

[2026-0048](#)

2026 Zoning Discussion

- a. Development Intensity
- b. Annual Administrative Amendments

Ms. Roediger introduced the results of the 2026 Planning and Zoning priority survey, noting that the purpose was to establish a high-level general idea of the most important topics for the upcoming joint planning efforts. Based on the survey data, the top two priorities for implementing the recently adopted 2025 Master Plan involve updating the zoning ordinance to permit certain types of attached housing units and refreshing the City's architectural design standards. Ms. Roediger emphasized that the housing initiative aims to increase variety-specifically missing middle options-without increasing the overall residential density of surrounding neighborhoods. Staff will also collaborate with local architects to update the architectural guidelines, which are nearly 15 to 20 years old, to ensure high-quality development that enhances community character.

The survey also highlighted data centers as a significant zoning topic for the coming year. Regarding development intensity, Ms. Roediger noted that the 2025 Master Plan reaffirmed the city's commitment to existing density limits, and staff continues to vet developer requests for variances or Planned Unit Developments to ensure they provide a legitimate public benefit. She detailed how the City has already overhauled the Flex Business District by reducing building heights, increasing setbacks from residential neighbors, and requiring additional open space following past controversies with specific projects.

Environmental preservation remains a core focus, with the City increasing the tree preservation requirement from 37% to 40% and expanding this standard to apply city-wide rather than just to a small fraction of properties. Additionally, staff is preparing housekeeping amendments to address nonconforming lots and eliminate loopholes in the densest residential districts. To support these efforts, Mr. McLeod developed an interactive residential development map that allows users to calculate the average density of any neighborhood or custom-drawn area to ensure new projects are compatible with the surrounding environment. Ms. Roediger concluded by noting that the era of massive housing booms from the 1980s and 1990s is over, and the remaining undeveloped land in the City is being handled with extra caution to respect natural features.

Ms. Roediger and Mr. McLeod presented the Density Explorer, a GIS-based interactive tool designed to provide granular data on residential development throughout the City. Ms. Roediger encouraged the boards to utilize the tool when reviewing future development proposals to ensure compatibility with surrounding neighborhood character and to verify that density is not being inadvertently increased.

Mr. McLeod demonstrated the tool's various data layers, explaining that it allows for analysis at the neighborhood level, the section level, and the subdivision level. At the neighborhood level, as established during the Master Plan process, the tool shows broad metrics such as the Adams neighborhood currently averaging two units per acre. Users can also view data for every individual

section, such as Section 1 in the northeast, which maintains a lower density of 0.86 units per acre. The explorer function allows users to click on specific property points or draw custom boundaries to calculate the average density of any group of subdivisions, moving beyond static charts to provide accessible information to residents and staff. Mr. McLeod noted that this data was previously tucked away but is now being integrated into a tool for daily staff use and Planning Commission reviews.

Ms. Mungioli raised concerns regarding the potential for data center development on Brownfield sites, particularly on the City's east side. She questioned how the City could proactively regulate such facilities to prevent developers from claiming property rights issues after investing heavily in capped sites. Mr. McLeod clarified that while the Density Explorer reflects what is currently in the ground, the Property Hub should be used to see allowed zoning uses. He acknowledged that showing allowed density versus actual built density would be a valuable future addition to the tool. Ms. Mungioli advocated for highly restrictive zoning standards specifically for data centers to safeguard community character while respecting legal property rights. She noted that she refrained from answering the survey because she felt critical issues like data centers could not be properly ranked when they are singular, high-priority concerns that could lead to requests for zoning changes based on high investment costs.

Ms. Roediger transitioned the discussion to the next topic, noting that they would address data centers following the conclusion of comments regarding residential density and intensity.

Ms. Mungioli inquired if the City was considering the complete removal of the four-story height allowance currently permitted on some lots.

Ms. Roediger responded that such an amendment had not been proposed but could be reviewed if that was the desired direction. She explained that the four-story option is restricted to a very small number of sites, requires a minimum lot acreage, and is a conditional use. She noted that this allows the Planning Commission discretion to review the potential impacts of site-specific proposals.

Ms. Mungioli expressed interest in understanding the impact of reducing the maximum height to three stories regardless of lot size. She specifically cited the Bordine and Twist Drill sites as locations where a four-story building would be a challenge.

Ms. Roediger noted that three-story buildings can be economically challenging for developers. She explained that from a code standpoint, three stories often act as a "loss leader" because the construction requirements and elevator costs are high, while the return on investment is lower than that of a four-story building.

Ms. Mungioli stated she would prefer developers be restricted to single-family residential on those lots rather than allowing a four-story building in the middle of

the city for the sake of developer profit. She reiterated her interest in finding out the impact of implementing such a change.

Mr. Dettloff inquired regarding the "breaking point" for residential density, asking when the City would effectively be "full" and without space for new houses or multi-story buildings. He questioned if this point might be reached in 10 or 20 years.

Ms. Roediger responded that it is difficult to provide a specific number, noting that while the City is nearly built out and few "easy pieces" of land remain, redevelopment remains a constant option. She stressed that the City does not want to shut down redevelopment opportunities, particularly for underutilized parcels or older shopping centers, as staying stagnant can cause a community to fall behind. She stated that the goal is to balance compatible and thoughtful redevelopment rather than declaring the City "closed for business".

Mayor Barnett noted that the rate of development has already tapered off. He suggested that future growth will likely come from the assimilation of smaller acreage-such as a long-time resident finally selling a 13-acre plot-rather than massive developments on large, open tracks of land or golf courses.

Ms. Roediger added that opportunities for residential growth often arise from the sale of schools or places of worship that close their doors. She emphasized that a conscious effort has been made to ensure such properties are planned to be compatible with surrounding residential densities, ensuring any future development matches the character of the neighborhood.

Mr. Carlock requested that Planning Manager Chris McLeod display the Hampton area on the map to illustrate what a high-density area looks like. Ms. Roediger explained that density is represented by the legend, with darker orange indicating higher density. Mr. McLeod stated that density can range from two to three units per acre up to 10 to 15 units per acre, depending on the housing type and building proximity. He used the Legacy development as an example, noting that while it falls in the five to 10 units per acre range and may appear large, it is not considered high density in the broader planning context. Mr. Carlock observed that density is relative, noting that while such developments may not be dense compared to New York City, they are considered more dense for Rochester Hills.

Ms. Mungioli raised a concern regarding property assembly, specifically when a developer acquires multiple neighboring large-lot properties to create a larger development. She questioned what options the City has when 13 acres are combined with others to reach 40 acres. Ms. Roediger clarified that from a density standpoint, any new development would still be restricted by the existing zoning of the surrounding area, such as R-2 or R-3. She cited the Walton Oaks neighborhood as an example where the density remained compatible with its surroundings.

Ms. Mungioli expressed concern about the potential for larger subdivisions returning to areas between Dequindre and John R, where many homes currently

sit on large lots. Ms. Roediger reassured the group that these areas would not see large multi-story apartment buildings; rather, any redevelopment would consist of single-family homes compatible with the surrounding neighborhood character.

Ms. Mungioli inquired if staff was monitoring the activities of local Catholic churches, noting there are five in the immediate area and reports suggest one or more may be impacted by future changes. She stressed the importance of keeping a close watch on these specific properties. Ms. Roediger explained that a conscious decision was made to maintain residential zoning for such sites. This ensures that if a place of worship moves out, it cannot be replaced by a high-assembly use, such as a theater.

Mr. McLeod addressed the complexities of property assembly, noting that it significantly increases development costs. He stated that developers often use these high acquisition costs to pressure the City for increased density. He emphasized that the City must remain firm in its zoning designations, such as R-1 or R-2, to ensure any new development aligns with the Master Plan's vision. He further commented that development interest never truly ends, as new proposals continue to emerge even when a community feels built out.

Mayor Barnett remarked that development interest only stops when a community loses its appeal—specifically if it becomes unsafe, schools decline, or parks are poorly maintained. He stated that ongoing interest from developers is a sign of the community's inherent value and success. He noted that while managing this success is a challenge, it is preferable to having no development interest at all.

Mr. McLeod added that after open land is exhausted, developers continue to seek opportunities because the community is a highly desirable place where they know they can sell homes.

Ms. Mungioli questioned if the City's density requirements correlate with a minimum threshold for affordable housing. Ms. Roediger noted that this query served as a transition to the next agenda item regarding affordability. Ms. Mungioli then indicated that Ms. Neubauer had a question to raise before the discussion moved forward.

Ms. Neubauer stated that the Master Plan process delivered a clear message that the community does not want more density. She suggested that the City should consider a reduction of density and capping building heights, noting that it is not her job to ensure a developer maximizes profit at the expense of citizens who desire lower density. She remarked that if three-story buildings are more expensive and difficult to build, that could serve as a useful standard to discourage higher density and force developers toward two-story structures. Regarding state legislation, she expressed concern over potential state-mandated affordability regulations and asked what could be done to prevent the state from imposing high-density projects on the community.

Mayor Barnett addressed the group, acknowledging the common perception

that the city is being "built up," but he countered this by stating the City has purchased ten times more green space and park space in recent years than it has turned into buildable property. He emphasized that the number of new homes being built is extremely low compared to neighboring communities and that the administration has consistently worked to make the city less dense. He provided demographic data showing the City grew by 7% from 2010 to 2020 and noted that the non-white population has increased by approximately 13,000 residents since 2000.

In discussing the demographics of the community, Mayor Barnett pointed out that Rochester Hills is an older community with an average age of 43.8. He contrasted this with neighboring Dearborn, where the average age is 26, to illustrate the city's unique position as an aging population group. He identified housing affordability as a top national concern but noted the local tension where residents support affordability in theory but oppose higher-density options like manufactured home communities.

Mayor Barnett voiced his opposition to a blanket ban on four-story buildings, arguing that maintaining them as a conditional use provides the Council with necessary control and options. He cited an example of an area he would like to see redeveloped into something that meets community needs, even if that includes a four-story proposal. He concluded by stating that the City is planting more trees annually than it removes, noting that the only years where the numbers were close coincided with the development of parks like Innovation Hills.

Mr. Blair requested to clarify the definition of affordable housing within the context of Rochester Hills. He noted that the standard formula considers housing affordable if it costs 30% or less of the gross median income. Based on a median income of \$120,000 in Rochester Hills, he calculated that affordable housing would equate to approximately \$3,000 per month. He stated that with current interest rates, this translates to a property value between \$450,000 and \$500,000. He emphasized that affordable housing in this community is a sliding scale and does not mean a home priced under \$300,000. He added that residents must be cognizant of the fact that it is not possible for someone on a very low fixed income to move into the City.

Ms. Mungioli thanked Mr. Blair for the calculation but noted that she views affordable housing more through the lens of a renter rather than an owner. She expressed interest in understanding what the affordability formula would look like specifically for rental units. Mr. Blair questioned whether the formula for affordable housing-calculating a percentage of income-remains the same for rental costs versus mortgage payments. Ms. Roediger confirmed that the formula is the same, as it measures what an individual is paying for their housing relative to their income, regardless of whether they rent or own.

Ms. Mungioli brought up subsidized housing and the impact of PILOT (Payment in Lieu of Taxes) housing programs, specifically mentioning Danish Village and other similar developments. Mr. Blair expressed significant concern regarding companies utilizing PILOT programs for Section 8 housing. He noted that one

project had recently fallen apart and mentioned that he had received emails from residents expressing disappointment with how another project had unfolded. He stated that these situations are difficult for residents and uncomfortable for elected officials to manage. He inquired if there were ways the City could curtail these programs or have more control over how they are implemented.

Mayor Barnett addressed the legislative constraints on municipal tax bases, specifically highlighting the impact of the veterans exemption. He noted that this exemption is growing annually and allows some veterans in million-dollar homes to claim tax-free status due to their disability ratings. He stated that municipalities are working together to address programs like the PILOT (Payment in Lieu of Taxes) housing initiative, which often involves the community's highest users of services. He described certain exploitations of these programs as a "garbage play" but clarified that because they are mandated through MSHDA (Michigan State Housing Development Authority), the City cannot create separate rules and must rely on advocacy groups like the Michigan Municipal League (MML) to lobby for legislative improvements.

Regarding community density, Mayor Barnett referenced a recent survey showing that density and intensity remain top concerns for residents. He asserted that the City has spent the last decade implementing policies to curtail and reign in the rapid growth seen in the early 2000s. He pointed out a unique challenge involving the Rochester Community Schools, which lose students annually because the City is an older, more prosperous community with fewer young families. He noted that school funding is largely tied to per-pupil state aid, creating a conflict where the district may require more density to remain viable.

Mayor Barnett emphasized the importance of maintaining a diverse housing stock-including apartments, condos, and senior living facilities-to protect the City from the economic vulnerabilities seen in communities with uniform housing stock, such as Berkeley or Royal Oak. He reiterated that while he hears residents say they want "no more apartments," providing safe and generally affordable options for various demographics is essential for long-term stability.

Transitioning to the topic of data centers, Mayor Barnett observed that these facilities have replaced past infrastructure discussions, such as the 2020 focus on preparing for driverless vehicles. He shared insights from discussions with the mayors of Santa Clara, California, and Mesa, Arizona, noting that while Santa Clara has 57 data centers, Mesa recently adopted zoning amendments to establish standards for sound, water, and energy usage to protect neighborhoods.

The Mayor announced that the administration would propose a six-month moratorium to the City Council later in February to allow for comprehensive research. He cautioned that the City cannot legally eliminate data centers entirely-comparing them to billboards or cell towers-but must instead "thoughtfully, artfully, and craftfully" determine suitable locations and boundaries. He noted that data centers are unique economic entities that

require massive infrastructure but create few long-term jobs, often described as "the next generation of economic development". The proposed pause is intended to ensure the City can set acreage limits and minimize environmental impacts without facing litigation.

Mr. Dettloff inquired if any members had personally visited a data center or if there were local facilities available for a site visit. He noted that without firsthand knowledge, it is difficult for officials to accurately address constituent concerns regarding these developments, whereas they can easily provide information on schools or other familiar infrastructure.

Mayor Barnett stated that he had not personally visited one but mentioned that cities in the south, such as those discussed with the mayors of Santa Clara and Phoenix, have a high concentration of them. He noted that data centers vary significantly in scale, with some requiring hundreds of acres while others occupy as few as three.

Ms. Roediger shared that a mapping website for Michigan data centers exists and offered to distribute it to the group. She clarified that while massive "super sites" are currently dominating the news, data centers have existed in Michigan for decades. She reported that there are currently 60 data centers in the metro Detroit area, including facilities in Auburn Hills and Troy, many of which have been operational for over 20 years.

Mayor Barnett observed that these facilities are likely not open for public tours due to the high-security nature of the work they perform.

Mr. Blair elaborated on the significant shift in data center technology, explaining that modern AI data centers are entirely different from the unremarkable buildings of the past three decades. He noted that while older data centers were designed to be visually discreet, new facilities running AI workloads feature a density of "compute"-the actual processing brains of the system-that is far more concentrated.

Mr. Blair used a manufacturing analogy, comparing the difference to a factory producing sewing machines versus one producing Humvees; while the building footprint might be similar, the intensity of the infrastructure inside is vastly different. He warned that while a traditional data center, such as those found along Northwestern Highway, might not appear impactful, AI-centric data centers in places like Silicon Valley are audible from blocks away. He described the cooling requirements for these new facilities as massive, featuring rows of air conditioning units the size of 18 motor homes. He emphasized that the City's focus should be on the specific impacts of these high-intensity AI facilities rather than outdated models.

Mayor Barnett highlighted a significant concern regarding the potential for state-level preemption of municipal authority. He noted that Governor Whitmer has been a vocal supporter of making Michigan a "pro-data center state," viewing the industry as the next generation of the manufacturing economy. He warned that if municipalities become too restrictive or uncooperative, the State

might intervene to usurp local control, as has occurred with other legislative matters. The Mayor emphasized that the City is monitoring the actions of neighboring communities to ensure its own policies remain "mindful" and defensible.

Ms. Mungioli raised questions regarding the long-term redevelopment of data center sites. She expressed concern that if these facilities-which often involve 10-acre "sprawling" buildings-become obsolete in 20 years, they could become environmental liabilities or "next-generation Brownfields". She inquired whether the City could implement structural requirements to ensure these buildings are adaptable for future uses, such as conversion into affordable housing, similar to the redevelopment seen at the Chrysler Tech Center.

Mayor Barnett introduced the emerging issue of drone delivery, noting that Amazon has already begun operations in neighboring areas. He reported that Amazon currently operates approximately 30 minutes before sunrise and 30 minutes after sunset, using drones capable of carrying packages weighing up to eight pounds. He noted that a single "Amazon-hungry neighbor" could receive up to 15 deliveries per day, creating a new set of municipal challenges.

The Mayor explained that the City's ability to regulate these operations is severely limited. Because the drones typically hover at 10 feet to drop packages rather than landing, the City cannot easily regulate them through land-use laws. Furthermore, these drones travel at speeds of up to 60 miles per hour, posing potential public safety concerns, particularly if they interfere with emergency drones used for tasks like searching for patients with dementia.

He concluded by stating that while these technologies-including drones and data centers-were not present in the last Master Plan, the City's team is working to find a regulatory path that protects the "residential culture and climate" as much as possible. He reiterated that simply banning these services or facilities is not a legally viable option, making thoughtful integration essential.

Ms. Mungioli inquired if the City could restrict drone delivery operations to standard working hours, specifically from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.. Mayor Barnett clarified that such regulations fall under the jurisdiction of the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) rather than local municipal authority. He noted that any negotiation regarding delivery hours would require a regional response where multiple communities band together to address the FAA, similar to previous municipal advocacy regarding state firework laws. The Mayor reported that while approximately 200 drone deliveries are currently dispatched from Pontiac daily, the goal is to reach 2,500 daily deliveries within the next year, representing a potential 10 to 20-fold increase in activity.

Closing the discussion on new technology and development challenges, Mayor Barnett suggested that the group shift its focus to the positive outcomes of their work. He reminded the members that Rochester Hills has been ranked as the best place to live in Michigan and among the top ten in the country. He highlighted a key metric: 95% of residents would recommend living in the City to their friends and neighbors, giving Rochester Hills the highest net promoter

score for a city in the country.

Mayor Barnett invited each member of the City Council and Planning Commission to share one project or development they are particularly proud of. He emphasized that despite common complaints regarding traffic or snow removal, the high resident satisfaction suggests that the Council, Planning Commission, and administration are succeeding in their leadership. He then turned the meeting back to Sarah Roediger for final comments.

Chairperson Brnabic addressed the ongoing debate regarding building height, specifically responding to developer claims that three- or four-story structures are necessary for financial feasibility. She noted that while developers naturally seek the highest return on investment, the Planning Commission must maintain strict regulations to prevent projects from becoming "ridiculous" in scale. She expressed a cautionary view on relying solely on conditional use status for height allowances. While the Commission has discretion, Ms. Brnabic emphasized that their hands are often tied by existing ordinances and regulations. She cited the Barnes and Noble property as an instance where the Planning Commission's authority was limited, requiring City Council intervention to resolve the issue. She argued that "high height" is not the vision of the community, stating she has never encountered a resident asking for more four-story buildings in the City. She praised the Flex Business (FB) ordinance and the associated moratorium for providing better structure through property minimums and overlays, but she maintained that height remains a point of contention. Reflecting on the Brooklands district, Ms. Brnabic commented that the new three-story building there feels "out of place" and "hideous" to some residents. She suggested that a two-story requirement would have been more appropriate and harmonious with the surrounding area, reiterating that financial feasibility for developers should not override the visual character and long-term vision of the community.

Mayor Barnett expressed respect for the concerns regarding height but cautioned against making blanket statements that could limit long-term planning. He referenced the City of Troy, specifically noting that he is "absolutely opposed" to some of the "awful uses of height and depth and density" seen along Rochester Road, such as storage units that feel awkward and out of place. However, he argued that while residents might say they do not want "higher and taller," many do not realize that the highest buildings in the city—such as high schools, hospitals, and churches—already reach four, five, or even eight stories. He noted that institutions like Oakland University, the local mosque, and several Catholic churches feature tall parapets or bell towers that exist throughout the City without public outcry.

Mayor Barnett emphasized the importance of maintaining options and being able to make decisions based on site-specific proposals. He noted that of the 10,000 sites in the city, only about a dozen could even qualify for four-story buildings under current regulations. He stated that the City Council maintains the ability to deny a project through conditional use if it "doesn't feel right on this spot," similar to how drive-throughs are regulated. He concluded by stating it is unwise for long-term planning to say the City will "never" look at certain types of

development, provided the appropriate caveats and standards remain in place.

Ms. Roediger noted the time and proposed concluding the meeting on a positive note by discussing projects of which the members are proud. She asked if there were any remaining topics the administration should investigate and encouraged members to reach out to her or Mr. McLeod with further questions.

Ms. Neubauer expressed significant pride in the development of inclusive housing for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) in Rochester Hills. She highlighted two specific projects, Walton Oaks and Auburn Oaks (Angara Oaks), which provide neuro-inclusive neighborhoods for a group of people often overlooked. Ms. Roediger remarked that these projects were complex, multi-year efforts that initially faced significant challenges. Mayor Barnett added that these developments likely received more criticism during their early stages than any other city project. Ms. Neubauer admitted that she was initially a strong critic on the panel, frequently sending the developers back to ensure legal requirements and community standards were met. She concluded that although it was a long and difficult road, the developers eventually "did it right," resulting in successful projects that will benefit the community for years to come.

Ms. Denstaedt expressed excitement regarding a forthcoming retail establishment located across from Lowe's. She noted that the project involved the removal of an unattractive building and emphasized that the new development will not resemble the aesthetic of Rochester Road south of South Boulevard.

Mr. Dettloff cited the Brooklands redevelopment as his preferred project, describing it as a "classic redevelopment".

Mr. Struzik highlighted the new commercial buildings at the northeast corner of Rochester and Avon Roads. He noted that despite initial public hesitation, the development now provides desirable locations for coffee and shopping.

Ms. Mungioli discussed the Winchester Mall redevelopment, noting that it has remained uniform over the years even as tenants have changed. She contrasted this with the Amazon Fresh building and stressed the need for updated design standards to ensure such uniformity is maintained during future redevelopments. Ms. Roediger and the Mayor briefly discussed the status of a specific permit at that location that was expected to have expired.

Mr. Blair expressed satisfaction with the improved traffic flow in front of Yates Cider Mill, noting that the area no longer experiences the daily backups that occurred previously.

Mr. Carlock concluded by mentioning the "fish art" and murals, with a suggestion of bringing similar art projects to Rochester Road in the future.

Mr. Gallina highlighted the Serra Ford dealership, noting that it is harmonious with other dealerships and features a significant improvement in traffic flow. He

remarked that the new facility replaced a former lighting facility and is a sprawling, attractive addition to a high-traffic area.

Mr. Carlock expressed satisfaction with the corner of Walton Boulevard and Adams Road. He observed that former vacancies have been replaced by new businesses, such as a cigar bar, Tee-Time, and a Pilates studio, which have refreshed the area's appearance.

Mr. Hetrick reiterated his support for the Walton Oaks and Auburn Oaks developments, describing them as terrific projects.

Ms. Mannino praised the design and value added by developments near the Livernois Road and Hamlin Road roundabout. She specifically mentioned Breckenridge and Legacy, noting that their high-quality design has increased property values in that vicinity.

Mr. Dettloff expressed his enthusiasm for the City's roundabouts. He concluded by reflecting on his experience as a new member of the government, stating that the process has been a positive, eye-opening experience. He suggested that more citizens should observe these meetings to understand how city employees and officials prioritize the community's best interests.

Mr. Blair shared an anecdote regarding the Sanyo Machine Corporation building at the corner of Rochester and Avon Roads. He recalled that several years ago, the building appeared unappealing due to rusty barbed-wire fencing. After coordinating with former Building Department Director Scott Cope, the barbed wire was removed. Mr. Blair noted that the building, originally constructed in 1947 with blue stone, now possesses a "retro charm". He emphasized that viewing a property through a different lens or making small tweaks can result in significant positive changes.

Mr. McLeod expressed excitement about the City leading by example. He stated that when the City can point to its own successful projects, it becomes easier to encourage developers to follow similar high standards.

Ms. Roediger identified The Village of Rochester Hills as one of the City's "jewels". She noted that while the development was born out of controversy and a consent judgment, it has become a premier destination.

Mayor Barnett concluded by expressing his gratitude for the partnership between the City Council, the Planning Commission, and the administration. He commended the Planning Commission members for volunteering their time to make the community better and noted the team's "crazy awesome track record" in executing successful projects.

Discussed