

**MINUTES  
CITY OF FARMINGTON HILLS  
FARMINGTON HILLS CITY COUNCIL  
STUDY SESSION  
CITY HALL – COMMUNITY ROOM  
AUGUST 11, 2025 – 6:00PM**

The study session meeting of the Farmington Hills City Council was called to order by Mayor Rich at 6:00pm.

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

Councilmembers Absent: None

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

**DISCUSSION ON THE INTERLOCAL AGREEMENT WITH OAKLAND COUNTY FOR HERITAGE PARK**

**Presentation**

Director of Special Services Schnackel, along with Deputy Directors Farmer and Moran, were present for this discussion on the proposed Interlocal Agreement with Oakland County for Heritage Park. Director of Oakland County Parks Ward was also present, accompanied by County Parks Deputy Director Jaros, Chief of Nature and Outdoor Education Smith, and County Commissioner Markham.

Attorney Shortley, of Rosati, Schultz, Joppich & Amtsbuechler, who had helped negotiate the agreement, was also present.

Director Schnackel reviewed the background of the proposed interlocal agreement. Oakland County passed a parks millage in 2024, enabling collaboration between the county and the city on Heritage Park. The city's expense to operate Heritage Park in the previous fiscal year was approximately \$1.8 million, with revenue of about \$500,000 from the Nature Center, archery, and shelter rentals.

Key features of the proposed agreement include:

- The park name being discussed is Heritage Oaks Park.
- This will be a 30-year agreement, with an upfront investment of \$4 million, resulting in anticipated annual cost reductions for the city.
- There will be significant improvements in facilities and ecological management, and increased service levels for residents and visitors.

If authorized, planning will continue through March 2026, with final approval by City Council anticipated by March 31, 2026. During the next six months, staff will work on a park action plan, including:

1. Community engagement with residents and stakeholders.
2. Analysis of existing park conditions and infrastructure.
3. Development of a strategic plan – the vision and goals for the operation and improvement of the park.
4. Creation of an operations and maintenance plan (POMP) outlining city and county roles.

5. A five-year capital improvement plan, with improvement to the north playground, including playground upgrades, splash pad and restroom improvements. A DNR grant had been applied for these improvements.

Other anticipated improvements include Nature Center and Spicer House upgrades, parking lot expansion, trail improvements, and a possibility of park maintenance storage and expansion of the archery range.

### **Discussion**

In response to questions from Councilmember Bridges, staff provided the following information:

- Cost reduction numbers would be determined before final approval in March 2026.
- The \$4 million investment will be received as cash by the city and Council will decide its use.
- The agreement concerns Heritage Park only, with the Longacre House likely excluded. The park will remain city-owned, with responsibilities clearly defined between the city and county. Council will remain in control of agreements.
- Public engagement is central to the process, to ensure residents are assured that the park's character will remain intact. The agreement is not a takeover but a collaboration to elevate services.
- The new park name, Heritage Oaks, reflects "Oaks" as a naming convention of the County parks.

Councilmember Bridges questioned why the matter was being presented at this stage, noting the absence of a finalized plan. County Director Ward explained that the intent was transparency and early communication, allowing council and the public to be involved before agreement finalization. City Manager Mekjian added that authorization is needed for staff to continue negotiations and planning, as significant staff resources are already being utilized.

Councilmember Bridges emphasized the importance of clear communication with residents regarding the proposed agreement. He asked the amount paid by Farmington Hills taxpayers to the Oakland County parks millage. Finance Director Skrobola said that with the \$1.3 million increase from the recent millage, Farmington Hills taxpayers will contribute approximately \$3 million annually (not the \$5 million originally stated). Councilmember Bridges stressed that city residents should receive a proportionate benefit to the taxes paid.

County Director Ward stated that the Oakland County park system has a 59-year history, dating back to 1966, but has lacked a strong presence in southern Oakland County. He noted that the proposed agreement provides a creative opportunity to establish a foothold in the area, allowing the county to invest and deliver services directly to residents. While ideally such agreements would have been implemented decades earlier, Director Ward emphasized that this approach represents the best available means to address the long-standing imbalance.

Councilmember Knol recommended that Oakland County staff present the plan to the Historic District Commission (HDC), given the HDC's oversight of several historic park properties, including Spicer House, the barn/art studio, and the museum. Director Schnackel said they were on the HDC's September agenda.

Councilmember Knol also asked whether deed restrictions from the Goodenough family (donors of the land) and State Department of Natural Resources (DNR) grant requirements had been reviewed. Attorneys Joppich and Shortley confirmed that the agreement complied with both deed restrictions and DNR grant provisions.

Councilmember Aldred sought clarification regarding the three plans outlined in the agreement: the Park Action Plan, Park Operations Management Plan, and Park Capital Improvement Plan. Director Schnackel clarified that all three plans would ultimately come before Council for input and approval, consistent with existing processes.

Councilmember Aldred also emphasized financial accountability, noting that the city contributes approximately \$1.1 million more annually under the new millage. He stressed the importance of prioritizing improvements that deliver immediate community benefit, while recognizing that Oakland County's assumption of operating costs represents significant cost savings for the city.

Councilmember Boleware welcomed Oakland County's commitment to a stronger presence in southern Oakland County, noting residents have long felt underserved. She asked for clarification regarding the county's initial \$4 million investment and stressed the need for sustained funding commitments.

Councilmember Boleware emphasized the importance of robust community engagement, suggesting outreach should extend beyond surveys and commission meetings to reach a larger portion of residents. She also highlighted specific capital improvement priorities, including:

- Adaptive and adult playground equipment in the north playground.
- Upgrades to the splash park, which has recurring outages.
- Modernization of park shelters to include amenities such as kitchens, lighting, and outdoor cooking facilities.

Councilmember Boleware believed that the initial \$4 million investment should be dedicated to Special Services and placed into a restricted fund balance for that purpose.

County Director Ward reiterated that the \$4 million provided by Oakland County will go directly to the city, to be used at the city's discretion. Councilmember Boleware reiterated that the funds should be dedicated specifically to Heritage Park, noting that residents supported the county millage with the expectation of visible benefits. Director Ward emphasized that Oakland County will also invest in capital improvements for the park. He agreed that it was critical residents see tangible enhancements to their park experience.

Councilmember Bruce strongly supported the partnership with Oakland County. The \$4 million investment and ongoing improvements would result in a magnificent park.

Mayor Rich asked about the status of city employees currently working at Heritage Park. County Director Ward explained that employees would remain city staff in the short term, with further details to be worked out during the agreement negotiation process. Director Schnackel said that currently two full-time employees are assigned specifically to Heritage Park: the Nature Center supervisor and a maintenance laborer. Other parks staff rotate as needed.

Councilmember Boleware asked whether the county would have an on-site operational presence. County Director Ward said that options include the county reimbursing the city for employee costs, or the County assuming the full operational costs. Director Schnackel highlighted that Oakland County's staff expertise, such as tree trimming, could directly benefit the park and reduce reliance on contractors.

Councilmember Boleware asked who would have programming control. Director Schnackel confirmed that the city would retain ownership and decision-making authority, with all changes made collaboratively.

Assistant Director Farmer emphasized that during the six-month planning period current service levels will be maintained while improvements are developed. Councilmember Boleware noted that residents are concerned about paying taxes to Oakland County without receiving clear benefits, and said that this partnership will demonstrate how local residents can see direct returns from their tax contributions.

Councilmember Bridges asked about the execution date for the agreement. Director Schnackel said that the final park action plan will be presented to Council by March 31, 2026, with potential implementation thereafter. She emphasized the importance of aligning transition planning with spring operations to ensure uninterrupted service during the park's busiest season.

Mayor Rich spoke to the importance of engaging residents in the discussion process. She suggested county and city staff use the city-wide open house, major events at the Costick Center, and Veterans Day events as opportunities for outreach.

Mayor Rich noted that residents are now paying nearly double in taxes for parks and have expressed concerns about not seeing sufficient value. Assistant Director Farmer explained that county parks are now free to residents, which broadens access and reduces costs to families. Director Ward highlighted ongoing efforts to expand Oakland County's park presence in southern Oakland County, citing partnerships with Southfield, Oak Park, Madison Heights, and the MSU Extension at Tollgate Farms. Director Ward acknowledged historic underrepresentation of park access in southern communities. Addressing that imbalance remains a top priority.

Mayor Rich concluded that there was no objection to advancing the interlocal agreement discussion on tonight's agenda. City Manager Mekjian confirmed that the \$4 million investment will be made available only after the agreement returns to Council for approval. Deputy Director Farmer expressed an interest in completing the process earlier than March 2026 if possible, noting that presenting a final agreement before the city's budget cycle would be beneficial. Public engagement remains the immediate next step.

## **DISCUSSION ON DRAFT ZONING TEXT AMENDMENT 5, 2025 - DESIGN STANDARDS**

### **Presentation**

Director of Planning and Community Development Charmaine Kettler-Schmult introduced this discussion item. She explained that the proposed text amendment is part of a broader effort to align city codes and regulations with the master plan. This amendment complements recent updates to the commercial zones and the OS-4 zoning district. Key areas of focus include building materials, fenestration, architectural scale, roof design, and building entrances. She noted that the Planning Commission considered options ranging from no design standards to highly prescriptive regulations, with the current draft representing a moderate approach.

Planning Consultant Tangari presented details of the proposed standards. He explained that while the master plan called for the development of design standards, the city currently lacks general design regulations, aside from overlays for certain corridors and uses. He emphasized the importance of balancing consistency and long-term durability with affordability and flexibility for small businesses and startups.

Planning Consultant Tangari described the following key elements:

**Purpose and Applicability:**

- The ordinance will include a statement of purpose to guide future interpretation and – where appropriate – waivers. The standards will not apply to single-family homes, and minor modifications to existing buildings will not require full compliance.

**Building Materials:**

- The ordinance identifies durable primary materials such as brick, stone, fiber cement siding, concrete masonry units (CMU), and timber. Decorative masonry veneers are classified separately as accent materials because they are not structural elements, and if not properly applied there can be drainage behind them. Less durable or less aesthetically consistent materials, such as plain CMU, stucco, plastics, and extensive glass, are restricted to accent use. EIFS (Exterior Insulation and Finish Systems) may only be used above ground level due to durability concerns.
- Material Flexibility: The ordinance allows for administrative approval of new materials not listed, ensuring that innovation is not stifled.

**Architectural Scaling:**

- The standards encourage features that break up flat facades and create human scale, including horizontal expression lines, pilasters, recessed entries, and vestibules. This helps buildings feel more approachable and visually engaging.

**Roof Design:**

- The amendment proposes limits on parapet height to prevent artificially tall appearances and to ensure that height serves functional purposes, such as screening mechanical equipment, rather than creating disproportionate structures.

**Fenestration and Building Entrances:**

- Proposed standards for fenestration (windows and doors) addressed the importance of avoiding blank facades and creating street-facing buildings that convey activity and welcome the public. Exceptions and waiver provisions are included for uses such as schools and places of worship, where extensive windows may not be practical.
- New standards for building entrances ensure that they are clearly visible, accessible, and distinct from other facade features. The goal is to improve wayfinding and create welcoming public access points.

**Discussion**

Councilmember Boleware asked for Planning Consultant Tangari's professional opinion on the proposed standards. Consultant Tangari responded that the draft represents a strong starting point, striking a balance between having no standards (the current situation) and avoiding overly prescriptive design mandates. The standards encourage durable, attractive, and lasting buildings without dictating specific architectural styles, providing flexibility for entrepreneurs and smaller developments.

Councilmember Bruce asked whether the standards would apply to new or existing buildings. Planning Consultant Tangari explained that the standards apply primarily to new construction. Redevelopment projects that expand floor area or seating capacity by more than 50% would also trigger compliance for the entire building. Minor modifications to older buildings would not require full compliance. Consultant Tangari noted that the anticipated cost increases for new construction would be modest, and most recent commercial projects would already comply with the proposed standards.

Councilmember Bridges asked for further clarity on what appeared to be an incremental approach – with likely changes occurring in a few years that might strengthen the standards further. Planning

Consultant Tangari explained that the city is currently at a near-zero baseline, with only limited standards in overlays. The proposed amendment represented a moderate but notable change. This approach avoids overwhelming developers and allows the city to adjust standards over time based on results and community feedback. Planning Consultant Tangari supported the proposal as a balanced and practical starting point.

In response to questions from Councilmember Bridges, Planning Consultant Tangari said that West Bloomfield has more rigorous standards, particularly in the north Orchard Lake corridor. Investment demand and community demographics play a role in the development of standards. Farmington Hills has a wide range of incomes, and design standards need to acknowledge and encourage attractive design and redevelopment at all levels. Predictability in zoning and design standards benefits investment, as it assures developers that just as they have to meet standards, future projects by other developers will have to meet the same quality expectations. Establishing standards helps create a reliable framework for redevelopment efforts along corridors such as 12 Mile, Orchard Lake, and Grand River.

Councilmember Bridges suggested a hybrid, flexible approach based on the characteristics of the existing business neighborhoods. Planning Consultant Tangari agreed that flexibility is necessary, particularly along Grand River Avenue, where the current voluntary overlays are overly prescriptive and complex, and remain unused. He recommended simplifying those requirements to encourage greater participation in redevelopment projects.

Councilmember Aldred expressed general support for the draft ordinance but questioned the omission of steel as a permitted primary material, noting that modern architecture often features glass and steel designs. Planning Consultant Tangari explained that metal had been placed under accent materials in the draft, but the Planning Commission and Council could reconsider including steel as a primary material.

Councilmember Knol pointed out that the City of Farmington has long maintained architectural design standards as part of its Main Street program, providing another nearby example of a community with established requirements.

Councilmember Knol asked whether facade renovations, absent major expansions, would trigger compliance with the new design standards. Planning Consultant Tangari explained that as written, standards apply primarily to floor area expansions of 50% or more. Councilmember Knol noted that most activity in Farmington Hills involves facade improvements to strip malls along corridors such as Orchard Lake Road and Grand River, rather than major new construction, and new facades should follow the new design standards.

Planning Consultant Tangari suggested language requiring compliance when facades are modified beyond simple replacements of windows or doors. Changes such as replacing EIFS cladding would require adherence to the new standards. Recent developments were cited, including Chillbox renovations to gas stations conveniences stores; these would not meet the new standards.

City Manager Mekjian voiced strong support for including facade improvement standards, linking them to the city's broader strategic vision. He emphasized the importance of revitalizing corridors such as 12 Mile, Orchard Lake, and Grand River, noting that redevelopment interest is already growing. The focus should be on consistency, quality, and attractive modern architecture.

Director Kettler-Schmult said that staff will revise the text based on tonight's feedback and schedule the draft amendment for a public hearing. The first reading and public hearing are anticipated for September, pending legal review.

**ADJOURNMENT**

The Study Session meeting was adjourned at 7:12pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Carly Lindahl, City Clerk