

**CITY OF FARMINGTON HILLS
PLANNING COMMISSION SPECIAL MEETING
31555 W ELEVEN MILE ROAD
FARMINGTON HILLS, MICHIGAN
FEBRUARY 19, 2026, 6:00 P.M.**

CALL MEETING TO ORDER

The Planning Commission Special Meeting was called to order by Chair Trafelet at 6:07 pm.

ROLL CALL

Commissioners present: Countegan, Grant, Lindquist (arr. 6:15 pm), Stimson, Trafelet

Commissioners Absent: Brickner, Mantey, Ware

Others Present: Staff Planner Mellem, City Attorney Schultz, Economic Development Director Brockway, Planning Consultant Carlisle

The commission heard a presentation by Bob Gibbs of the Gibbs Planning Group on the *Grand River Avenue Corridor Growth Strategy & Plan*.

Mr. Gibbs explained that the Grand River Avenue Corridor Growth Strategy & Plan covers the two-mile corridor from Orchard Lake Road to 8 Mile, with a broader six-square-mile influence area. Grand River is a historic regional highway designed to carry significantly more traffic than it currently does.

Market research indicates strong demand for residential, office, retail, and restaurant uses within the corridor. The absence of desired development was attributed primarily to non-market factors, including zoning constraints, site conditions, and perceptions, rather than a lack of market demand. The purpose of the Plan is to remove barriers and enable private-sector investment consistent with demonstrated demand.

Three primary objectives were outlined: (1) strengthen surrounding neighborhoods to improve quality of life and property values; (2) improve aesthetics and placemaking along Grand River, including beautification and outdoor dining opportunities; and (3) encourage investment and growth by creating predictable regulatory standards.

The research process included stakeholder interviews, advanced market analysis across multiple land uses, and a comprehensive review of the existing GR-1 overlay district and zoning code. Approximately 100 zoning modifications were recommended, addressing parking requirements, setbacks, building heights, and land use standards.

Key recommendations include expanding overlay zoning – proposed by right GR-2 – to cover the broader corridor while maintaining the existing GR-1 and base zoning unchanged. The result would provide updated, predictable standards under the GR-2 overlay, while preserving existing regulations as an option for those who do not want to develop under the new overlay. Developers indicated a preference for predictable by-right standards – even ones they don't necessarily like – over negotiated Planned Unit Developments (PUDs).

Additional recommendations include conducting community workshops and site-specific planning

charrettes; establishing a five-year sunset provision for the GR-2 Overlay District to encourage timely investment; creating blue-ribbon panels to review engineering standards and architectural requirements; continuing corridor beautification efforts; and exploring stormwater and shared parking strategies.

Mr. Gibbs emphasized that Grand River functions as a regional highway rather than a small-town downtown, and zoning and design standards should reflect that context. Given its width, speed, and traffic volumes (approximately 20,000 vehicles per day in some segments), it is unlikely to function as a traditional walkable, two-sided downtown corridor. The scale, setbacks, and landscaping should reflect its highway character.

Mr. Gibbs recommended that the City consider strategic public investment, including the development of small shared public parking lots and common stormwater retention facilities. These improvements could function as “banks,” allowing adjacent properties to utilize shared parking and stormwater capacity, thereby improving redevelopment feasibility and walkability. Recommendations also included offering low-cost or City-supported architectural design assistance to help property owners visualize façade and site improvements.

Mr. Gibbs identified several larger redevelopment opportunity sites, including parcels of 20 to 30 acres, that could support substantial residential or mixed-use projects if zoning were predictable. Residential builders are expressing interest in the corridor, citing strong surrounding demographics and demand for updated housing options for residents who wish to remain in the area.

Mr. Gibbs summarized market findings indicating strong demographics *within a five-mile radius*—approximately 225,000 residents, 100,000 households, and average household incomes of about \$105,000—well above thresholds typically sought by retailers and restaurants, reinforcing the corridor’s underlying market strength. Detailed market analysis findings for the corridor’s *defined trade area* included approximately 120,000 residents and 50,000 households, with average incomes near \$100,000. Although portions of the corridor appear physically tired, the underlying demographics are strong, with high income and education levels. The trade area extends toward Livonia and northwest Detroit and represents a significantly underserved retail market.

Within a five-minute drive, approximately 15,000 workers generate an estimated \$40 million annually in retail and dining spending. Capturing even 5–10% of that spending locally would support new commercial development. Workers and employers have both indicated a desire for walkable amenities such as restaurants and coffee shops.

Market demand analysis identified support for approximately 400–600 new housing units, including townhomes, cottage-style homes or duplexes, and garden-style apartments. Many existing residents live in older 1950s–60s housing stock and expressed interest in downsizing into newer homes while remaining in the community. Developers are indicating interest in building smaller, updated housing types to meet this demand.

The study also found supportable demand for approximately 75,000 square feet of new office space, primarily professional and medical office serving local needs. Retail demand was estimated at roughly 90,000 square feet, including approximately 15 stores and six restaurants. A medium-sized grocery store

(approximately 30,000 square feet) was identified as a strong opportunity, with projected sales levels exceeding typical industry averages. Restaurant demand was also characterized as strong and underserved. Development of a coordinated mixed-use project on a larger assembled site could increase overall demand beyond the baseline projections.

The study analyzed spending patterns in moderate-income, higher-density neighborhoods, demonstrating that when measured per acre, retail and dining spending is comparable to or greater than higher-income, lower-density areas, such as those located in the northeast portion of the City. Despite skepticism from some, the data indicate that the southern portion of the trade area generates substantially more retail spending than the northern comparison area but lacks a corresponding retail supply. As a result, significant consumer spending is currently leaking to other communities.

The corridor presents a substantial opportunity for residential, office, and retail growth. The completed market study can serve as a tool for local businesses and developers to support financing, investment decisions, and recruitment efforts, including mixed-use development.

Mr. Gibbs discussed recommended revisions to building height, massing, and setback standards to better align with market realities and neighborhood compatibility. He recommended simplifying the existing height regulations, which currently allow varying maximum heights (three, five, and seven stories) within the GR-1 overlay district. This structure is confusing and may artificially inflate land values by suggesting development potential that is not economically feasible. He advised establishing a consistent three-story maximum height across the corridor, measured to the eave rather than the midpoint of the gable, to simplify administration and encourage residential-style rooflines. A half-story bonus within a pitched roof attic was suggested to maintain neighborhood character while allowing additional usable space.

He also discussed the benefits of vertically integrated mixed-use development, noting that residential units above retail generally command higher rents and sale values. While common in other states, this model has been less prevalent locally but remains viable if properly zoned and scaled.

Turning to setbacks, Mr. Gibbs observed that the existing GR-1 overlay limits front setbacks to a maximum of 15 feet, a standard more appropriate for a traditional downtown than a high-speed regional highway. He recommended increasing setbacks along Grand River to a 20' minimum for small lots and 60' minimum for larger redevelopment sites, to better reflect the highway character and provide room for landscaping and buffering. Greater setbacks would improve corridor aesthetics and functionality.

Mr. Gibbs stressed the importance of strong buffering standards between commercial and residential properties. Insufficient transitions can negatively affect adjacent neighborhoods and discourage reinvestment. He recommended reduced building heights near residential areas, enhanced landscaping, and clearly defined separation standards to protect neighborhood stability while accommodating corridor redevelopment.

He also recommended increasing rear yard setbacks—generally 30–40 feet—to provide stronger buffering between commercial and residential properties. The intent is to eliminate maximum setback restrictions, encourage greater flexibility, and enhance predictability for homeowners.

Mr. Gibbs proposed allowing limited front-yard parking for retail and restaurant uses, capped at 25% of total required parking, provided the site is well-landscaped and set back appropriately. He noted that highway-oriented retail often relies on visible and convenient front-door access, and prohibiting all front parking may discourage redevelopment. This modification alone could significantly increase private investment interest along the corridor.

He further emphasized the importance of shared or municipal parking lots to support walkability and redevelopment, particularly on smaller lots. Common parking areas, rather than individual on-site lots, would allow buildings to be closer together and create a more cohesive development pattern.

Mr. Gibbs advocated for streamlining the zoning code overall, suggesting that standards be condensed into a clear, user-friendly format that property owners and developers can easily interpret without extensive consultation.

These changes—combined with improved landscaping and clearer standards—would better align redevelopment expectations with the corridor’s highway character while promoting reinvestment and protecting adjacent neighborhoods.

Planning Commission discussion

In response to questions, Director Brockway said that MDOT would allow trees to be planted in the right of way, depending on the tree type.

Commissioner Countegan expressed strong support for the recommendations, describing the approach as practical, financially grounded, and a significant shift from decades of corridor micromanagement. He characterized the proposal as a major policy change, particularly regarding building heights and regulatory simplification, and asked whether the City Council was aware of and supportive of the overall direction.

Director Brockway confirmed that City Council has been informed throughout the research process, beginning with Master Plan discussions that identified long-standing zoning and nonconformity issues along the corridor. Updates have been shared with Council and the Grand River Corridor Improvement Authority, and further policy discussions will occur as implementation moves forward. Director Brockway also confirmed that developers are “ready to go” once the changes are implemented.

Mr. Gibbs clarified that while the proposed by-right GR-2 overlay would incentivize preferred development patterns, certain auto-oriented uses could be restricted within the overlay while still remaining permitted under the underlying zoning. The intent is not to remove property rights but to make desired redevelopment more feasible and attractive.

He also recommended simplifying existing architectural and form-based standards, which he described as overly prescriptive and better suited to traditional downtown environments than a regional highway corridor. Examples included detailed window, awning, and glass-percentage requirements. He emphasized creating clearer, more flexible, and more easily administered standards, particularly through predictable “by right” approvals, in order to reduce negotiation and uncertainty. Mr. Gibbs said that his focus was on defining “what” should change, with the Planning Commission, staff, and planning

consultants determining “how” to implement the revisions.

In response to questions regarding older residential neighborhoods, Mr. Gibbs clarified that the Plan does not propose demolishing existing homes. Instead, providing new downsized housing options would allow older residents to remain in the community while creating opportunities for first-time homebuyers to purchase and invest in older housing stock.

Mr. Gibbs reaffirmed the plan’s three core objectives: strengthening neighborhoods, beautifying the corridor, and encouraging private investment, noting that these goals are interdependent and must be pursued together to achieve long-term revitalization.

Commissioner Stimson asked whether there have been discussions with the State regarding reducing the number of travel lanes on Grand River in order to reclaim space for redevelopment. Director Brockway explained that a recent traffic study included simulations evaluating the impact of removing a lane. The analysis indicated that lane reductions would result in failing conditions during peak traffic periods due to traffic volumes at both ends of the corridor. Current traffic modeling does not support reducing the number of lanes. The proposed strategy represents a practical approach that works within the corridor’s existing conditions rather than assuming a significant roadway transformation that may not be feasible.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Evan Rosen and Phillip McKenna, Farmington Hills residents, gave comments regarding the presentation.

ADJOURNMENT

The meeting adjourned at 7:28 pm.

/cem