

**MINUTES
CITY OF FARMINGTON HILLS
FARMINGTON HILLS CITY COUNCIL
FARMINGTON HILLS PLANNING COMMISSION
FARMINGTON HILLS ZONING BOARD OF APPEALS
SPECIAL MEETING – JOINT STUDY SESSION
THE HAWK – CONFERENCE CENTER
JULY 20, 2026 – 5:00PM**

The special joint study session was called to order by Mayor Rich at 5:02pm.

Councilmembers Present: Aldred, Boleware, Bridges, Dwyer, Rich and Starkman

Planning Commissioners Present: Brickner, Countegan, Grant, Lindquist (arrived late), Mantey, Trafelet, Ware

Zoning Board of Appeals Members Present: Irvin, O'Connell, Khan, Rich, Rowland, Vergun

Others Present: Acting City Manager Mondora, City Clerk Lindahl, Deputy City Clerk Hopper, Directors Brockway, Kettler-Schmult, City Planner Mulville-Friel, Zoning Supervisor Curry, City Attorney Joppich and Planning Consultants Auerbach and Carlisle

Mayor Rich called the Special Joint Meeting to order at 5:02pm and provided a legislative update on several federal and state actions with direct implications for local zoning and land use authority:

Federal 21st Century ROAD to Housing Act became law July 11, 2026 — an incentive-based (not mandate-based) law that expands existing programs (CDBG, HOME, USDA, FHA), creates new grants/pilots, and reduces environmental review requirements, while preserving local zoning authority.

Federal Act funding is uncertain: it authorizes but doesn't appropriate money — actual availability depends on Congress and HUD implementation. Farmington Hills likely qualifies as a covered CDBG recipient, but details await HUD guidance.

Michigan's nine-bill Housing Readiness Package (HB 5529–5532, 5581–5585) is pending in the state House as of July 16, 2026, and would impose statewide zoning preemptions (lot size, setbacks, parking, dwelling size, duplexes, ADUs), overriding local discretion.

The state package is opposed by planning professionals, the Michigan Township Association, and Michigan Municipal League, largely on grounds that it removes local control without addressing infrastructure funding or affordability.

Potential local impacts of the state package include smaller lots, duplexes/ADUs in single-family areas, reduced parking/setbacks, more administrative (less public) review, and possible conflicts with Farmington Hills' Master Plan.

Land Division Act (PA 58 of 2025), effective March 2027, allows up to 10 parcels (vs. 4 previously) from the first 10 acres of a parent parcel via administrative review, though local zoning standards still apply.

Land Division Act impact on Farmington Hills is expected to be limited since the city is largely built out, but it could affect large residential lots, older acreage parcels, and infill requests.

Single-stair construction bills (HB 5570/5571) have passed both chambers and await gubernatorial action; they'd allow buildings up to six stories to use one protected stairway under strict fire-safety conditions.

Single-stair rules are governed by the State Building Code, not local zoning — the city would retain control over height, density, parking, setbacks, and site access.

Mayor Rich characterized the overall theme of this legislative activity as multiple overlapping federal and state actions are pushing toward increased housing production and reduced regulatory barriers, with varying degrees of preemption — ranging from incentive-based (federal) to mandatory statewide standards (MI zoning package) — creating both opportunities and control challenges for Farmington Hills' planning authority.

PRESENTATION OF THE ZONING ORDINANCE UPDATES

Planning Consultant Ben Carlisle of Carlisle Wortman and Associates presented a proposed multi-year zoning ordinance update work program. He noted the effort is structured as a coordinated series of targeted amendments rather than a single comprehensive rewrite, following direction from City Council. The purpose of the joint session was to confirm that the proposed amendments are in the correct order, that anticipated timeframes are reasonable, and that no key priorities have been overlooked.

Mr. Carlisle emphasized the value of the joint board format, noting that each body brings a distinct perspective: Council provides overall policy direction and adopts ordinances; the Planning Commission tests concepts, conducts public hearings, and makes formal recommendations; the ZBA identifies recurring friction points through variance cases; and staff and consultants coordinate drafting, administration, and legal review.

Proposed Work Program

- 1. Site Plan Review Process Update (Target: October 2026)** The most immediate priority is a comprehensive update to the site plan review process, which is currently distributed primarily across engineering standards rather than consolidated in the zoning ordinance. The amendment will establish a clear, consistent process for application submittal, concurrent departmental review, approval, and amendment. The stated goal is a process

that is "fast, fair, and predictable"; reducing incomplete applications, repeated review cycles, and avoidable delays, while ensuring that similar projects are treated consistently. Mr. Carlisle noted that unclear or inconsistently applied standards are among the most significant barriers to development and expressed hope that clarifying the process would allow the Planning Commission to focus on substantive land use and design policy rather than administrative deficiencies.

- 2. Zoning Ordinance Reorganization (Target: approximately one year following scope approval)** The second initiative is a structural reorganization of the zoning ordinance — not a comprehensive rewrite of standards — intended to eliminate redundancies, streamline provisions, and make the document easier for staff to administer and for applicants and residents to understand. Mr. Carlisle noted that some current provisions are difficult to interpret even for experienced practitioners, and that the fragmented structure makes amendments cumbersome, sometimes requiring changes in five separate locations. A scope for this work was noted as pending City approval.
- 3. Grand River Corridor Zoning Framework (Starting late 2026, continuing into 2027)** The third near-term initiative is a zoning framework for the Grand River Corridor, translating the completed market study and Master Plan recommendations into actionable ordinance language. Mr. Carlisle acknowledged the corridor's complexity: small lots, existing nonconformities, and older building stock that frequently conflicts with current standards. The goal is to reduce barriers to redevelopment and create a more predictable framework for both public and private investment, while not penalizing property owners for making improvements. He cautioned that redevelopment along corridors is inherently incremental and should not be expected to occur rapidly.
- 4. PUD Ordinance Review (2027)** The PUD ordinance is slated for review in 2027. Mr. Carlisle expressed the view that PUDs should be used sparingly — as a scalpel rather than a hammer — and that a well-written base ordinance for key corridors should reduce the need to rely on PUDs to facilitate development. He noted that most developers actively prefer to avoid the PUD process due to the risk and uncertainty it introduces.
- 5. 12 Mile Road and Orchard Lake Road Corridor Zoning (Mid-to-Late 2027)** A corridor-specific zoning framework for 12 Mile and Orchard Lake Roads is planned for the second half of 2027, following completion of the associated market study and informed by lessons learned from the Grand River process.
- 6. Master Plan Implementation (Running concurrently throughout)** Master Plan recommendations will be addressed on a rolling basis, woven into each of the above initiatives as appropriate. Some recommendations may require standalone amendments not captured within any specific project.

Discussion

Councilmember Bridges asked about the anticipated effect of PUD ordinance changes on the volume of PUD applications and inquired about the standard for community benefit. Mr. Carlisle responded that clearer base ordinance standards — particularly on the identified corridors — should reduce the need for PUDs, and that community benefits should always be proportional to the degree of relief requested, evaluated on a case-by-case basis.

Councilmember Bridges also raised the challenges of the Orchard Lake Road corridor, including speed, long-term vacancies and aesthetics. Mr. Carlisle acknowledged that zoning alone cannot create a market but can certainly suppress one and encouraged a dual approach of code enforcement and active facilitation of redevelopment.

Economic Development Director Brockway provided context for Grand River's prioritization, noting active momentum including an approved public mural program with sites selected, a streetscape plan underway, a \$30,000 facade improvement grant specific to the corridor, and a \$200,000 brownfield redevelopment grant. She also noted that significant foundational zoning amendments had already been completed along the 12 Mile corridor, making the Grand River work the more pressing next step.

Mayor Rich invited members to indicate their support for the proposed work program order; no members signaled disagreement or concern, and the body indicated consensus to proceed as presented.

DISCUSSION OF ZONING BOARD OF APPEALS TRENDS IN VARIANCE REQUESTS

City Planner Diane Mulville-Friel presented findings from a staff analysis of ZBA cases spanning January 2023 through June 2026, covering 26 meetings and 120 total variance requests. The purpose was to identify recurring patterns that may signal underlying ordinance issues warranting amendment, rather than evaluating individual cases in isolation.

Key Findings:

- Residential requests accounted for 57% of cases; nonresidential/commercial for approximately 43%.
- 95% of all requests were dimensional variances (setbacks, heights, etc.); only 5% were use variances.
- Side and rear setbacks represented the single largest category of requests, with 19 and 16 cases respectively.
- Accessory structures generated 11 requests, with 8 of those involving height variances.
- On the commercial side, dumpster placement and facade transparency requirements led the pack, typically associated with redevelopment of older properties.
- Multiple variances per property were common in commercial cases, with some properties presenting as many as eight or nine variance requests simultaneously due to nonconforming conditions on older sites.

Potential Ordinance Amendments Identified:

For residential properties, staff identified three areas for potential amendment: (1) revising accessory building height limits and allowing larger accessory structures on properties of one to two or more acres; (2) updating fence standards, including reconciling the conflict between the building code's four-foot pool barrier requirement and the zoning ordinance's three-foot side yard fence limit, and potentially allowing decorative fencing in front yards; and (3) establishing an administrative approval pathway for minor setback encroachments, reducing the need for formal ZBA hearings on small deviations.

For commercial and nonresidential properties, staff identified potential amendments related to flexible shared loading/unloading zones, more flexible dumpster enclosure placement (potentially allowing screened front-yard placement), adaptive reuse standards for older properties, and an administrative track for minor deviations from setback requirements.

Discussion

ZBA Member O'Connell (referencing the size-of-lot issue) agreed that larger lots were sometimes held to identical standards as small lots despite the absence of any meaningful impact on neighbors and expressed support for tiered standards based on lot size.

ZBA Chair Dan Irvin confirmed the findings were consistent with the board's experience and raised concerns about the burden placed on residents and businesses for what he characterized as minor or technical variances. He expressed support for expanding administrative authority to handle genuinely minor matters, noting the cost — both financial and in time — to applicants navigating the full variance process.

ZBA Member Roll Call noted that removing attached garages from the calculation for accessory structure size limits would resolve a significant portion of the cases the board sees.

Attorney Joppich acknowledged the legal constraints on modifying the ZBA's jurisdiction under the Zoning Enabling Act but expressed openness to exploring creative solutions within the law, including ordinance amendments that reduce the requirement of a formal variance.

Mayor Rich noted feedback received from developers at a Grand River Corridor Improvement Authority session who described significant frustration with the difficulty of doing business in Farmington Hills and characterizing that feedback as a motivating force behind the current reform effort.

DISCUSSION ON ZONING ENFORCEMENT

Zoning Supervisor David Curry presented a summary of zoning enforcement activity and goals for the division.

Six-Month Activity Summary:

The division handled 782 enforcement cases over the prior six months, with tall grass and vegetation violations representing the highest volume of complaints, closely followed by trash

and blight at approximately 40% of caseload. Additional case types included junk vehicles, property maintenance issues, nuisance complaints, and complex multi-violation cases. The division is staffed by four zoning inspectors, one clerk, and the supervisor.

Operational Improvements Underway:

- Transition to electronic citation issuance, enabling direct transmission to the court and reducing administrative processing time.
- Field capability to update enforcement case management (BS&A) in real time.
- Implementation of portable radio communications for inspector safety in the field.
- Updated vehicle and staff identification (city logo and "Code Enforcement" labeling on vehicles and uniforms) to improve resident recognition and professionalism.

Goals for the Next Six Months:

Supervisor Curry outlined the following priorities: improving initial response time to complaints (target of same-day or next-day initial investigation); expanding proactive neighborhood inspections, particularly heading into fall; increasing voluntary compliance through education and resident communication; and enhancing coordination with Building, Planning, Fire, Police, and Public Works. He noted a cultural shift he has implemented within the division away from a citation-first approach toward a compliance-and-education-oriented model.

Discussion

Councilmember Dwyer mentioned Mr. Curry's background and asked about his experience identifying staff conduct issues. Supervisor Curry acknowledged that upon arrival he observed tendencies within the division toward issuing citations without first attempting dialogue and confirmed he had redirected that approach toward resident engagement and voluntary compliance.

Councilmember Bridges requested that Supervisor Curry develop a proactive process for recurring commercial pothole and maintenance issues, particularly along Orchard Lake Road, and Grand River noting the post office on 12 Mile Road as an ongoing example. Supervisor Curry confirmed awareness of that situation and committed to developing location-specific tracking for known recurring problem areas.

Councilmember Bridges also asked about the high volume of multiple-violation cases. Supervisor Curry explained that "multiple violations" is a catch-all category used when a single property presents several concurrent issues (e.g., tall grass combined with junk vehicles and peeling paint), and that such cases are handled with a consolidated warning letter identifying all violations.

Councilmember Aldred raised the question of metrics and accountability, encouraging Supervisor Curry to establish measurable targets for response time and case management so that progress could be assessed at future reporting intervals. Supervisor Curry acknowledged the challenge given the variable duration of enforcement cases but confirmed his intent to use

the six-month mark as a benchmark for evaluating progress and would work toward more defined targets.

Councilmember Boleware raised the condition of commercial properties along Orchard Lake Road between 12 and 13 Mile Roads, noting deteriorating landscaping, cracked pavement with weed growth, and an overall appearance inconsistent with the city's marketing of the International Mile corridor. She noted that a complaint she filed had resulted in five properties receiving notices, with compliance achieved, but expressed the need for sustained attention. Supervisor Curry confirmed the follow-up and acknowledged the need for ongoing monitoring of the corridor.

Planning Commissioner Grant asked for clarification on the relationship between city ordinances and HOA rules. Supervisor Curry explained that the division enforces city zoning ordinances only; HOA enforcement is a civil matter separate from municipal code enforcement, and HOA rules may be more restrictive than city ordinances without constituting a code enforcement matter.

Mayor Rich asked about rentals and enforcement coordination and about seniors with zoning violations and if there is any assistance available.

COUNCIL/COMMISSIONER ROUND TABLE

Mayor Rich invited each member of the Council, Planning Commission, and ZBA to offer closing remarks.

Members shared appreciation for the informative joint format meeting, showed strong support for reviewing prescriptive residential provisions, and expressed support for staff-level authority over smaller cases. They emphasized the importance of consistency and fairness in any newly granted administrative flexibility, expressed enthusiasm for the direction of the work and its potential to drive development and community improvement.

Acting City Manager Mondora thanked participants for their feedback, noted the substantial pipeline of work ahead across the Master Plan, market study recommendations, and zoning audit, and committed to reporting progress along the way.

Mayor Rich closed the roundtable by returning to the legislative landscape described at the opening, noting that many of the ordinance provisions under discussion would soon be subject to state and federal preemption regardless of local action, and encouraged all bodies to remain engaged as the regulatory environment continues to evolve rapidly.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Eunice Jeffries, Chair of the Economic Development Corporation, expressed enthusiasm for the direction of the discussions, noting that zoning, code enforcement, and development process reform are directly tied to economic development outcomes. She endorsed the concept of

empowering staff to make timely decisions within defined thresholds, noting that overly restrictive administrative processes are demoralizing both for residents and for staff.

Cassie Clark, EDC board member committed to sharing the meeting's themes and takeaways with the full EDC, noting that she works extensively in Farmington Hills though residing elsewhere, affirmed her commitment to advancing the city as a desirable place to live, work, and do business.

ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned at 7:25pm.