows:

Paul Rozeboom, Chairperson	Kristine Bersche
Joseph Laurel, Vice Chairperson	Aaron Jonker
Susan Shannon, Secretary	Brian Swem
Kyle Van Strien	Lawrence Williams

Planning Commission Attendance Record – FY24	
Number of Planning Commission Meetings Held	17
Number of Meetings Where Quorum was Affected	0
Average Commissioner Present Rate	81.5%
Average Commissioner Absent Rate	18.5%