

**MINUTES
CITY OF FARMINGTON HILLS
FARMINGTON HILLS CITY COUNCIL
CITY HALL – COMMUNITY ROOM
FEBRUARY 10, 2025 – 6:00PM**

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

Council Members Present: Aldred, Boleware, Bridges, Bruce, Dwyer, Knol and Rich

Council Members Absent: None

Others Present: City Manager Mekjian, Assistant City Manager Mondora, City Clerk Lindahl, Directors Aranowski, Kettler-Schmult, Rushlow, and Schnackel, and City Attorney Morita

DISCUSSION ON THE USE OF CITY FACILITIES POLICY AMENDMENTS REGARDING CITY HALL ROOM RENTALS AND SIGNATURE GATHERING

City Facility Policy Amendment – City Hall Room Rentals

City Clerk Lindahl provided an overview of the discussion from the December 9, 2024 study session regarding limiting the use of City Hall rooms for outside groups. At that time, it seemed like there was consensus to move forward with some restrictions, and draft revisions of *Use of City Facilities Policy* was included in tonight's packet.

- Alternative meeting spaces were identified, including the Spicer House (undergoing renovations), Fire Station 5 Headquarters (also set for renovations), and two newly available meeting rooms on the third floor of the Hawk. These rooms have an estimated capacity of 35 to 50 people.
- The John Grant Community Center was not included in the list of replacement facilities because there is no evening staff there.
- The City had also explored recommending library meeting rooms, which are now more easily accessible through the library's online scheduling system, and which are also free.
- Impacted groups, such as homeowners associations and political organizations, will be contacted to discuss scheduling options and receive assistance with finding alternative locations.
- The primary concern is that City Hall is often left open and unstaffed for extended periods while outside groups use City Hall facilities.

In response to questions, Clerk Lindahl confirmed that groups from both major political parties currently use meeting space in City Hall. Assistant City Manager Mondora also explained that while fire stations, such as Fire Station 4, can accommodate meetings, they may be unstaffed if crews are dispatched on emergency calls. Fire Station 5 is more consistently staffed and available for evening meetings.

Security Concerns for Night Meetings at City Hall

Mayor Pro Tem Dwyer raised concerns about security at City Hall during evening meetings, when the building is open to anyone for extended periods of time when a group is using City Hall to meet, often without any staff present. Even when staff is present, they are active in the meeting, and no one is patrolling the building. He strongly recommended limiting night meetings at City Hall as much as

possible and ensuring that when meetings such as Planning Commission or Zoning Board of Appeals do occur, a law enforcement presence, such as an on-duty officer or police cadet, patrols the hallways.

Council discussion focused on limiting night meetings at City Hall to those official boards and commissions appointed by Council, and who had city staff present at their meetings, versus the importance of keeping City Hall available for other community groups.

Council pointed out that while the building needs to be protected, it is a taxpayer-funded facility used by various groups, including homeowners associations. Council expressed concern about overly restricting public access to a building that was specifically designed to serve the community. Also, the Spicer House was difficult for seniors and individuals with disabilities to access, particularly in winter.

Consensus appeared to support scheduling on duty police or police cadets to patrol the halls during night meetings. Live feed City Hall camera monitoring at the police station was also noted.

City Manager and Clerk Input

City Manager Mekjian assured Council that official boards and commissions would continue to have access to City Hall. The proposed policy changes primarily affect groups that do not have staff present.

Clerk Lindahl underscored security concerns, particularly with election-related materials stored in City Hall and the new rules regarding early voting. She explained that her staff often works late hours, and the presence of unsupervised groups in the building can be unsettling. Again, the City will assist affected groups in finding alternative meeting spaces.

Mekjian and Lindahl further highlighted issues with non-City groups using City Hall's technology, noting that frequent incidents of damage and improper use lead to costly repairs.

Security and Alternative Meeting Locations

- Council Member Bridges pointed out that some commissions already meet outside City Hall, including the Council on Aging at the Costick Center and the Economic Development Corporation at the John Grant Community Center. Some of these groups do not require advanced technology.
- Council Member Aldred supported the proposed policy, stating it is reasonable given the increased number of election-related events requiring City Hall's use and that other free community spaces are available.
- Council Member Knol reiterated that she supports the proposal as long as boards and commissions continue to have access to City Hall for meetings.
- Council Member Boleware supported the proposed changes, noting that groups not affiliated with City Council would still have access to taxpayer-funded facilities such as The Hawk, Spicer House, and fire stations. She expressed concern about the overall security of City Hall, particularly regarding the artwork displayed in the hallways. While the City may have insurance coverage, stronger precautions should be considered to prevent theft or damage.
- Council Member Boleware also stressed the importance of ensuring that any alternative meeting spaces are appropriate and accessible for the groups using them. Council Chambers accommodates a significant number of attendees, particularly during political forums hosted by homeowners' associations. Her subdivision has held meetings on the third floor of The Hawk and found the third

floor rooms difficult to navigate and suggested exploring options to make lower-level spaces at The Hawk available for those who may need them.

- Council Member Bruce confirmed that there were security cameras in the halls at City Hall.
- City Manager Mekjian stated that if Council desired a police officer or cadet presence at board and commission meetings, it could be arranged, but consideration for this would need to be included in budget discussions.

Mayor Rich noted that there appeared to be general agreement to keep City Hall open for official boards and commissions while exploring additional security measures, which would be addressed during budget discussions. Other affected organizations could be notified about alternative taxpayer-funded locations available for their meetings.

Discussion on Petition Signature Gathering at Heritage Park

Designated Signature Gathering Area at the Amphitheater

Clerk Lindahl explained that the City has identified a suitable area for people gathering signatures for ballot initiatives or candidates at Heritage Park when events are going on at the amphitheater. The space set aside for signature gathering is in a high-traffic area near the amphitheater, where people frequently enter and exit. Concerns had been raised regarding signature gathering activities during marijuana establishment petition efforts, when signature gatherers would walk among people who were at the amphitheater to attend a concert or other event. Since the amphitheater is considered a “designated use” area during such events, the proposal is for signature gatherers to be directed to an appropriate accessible location to minimize event disruptions while still allowing signature gathering.

Clerk Lindahl clarified that the city does not plan to physically mark off the assigned signature gathering area. However, if a park ranger receives a complaint from a resident or community member, they will be able to direct signature gatherers to the appropriate location. The proposed guidelines, including this specified signature gathering area, are detailed on page 27 of the draft amendment to *Use of City Facilities Policy*.

Clarification on Signature Gathering Rules

Mayor Rich confirmed that the discussion was focused only on Heritage Park and the amphitheater, not citywide signature gathering rules.

In response to questions, Clerk Lindahl clarified that:

- Signature gatherers would continue to be allowed in Heritage Park but during “designated use” events would not be allowed in the area where people were sitting to enjoy the event.
- Heritage Park remains a traditional public forum where signature gathering is generally allowed, except in areas reserved for designated uses like sports fields, the splash pad, and reservation-based picnic shelters and areas for programmed events (camp-out, fry and fry, amphitheater, etc.)

Balancing Free Speech and Public Use

- Council Member Dwyer stressed that the city could maintain the status quo without violating free speech rights. The intent is to balance public privacy, ensuring families attending concerts or picnics were not disrupted while still allowing signature gatherers to do their work.
- Council Member Bruce noted that both the ACLU and City Attorney Joppich confirmed that the proposed policy does not violate First Amendment rights. However, he also expressed concern

about broader signature gathering restrictions in the city, particularly near certain city buildings where signature gatherers are forced to stand on the road rather than on private walkways closer to entrances. He suggested that if aggressive signature gathering becomes an issue, enforcement mechanisms similar to those used for panhandling in traffic could be explored. Most signature gatherers are respectful and do not wish to alienate the public by being overly aggressive. While he supported the current proposal in terms of designated use events at Heritage Park, he expressed interest in revisiting and potentially expanding signature gathering rights across the city in the future.

- Council Member Knol also expressed concern that the restrictions on signature gathering at city buildings, particularly City Hall and the Costick Center, were too strict. She supported allowing signature gatherers to stand near entrances to engage with individuals entering and exiting city buildings. She also requested a clearer definition of the amphitheater's boundaries to ensure signature gatherers could position themselves effectively between the parking lot and the hill where people walk to events.

Special Services Director Schnackel explained that the designated signature gathering area was chosen based on heavy foot traffic patterns, allowing signature gatherers to approach attendees without obstructing movement or interfering with performances.

City Manager Mekjian reiterated that the goal was to provide a clearly visible location for signature gatherers that aligned with pedestrian movement. He confirmed that while signature gatherers were free to move within permitted areas, they should not be in roadways or parking lots due to safety concerns.

- Council Member Boleware noted that collecting signatures can be challenging due to already existing restrictions, something council members have personally experienced. She emphasized the need for clearer boundaries defining where signature gatherers are permitted and suggested that the city should reassess all signature gathering restrictions, as she believed they were currently too restrictive.
- City Attorney Morita clarified that signatures could be collected in public areas, such as sidewalks, as long as the activity was not obstructing traffic or creating safety hazards. Also, nothing in the city's policy prevented signature gathering in the amphitheater area when no event was occurring.
- Council Member Aldred did not see any significant issues with the current signature gathering process. However, if the change was made, the boundaries of the amphitheater need to be more clearly defined. While he understood the intent behind establishing a designated space, he expressed skepticism about its effectiveness. He pointed out that signature gatherers tend to move naturally to high-traffic areas, and simply designating a specific spot may not necessarily enhance their ability to gather signatures. If the goal is to create a more practical signature gathering space, he suggested that the city reconsider whether the proposed approach would accomplish that objective.
- Council Member Bridges inquired whether City Attorney Joppich had reviewed the proposed restrictions and whether they aligned with state guidelines. Attorney Morita confirmed that Mr. Joppich had addressed the matter in a previous legal memo and had not identified any legal concerns.

Legal and policy considerations related to signature gathering access at City Hall

Council Member Knol noted that three council members had expressed interest in making signature gathering policies less restrictive. She proposed directing city administration and the city attorney to draft less restrictive revisions, starting with allowing signature gathering near the entrances at City Hall. Security concerns were minimal, as police were stationed nearby, cameras were already in place, and increased law enforcement presence was under discussion for certain meetings.

City Manager Mekjian emphasized that the issue of signature gathering is fundamentally a First Amendment free speech matter, not a singular policy issue. Expanding signature gathering access could open the city to broader demonstrations, relative to potentially controversial topics such as abortion rights, capital punishment, or international political causes.

City Attorney Morita supported this view, noting that the city's existing signature gathering restrictions have been in place since the 1990s for reasons related to safety, operational efficiency, and fairness. She explained that allowing signature gathering in certain areas would require the city to permit all forms of free speech in those spaces, which could lead to unintended consequences. There has to be a rule that says no to everyone, or the City has to be prepared to let everybody come in close to the building to do what they want.

Council Member Aldred acknowledged the legal complexities of expanding signature gathering rights, particularly at facilities like The Hawk, where children are frequently present. He noted that allowing signature gathering there could create enforcement challenges, as all political speech would need to be accommodated. He expressed some openness to loosening restrictions at City Hall, given its role as a government building, but remained cautious about the broader implications.

Council Member Bruce suggested reviewing how other cities regulate signature gathering at public facilities. He supported allowing signature gathering on all issues, even controversial ones, as a fundamental free speech right. While he may not always agree with each cause, he strongly believed in the right to gather signatures. He noted that most signature gatherers are respectful, with aggressive behavior being rare and manageable. He advocated for designated signature gathering areas at City Hall, the Costick Center, and possibly other facilities, allowing signature gatherers to engage with the public near entrances. Although the ACLU affirmed the city's current policies as legally sound, he found them overly restrictive. He urged expanding signature gathering opportunities, particularly at City Hall, to give residents better access to the process.

Mayor Rich reminded Council that expanding signature gathering rights at City Hall or other locations would encompass all forms of First Amendment activity, including protests and demonstrations.

Council Member Bridges also inquired whether other cities had similar policies. City Manager Mekjian responded that the city's current approach is consistent with other municipalities but if Council so directed, a broader review could be conducted.

Mayor Rich confirmed with Council that they generally supported the proposed amendment regarding gathering signatures at Heritage Park relative to "dedicated uses" such as concerts and other events at the amphitheater and she suggested that the rest of the discussion be tabled to a future study session item regarding free speech.

DISCUSSION ON PLANNED UNIT DEVELOPMENT 2, 2024 INCLUDING SITE PLAN 56-8-2024, MULBERRY PARK AND THE TABERNACLE MULTI-FAMILY HOUSING, LOCATED ON 13 MILE ROAD, WEST OF MIDDLEBELT ROAD

Director of Planning and Community Development Kettler-Schmult gave the background to this discussion item, noting that the last discussion on this item took place during the January 13, 2025 regular Council meeting, which included a public hearing, following which Council and staff provided feedback. The Schafer development team has returned with a presentation outlining proposed improvements, and they are seeking Council's reaction this evening as to whether they are moving in the right direction.

The project remains scheduled for a public hearing on March 3. After Council provides feedback during this meeting, the developers can choose to submit their revised plans for formal staff review.

Members of the development team present this evening included Aaron, Spencer, and Stephen Schafer, who presented revisions relative to the following topics:

- **Reduced Density**
 - The number of units has been reduced from 76 to 69 with room count adjustments leading to an overall decrease of 25 to 35 rooms across the project, and a density reduction from 6.3 to 5.5 units per acre (12.2% reduction), with room counts decreasing to 18–19.5 rooms per acre (9.3% reduction).
 - Schafer Development conducted an analysis of residential density along the south side of 13 Mile Road between Orchard Lake and Middlebelt:
 - Glen Oaks: 21 rooms per acre, 5.3 units per acre.
 - Cove Creek: 17 rooms per acre, 4.2 units per acre.
 - Proposed Mulberry Park Plan: Falls between Glen Oaks and Cove Creek at 18–19.5 rooms per acre.
 - The developers emphasized that the revised plan creates a balanced density transition in the area.
- **Traffic Flow/Safety**
 - Baptist Manor will remove the first duplex unit to create a new entrance at the Detroit Baptist Drive/13 Mile Road signalized intersection. There will also be a secondary entrance on 13 Mile Road east of Westgate Drive, aligning with engineering recommendations.
 - The plan maintains flexibility to comply with engineering and fire code requirements, ensuring adequate access points.
 - The curved roadway connecting to Baptist Manor will result in removing four older duplex units, with Baptist Manor committed to relocating affected residents within its campus.
 - The project maintains two access points to meet International Fire Code standards.
- **Deep Buffering**
 - Building setbacks along the southern property line have increased by 11 to 16 feet, creating a total buffer of 83 to 86 feet, exceeding the original 75-foot buffer request.
 - The revised plan approximately doubles the eastern stormwater basin and potentially completely eliminates the western stormwater basin, thereby increasing open space.

- **Visual Impact**
 - The unit configurations to the south have been modified to better match the surrounding neighborhood, shifting from four-, five-, and six-unit structures to primarily three- and four-unit buildings to reduce visual impact on adjacent residential properties.
- **Walkability**
 - The revised plan includes sidewalks on both sides of the roadway and along the south side of the main thoroughfare connecting the development to Detroit Baptist.
 - The 13 Mile Road sidewalk will be reconstructed, as the existing sidewalk is unsafe due to its close proximity to the roadway. The new design will include a buffer to accommodate future expansion and improve pedestrian safety.
 - Regarding landscaping enhancements:
 - The developers will enhance landscaping rather than request a waiver for reduced tree planting.
 - The revised plan adds significant new plantings along the PUD frontage and Baptist Manor's property, particularly along the 13 Mile corridor.
 - Placemaking enhancements include:
 - A designated space for public art along the 13 Mile Road frontage.
 - A walking trail for community wellness, with additional features such as a butterfly or pollinator garden or a rain garden for ecological sustainability. This space may expand further if the western stormwater basin is removed.
 - Eastern overlook – a passive amenity area, possibly including a pergola or seating area, overlooking the basin and the wildlife corridor/tree preservation area at the southern property line.

Council feedback

In response to questions, Director Kettler-Schmult provided the following information:

- Revisions to this plan have been ongoing since the January 13, 2025 City Council meeting. Once a final plan is submitted, updated staff and planner's reviews will be prepared. The primary items brought out in the January 13 meeting have been addressed.
- The area is zoned RA-1, a low-density residential designation. The newly adopted master plan introduces a "flex zoning" category intended to allow for varied land uses and increased development flexibility including increased density in some cases. However, the master plan has not been fully implemented, and specific definitions and guidelines for flex zoning have not yet been adopted. The proposed density aligns more closely to RC-3 or RC-1 zoning.

Aaron Schafer pointed out that the revised plan presented this evening proposes 35 to 55 fewer rooms than what RC-1 zoning permits, reflecting a reduction in density.

- Council Member Knol acknowledged the proposed connection to Baptist Manor, allowing residents access to a signalized entrance, and asked whether the eastern entrance would be gated for emergency use only, directing all traffic to the light.

Aaron Schafer responded that discussions with engineering are ongoing, and recent conversations had focused on restricting turn movements at the eastern entrance. Installing a breakaway gate

might not be feasible due to separation distances. The fire marshal has approved the current entrance designs, pending engineering approval, and options like a right-in, right-out configuration are under consideration.

In response to further questions, Aaron Schafer said that:

- They had shared the revised plan with the Westgate Homeowners Association who were receptive to the changes. The developers were hoping to schedule a meeting with the Holly Hill Farms HOA within the next week or two.
 - An updated traffic study was being prepared, and the developers would submit it as soon as possible.
 - A comprehensive stormwater management plan will address concerns about potential drainage and flooding issues affecting neighboring properties, in that all runoff from the southern units, particularly near the natural foliage, will be directed northward into designated basins, eventually connecting to the 13-mile stormwater outlet. This aligns with recommendations from the engineering department, which suggested that roof runoff be channeled into the stormwater system, while other surface runoff should infiltrate the ground at a controlled, agricultural rate. By preserving existing vegetation and minimizing land disturbance, the plan will enhance natural infiltration and reduce the need for additional infrastructure. Schafer Development has engaged with individual residents to identify specific areas of concern and is committed to addressing these issues proactively. Overall, this strategy is expected to significantly improve current drainage conditions experienced by neighboring properties.
- Council Member Boleware advocated for the inclusion of adult playgrounds in the design, particularly near the proposed pergola.
 - Several council members expressed appreciation for the detailed responses to concerns raised at the January 13 meeting and also for the continued interaction with nearby residents.

City Manager Mekjian emphasized the importance of submitting the traffic impact study as soon as possible. He noted that as a best management practice, the recommendation is always to line up driver approaches across major roads to minimize traffic impacts/accidents as much as possible. The geometrics that were shown tonight in the revised plan were not good geometrics in terms of traffic safety.

Mayor Rich reiterated that the March 3rd meeting is scheduled as planned. At that time, Council will decide whether to approve, deny, or defer the proposal based on the information and revisions presented.

ADJOURNMENT

The Study Session meeting was adjourned at 7:22pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Carly Lindahl, City Clerk