

**MINUTES
CITY OF FARMINGTON HILLS
CITY COUNCIL AND PLANNING COMMISSION
SPECIAL JOINT MEETING – STUDY SESSION
JULY 21, 2025 - 5:00 P.M.
THE HAWK – MEDIA CENTER**

The special joint study session meeting of the Farmington Hills City Council was called to order by Mayor Rich at 5:04pm.

Councilmembers Present: Aldred, Boleware, Bridges, Bruce, Dwyer, Knol and Rich

Councilmembers Absent: None

Planning Commission Members Present: Brickner, Countegan, Grant, Mantey, Stimson, Trafelet and Ware

Planning Commission Members Absent: Aspinall and Varga

Others Present: City Manager Mekjian, Assistant City Manager Mondora, City Clerk Lindahl, Directors Brockway and Kettler-Schmult and City Attorney Joppich

City Manager Mekjian said that considerable progress had been made by City Council and the Planning Commission since the adoption of the Master Plan in 2024. Tonight staff was seeking consensus on two key topics: 1) the proposed Public Art Ordinance and 2) a memorandum from the City Attorney regarding procedural clarity in making motions. These items needed consensus from both bodies.

Director Kettler-Schmult overviewed the items that would be discussed in tonight's meeting.

MASTER PLAN IMPLEMENTATION

a) COMPLETED: DRIVE-IN DEFINITION AND UPDATE TO CAR SALES, GAS STATIONS AND CAR WASH LOCATIONS.

The zoning text amendments relative to drive-in definition and update to car sales, gas stations, and car wash locations were enacted in January 2025 and marked the beginning of a series of zoning amendments following the adoption of the Master Plan.

b) IN-PROGRESS: ZONING TEXT AMENDMENT FOR OS-4 AND PARKING, DESIGN STANDARDS FOR COMMERCIAL BUILDINGS, PUBLIC ART ORDINANCE AND PLANNED UNIT DEVELOPMENT.

The OS-4 amendment currently in progress relates to large office uses and parking. This amendment has completed its first reading at City Council, with the second reading scheduled for August. Modifications during the first reading include height adjustments, and the addition of new uses such as fitness centers and private schools.

Director Kettler-Schmult noted that design standards for commercial buildings have been finalized by the Planning Commission and are being prepared for City Council study session review. Updates to the Planned Unit Development (PUD) ordinance are under legal review, and

will next be heard by the Planning Commission. The updates will clarify what constitutes minor versus major changes and will define public benefit expectations.

As PUDs have aged, developers' desires to make modifications to bring them in line with current market conditions has grown. However, many of the PUDs currently in place are very specific, and making changes to existing PUDs is an arduous process, deterring redevelopment in some locations.

Mayor Rich added that Farmington Hills was known as an aging, built-out community. It was critical to make changes that will spur additional development.

Planning Consultant Bahm (Giffels Webster) explained that ordinance changes would use clear language to describe what the City wants, and lay out a straightforward path for developers to get there.

Public Art Ordinance

At its 2024 goal session, City Council initiated work on a Public Art Ordinance. The ordinance has undergone multiple reviews by both Council and the Planning Commission.

Planning Consultant Bahm explained that the draft ordinance drew inspiration from Southfield's public art ordinance, and she shared examples of recent installations in that city. She emphasized that Southfield is a relevant and familiar comparison for developers in the region. She also noted that Southfield maintains a public art guide. She suggested that when Farmington Hills creates its own guide, it should be designed for easy annual updates rather than requiring full rewrites.

Planning Consultant Bahm pointed out several changes to the draft Public Art Ordinance that were proposed by the Planning Commission:

- Limit required art installations to designated planning areas as outlined in the Master Plan, rather than citywide. This was suggested to create more cohesive public art corridors and avoid scattered, less visible installations.
- Remove the requirement for public art in single-family residential developments, due to concerns about long-term maintenance responsibilities falling on future homeowners or homeowners' associations (HOAs). The ordinance will still apply to multi-family and commercial developments within the designated planning areas.
- Clarify the use of the Consumer Price Index when determining contribution thresholds, and ensure Planning Commission involvement in evaluating proposed artwork placement for compatibility with traffic flow and site circulation prior to referring the proposal to the Arts Commission. Final approval of the artwork's placement would rest with staff.

Discussion:

- Mayor Rich opposed limiting the public art ordinance to specific geographic areas, for the following reasons:
 - Southfield's ordinance has been successful over a decade, with no reported residential issues.

- Such restrictions are unnecessary and could create confusion. Further, there was no data showing problems with applying the ordinance to residential areas.
 - Council has discussed the ordinance thoroughly over several meetings; she disagrees with making major changes after that work.
 - Small residential projects can contribute to the public art fund instead of installing art onsite.
- Commissioner Ware cited personal experience with the cost and management burden of HOAs; she did not believe that residents should be obligated to main public art. She also raised concerns about encouraging public traffic through residential neighborhoods.
- Councilmember Knol supported limiting the ordinance to specific districts where art would be more visible and impactful. Concentrating artwork in key areas would build momentum and increase community value, compared to scattering installations across the city. She supported applying the ordinance to apartment complexes with professional management, but not to single-family neighborhoods where maintenance and oversight would be challenging.
- Councilmember Boleware emphasized that public art represents the soul of the City. She emphasized the following:
 - Public Art can serve as a public benefit under Planned Unit Developments. The ordinance would primarily apply to new development rather than established, built-out neighborhoods.
 - SEMCOG (Southeast Michigan Council of Governments) offered a grant that could support the identification of existing public art throughout the City. This in turn can inform future placement in commercial and special planning districts such as Grand River Corridor and 12 Mile Road.
- Councilmember Boleware supported working closely with the Arts Commission and leveraging local creativity to create a more vibrant and forward-thinking community. She referenced past efforts to reimagine Grand River as an arts corridor and believed that public art could serve as a catalyst for redevelopment in blighted areas.
- Commissioner Brickner reiterated concerns previously discussed about safety and practicality when placing art in residential areas. He supported the ordinance's exclusion of single-family neighborhoods and emphasized that public art requirements should apply only to new developments, particularly in multi-family or commercial settings.
- Councilmember Aldred supported the Planning Commission's revisions, agreeing that art installations should align with district character and broader community planning goals.
- Councilmember Bruce was also concerned about requiring HOAs to maintain public art, highlighting difficulties HOAs already faced in collecting dues and maintaining existing amenities. He suggested art in HOAs should remain voluntary, not mandated by ordinance.
- Councilmember Bridges endorsed Councilmember Boleware's suggestion to inventory the city's existing public art, and to pursue SEMCOG grant opportunities relative to this effort.
- Commissioner Brickner recommended establishing a clear implementation date for the ordinance, to avoid retroactively applying requirements to developments that have already received approvals.

Mayor Rich acknowledged a general consensus among Council and Commission members in favor of the suggested Planning Commission revisions.

c) **UPCOMING: 12 MILE/ ORCHARD LAKE AND GRAND RIVER CORRIDORS, REVIEW OF ZONING ORDINANCE NON-RESIDENTIAL DISTRICTS, AND FUTURE REVIEW OF RESIDENTIAL DISTRICTS.**

This was discussed in tandem with the discussion on Update on Corridor Market Studies, below.

DISCUSSION ON PLANNING COMMISSION AND CITY COUNCIL MOTIONS RELATED TO ZONING ORDINANCE STANDARDS

Director Kettler-Schmult explained that recently there have been legal decisions in neighboring communities that have reversed the community decision due to weak motions and documentation relating to the findings or basis of the decision made. To that end, the attorney's office has distributed a legal opinion regarding this topic.

City Attorney Joppich provided an overview of relevant legal issues, explaining that courts have recently demonstrated less leniency in reviewing municipal decisions. Both approvals and denials can be subject to challenges from applicants or nearby residents. He highlighted the importance of including specific findings in motions, referencing zoning ordinance standards directly and explaining how each standard is met or not met.

While the courts typically defer to municipal decisions if a 'scintilla of evidence' supports them, incomplete or unsupported findings can and have resulted in remands, delaying projects and potentially harming both the City and the applicant. Joppich advised the use of tools such as motion templates and staff-prepared reports to guide deliberations and motion drafting.

Attorney Joppich emphasized that both approvals and denials can be valid outcomes if properly justified. Planning staff currently provide sheets outlining ordinance criteria, though these are not always incorporated into Council motions. On the other hand, the Planning Commission, which deals with land use and zoning decisions at every meeting, and is more accustomed to making detailed motions, follows templates provided to them for each case.

To summarize:

- Both Council and Planning Commission must make specific findings for zoning ordinance motions.
- Recent court decisions require greater attention to standards and justifications in motions.
- Motions should cite specific ordinance criteria and explain how each is satisfied or not.
- Incomplete findings may result in court-ordered remands and project delays.
- Staff and legal counsel support the use of detailed review sheets and motion templates to strengthen decisions.

City Manager Mekjian suggested scheduling a study session or workshop regarding this topic.

UPDATE ON CORRIDOR MARKET STUDIES

Economic Development Director Brockway explained that two market studies have been conducted to inform future zoning text amendments, focusing on the 12 Mile and Orchard Lake corridor, and the Grand River Corridor. These studies were intended to identify economic incentives and redevelopment opportunities. The Grand River Corridor study covers the area from Orchard Lake to Inkster, while the 12 Mile Road/Orchard Lake study spans 12 Mile from Orchard Lake to Haggerty, primarily focusing on the south side including Hills Tech Drive, and Orchard Lake Road from Oakland Community College to 14 Mile, both east and west.

Director Brockway explained that the studies evaluated the city's existing assets, supply and demand conditions, and market trends. The studies will guide future zoning changes and help market the city to developers by identifying the greatest areas of opportunity. The overall goal is to ensure that the City's future planning efforts align with market realities and community needs.

Director Brockway noted that Council and Planning Commission have have gone through the master plan, and understand that there will be changes related to the implementation of the master plan's vision for the City.

Grand River Corridor Findings

The study found strong demand in four primary areas:

- **Retail (particularly grocery and soft goods):** Although the projected demand for retail space has slightly declined from over 100,000 to just over 90,000 square feet due to big box stores' decisions to file Chapter 11, there remains an opportunity to recapture \$30 million currently being spent outside the corridor. The most significant retail need is for grocery stores, accounting for approximately 40,000 square feet of unmet demand. However, chain grocers are hesitant to locate due to their own nearby existing stores, opening opportunities for independent retailers.
- **Dining establishments:** There is also widespread demand for additional restaurants and dining spaces.
- **Multi-family housing:** The area's dense population makes it attractive for both commercial and residential development. Housing demand between now and 2030 is projected to be 400–600 new units, with a mix of young professionals, 55+ residents, and workforce housing comprising about 25% of the total. This supports the goal of creating a mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly environment along the corridor. There is limited demand for hotel development, with potential interest in a boutique hotel serving Corwell Health.
- **Office space:** The office sector has shown surprising demand, particularly for medical office space due to the influence of Corwell Health and its associated staff, residents, and support services.

Day-to-day, 1,600 people work within the Corwell Health area, with approximately 2,600 employees in total. Corwell Health is the major anchor for the area. Those serving residencies seek to live close to the hospital.

Discussion:

- In response to a question from Mayor Pro Tem Dwyer regarding plans to eliminate undesirable businesses, Director Brockway explained that redevelopment would require a domino effect of reinvestment. The Corridor Improvement Authority (CIA) will play a key role, leveraging funds collected through Tax Increment Financing (TIF) to support public realm enhancements such as improved crosswalks, sidewalk upgrades, beautification of medians, and enhancements to bus stops. These improvements signal revitalization and encourage private property owners to invest in their sites.
- The initial phase of corridor improvements will be structured as a five-year plan, with Year 1 focused on design work for landscaping, lighting, sidewalks, and potential public art placements. Full transformation of the corridor will likely take 15 to 20 years to fully implement, as the City balances physical improvements, zoning changes, business retention, and economic development.

- Commissioner Ware asked for clarification on the corridor boundaries and the definition of “undesirable.” Brockway confirmed that the CIA district spans from Eight Mile to Orchard Lake Road. “Undesirable” was defined as vacant buildings, car lots, and underutilized parcels.
- A brief sidebar discussion was held regarding public safety concerns in this area of the city, and the need to balance compassion with public safety as people sought essential housing in low-rent facilities.
- The current TIF fund balance was approximately \$1 million. Spending will be phased over five years, with \$200,000 allocated for landscaping improvements. The Corridor Improvement Authority also has an active façade improvement grant program, offering up to \$30,000 to three businesses annually. Two applications have been received, and one is pending approval.
- Commissioner Mantey highlighted the lack of nearby restaurants and safe pedestrian crossings for Corewell employees. The Corwell Health cafeteria closes at 7pm, further limiting food access. Director Brockway emphasized that food-related development remains a top priority for the corridor.
- Commissioner Brickner shared historical context regarding the Corridor Improvement Authority, explaining that the initial revenue projections were disrupted by the 2008 economic downturn. Property values did not increase as anticipated, delaying revenue collection from the TIF district. The current \$1 million balance marks a turning point for potential investments.
- Councilmember Aldred expressed general support for corridor investment and the potential for restaurants in the Corwell Health area and redevelopment of the parking area in West River Shopping Center. He also raised concerns about overly optimistic market projections. He referenced real estate advisor feedback in the market study suggesting that only one to three small new stores might be feasible. Councilmember Aldred questioned how the City could reconcile optimistic forecasts with market hesitation.

Director Brockway pointed out that the Grand River Corridor generates \$46 million in retail spending—more than any other area in the city—due to its population density and regional access. The optimistic tone of the report was partly a strategic counter to longstanding negative perceptions of the corridor. Real market demand data can be used to market the district to non-local and specialty operators.

- Commissioner Aldred asked what zoning changes might be needed to accelerate redevelopment. Director Brockway described the corridor as a sandbox for creativity and explained that redevelopment will require flexibility to accommodate small lots, tight setbacks, and mixed uses such as townhomes.
- Director Kettler-Schmult noted that the existing overlay district has never been used. It was important to revisit the overlay’s language based on market study findings to improve usability and appeal of properties in the area.
- Planning Consultant Tangari added that deeper setbacks currently conflict with lot dimensions in the area, and revising those standards will be a key focus of zoning updates, to ensure development is physically feasible and flexible.
- Commissioner Grant inquired about efforts to attract restaurants. Director Brockway confirmed that both chains and independents have expressed interest. However, property prices – such as \$2 million for small parcels – remain a barrier for small business owners.
- Commissioner Grant also noted that some restaurants previously located in the corridor failed to survive. Director Brockway explained that several variables contributed to past closures, including

the economic impact of the Great Recession and the presence of long-term property owners who sold to the highest bidder after the death of family members. She cited the example of Farmington Diner, which has persisted due to existing demand but remains an isolated option.

- Commissioner Grant suggested the area could support food trucks.
- Commissioner Ware inquired about the availability of liquor licenses in the City. Clerk Lindahl explained that the city gained five new quota licenses following the most recent census. All have been allocated. Other licenses are in escrow or may be transferred at market cost. Interested parties should contact Clerk Lindahl directly.
- Commissioner Ware also asked about blighted buildings near Orchard Lake and Grand River. Director Brockway confirmed that one of the buildings – the former winery – is located in the City of Farmington, although she can report that the building has a new owner working on remediation. Director Brockway emphasized the importance of cooperation with the City of Farmington, as the two jurisdictions share this corridor.
- Commissioner Brickner recalled state legislation signed during Governor Granholm’s term that allowed for additional liquor licenses in redevelopment districts. While Farmington Hills played a key role in advocating for the law, it had not previously qualified for these licenses. Brickner suggested the city may now have eligible areas and encouraged staff to pursue those opportunities.
- Director Brockway noted that these licenses are difficult to obtain, requiring applicants to exhaust all other licensing options. Farmington Hills has received one such license in the past, which was contingent on demonstrating substantial investment in the redevelopment area—approximately \$7 million.
- Councilmember Boleware expressed strong support for visibly improving the 8 Mile corridor to make it more inviting for businesses and residents. She described the current state as unappealing and potentially unsafe, citing poor lighting and deteriorating conditions. She encouraged the use of the \$1 million in funds for aesthetic upgrades such as lighting, banners, flowerpots, and other streetscape enhancements to signal investment and draw interest. She urged a proactive approach, stating that the corridor needed an initial investment to attract future development and that the time to act is now.
- Councilmember Boleware expressed further concern about the deteriorated conditions along the corridor, noting that many medical professionals now prefer Northwestern Highway due to its proximity to the hospital and more appealing surroundings.
- Commissioner Grant questioned the historically slow pace of progress regarding Grand River improvements. Commissioner Mantey responded that there was no funding for the first decade following the creation of the district. Commissioner Brickner further explained that revenue for the Corridor Improvement Authority (CIA) is derived from increased property value capture, which was not possible until recently due to declining property values. With values now rising, funding is finally becoming available.
- Mayor Rich shared an example involving the Greater Seth Temple’s interest in purchasing the adjacent motel for a senior center, but the high asking price made it unaffordable.

12 Mile Road Corridor Findings

Director Brockway presented findings from the 12 Mile and Orchard Lake Corridor study, highlighting the area's dominant use as office space (49%), with significant Research and Development use. The Hills Tech Drive area was included as part of the corridor study, and includes roughly 10,000 jobs and a high percentage (71%) of in-person workers.

Despite the high employment and the acknowledged great location, there is a significant lack of desired amenities in the 12 Mile Corridor such as walkable food, retail, and service options. This demand aligns with the City's Master Plan goals. Desired improvements include pedestrian connectivity, mixed uses, and local amenities such as restaurants, salons, child care, and places to meet after work .

Zoning changes under OS-4 help address some of these gaps along 12 Mile Road, but Hills Tech Drive is zoned IRO, which may need reevaluation to allow similar improvements.

There is growing interest among long-time property owners – some who have owned their properties for 40 years – to convert aging office properties into housing, particularly using Brownfield Housing TIFs to support development for workforce and market-rate housing. These tools are seen as essential to addressing infrastructure costs and meeting regional housing demands.

Director Brockway stated that the area median income for those who might be targeted by TIF housing is approximately \$70,000 to \$75,000; this figure fluctuates year to year. As demand grows and horizontal development space becomes limited, future development is expected to include more mixed-use and multifamily structures rising to four stories or higher. Heights of 65 to 80 feet are expected to be feasible in the near future; higher than that requires steel structure components. There is strong demand for accessible restaurants, retail, and pedestrian-friendly spaces. Developers are seeking opportunities to integrate mixed-use elements where residents can live, work, and shop along the 12 Mile corridor.

OCC Hockey Arena and New Development Opportunities

Mayor Rich noted that the market study was conducted prior to the announcement of the Little Caesars Junior Hockey Arena coming to the OCC campus. Director Brockway confirmed that the arena is expected to increase demand for housing, retail, and temporary lodging. Property owners are already exploring how to attract visitors and students to lease residential units. Retail demand is expected to grow substantially due to tournament traffic and increased foot traffic from the arena and OCC uses, including medical uses.

Orchard Lake Road Corridor and International District

Director Brockway highlighted that Orchard Lake Road is the city's busiest retail corridor, and the redevelopment of Hunter Square has triggered new interest in the area generally. Orchard Lake Road also features a growing international district between 12½ Mile and 13½ Mile Roads. This district includes a concentration of businesses operated by Syrian, Pakistani, Indian, and Georgian entrepreneurs. Based on mobile device data, over the past three years an estimated 800,000 visitors have been drawn to the area, representing a 9% increase during that time period.

Challenges include property setbacks and reluctance from some owners to invest in redevelopment. The city is considering options such as pocket parks, outdoor markets, and food trucks to bring retail visibility closer to the street. Restaurant and retail demand in the corridor is high, with interest in quick-serve, healthy food, traditional diners, and upscale dining options.

Survey Responses and Mixed-Use Zoning Considerations

Director Brockway described the extensive survey process, with door-to-door outreach with materials in five languages, and which had resulted in 1,000 responses. Respondents expressed a strong desire for

more late evening dining options, especially for takeout and casual dining. Post-pandemic takeout trends have solidified, further strengthening this demand.

Residents also called for increased mixed-use development. The City is reviewing the OS-2 zoning district, which currently allow only office uses. The potential addition of appropriate mixed-use options—like coffee shops, delis, and other compatible amenities—could help revitalize these corridors without compromising their existing office functions.

Commissioner Mantey suggested that the Orchard Lake Road study/planning area should reach as far south as 11 Mile Road, given the rise in activity on the OCC campus.

Commissioner Grant referenced development at 14 Mile and Orchard Lake in West Bloomfield as a model of mixed-use design, citing a mix of homes, businesses, and retail spaces.

Director Brockway noted that Farmington Hills' median age is approximately 47, with the majority of corridor users aged 30 to 65. Many residents in this age range are looking for first homes, rental units, or downsizing options, increasing demand for accessible housing and restaurant options, particularly carryout.

Commissioner Grant added that some elderly residents now prefer to rent rather than buy. She cited a specific case in which a resident planning to sell a condo could not find a rental in Farmington Hills within her \$1,900 budget and was considering relocating to West Bloomfield. Director Brockway confirmed that this trend toward rental housing among the 55+ population is a key finding in the corridor market study.

Mayor Rich asked what specific actions were being requested of Council and the Commission. Director Brockway replied that both the Grand River and 12 Mile/Orchard Lake studies were nearing completion. While there were no immediate action items, she asked both bodies to review the materials thoroughly in preparation for future zoning and policy discussions.

Mayor Rich invited final comments from those present. Comments included:

- City Manager Mekjian provided a final update regarding OCC's community engagement meetings and everyone to attend. He also encouraged everyone to be open-minded regarding the redevelopment of the corridors as discussed this evening.
- Councilmember Aldred expressed support for accelerating zoning changes to support redevelopment.
- Councilmember Bruce thanked staff and looked forward to next steps.
- Councilmember Bridges emphasized the importance of equipping the City's Economic Development Director with the tools and flexibility needed to attract reinvestment.
- Commissioner Grant shared frustration about the historically long timeline of Grand River improvements and called for incentives to retain and attract businesses to Farmington Hills.
- Mayor Rich emphasized the importance of eliminating barriers to doing business in the City and improving process efficiency.
- Planning Consultants Bahm and Tangari expressed appreciation for the discussion. Consultant Tangari highlighted the importance of housing density near commercial corridors to support economic growth.

- Director Kettler-Schmult expressed gratitude for the collaborative and respectful conversation this evening.

PUBLIC COMMENT

There were no public comments.

ADJOURNMENT

The special study session meeting adjourned at 7:06pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Carly Lindahl, City Clerk