

**MINUTES
PLANNING COMMISSION SPECIAL MEETING
CITY OF FARMINGTON HILLS
COMMUNITY ROOM
MARCH 20, 2025, 6:00 P.M.**

CALL MEETING TO ORDER

The Planning Commission Special Meeting was called to order by Chair Trafelet at 6:00pm.

ROLL CALL

Commissioners present: Aspinall, Brickner, Countegan, Grant, Mantey, Stimson, Trafelet, Varga, Ware

Commissioners Absent: None

Others Present: City Planner Perdonik, City Attorney Schultz, Planning Consultants Upfal and Tangari

APPROVAL OF AGENDA

MOTION by Stimson, support by Grant, to approve the agenda as published.

Motion passed unanimously by voice vote.

SPECIAL MEETING

A. DISCUSSION OF DRAFT ZONING TEXT AMENDMENT 5, 2024, TO INTRODUCE DESIGN STANDARDS AND REVISE PLANNED UNIT DEVELOPMENT PROVISIONS

Planning Consultants Upfal and Tangari led a discussion based on the Giffels Webster February 13, 2025 memorandums *Post-Master Plan Amendments: Design Standards*.

The intention of the standards was to guide developers toward high-quality design while leaving room for architectural creativity. The standards were not prescriptive but provided minimum expectations related to building design.

The memorandum was organized into five categories typically addressed by communities through design standards, and each category as described in the memo was reviewed in some detail:

1. Building materials
2. Fenestration
3. Architectural scale and breaks
4. Roof design
5. Entrance features

A purpose and intent statement was intended to support the standards by introducing the themes of:

1. Enhance aesthetic quality,
2. Promote the use of building materials that are durable and resilient
3. Support economic development
4. Maintain a harmonious relationship between adjacent land uses
5. Encourage pedestrian-friendly design elements

An applicability section clarified which types of development would need to comply with the standards:

- All *new construction* must comply.
- *Expansions* exceeding 50% of gross floor area or indoor seating must bring all public-facing facades into compliance.
- *Smaller expansions* (under 50%) would not need to update existing facades.
- *Exemptions* were suggested for single- and two-family dwellings. In industrial (LI-1) districts, only buildings fronting major thoroughfares would be subject to the standards.

Commissioners were asked to consider whether the 50% threshold was appropriate and to potentially differentiate between elements that should always be brought into compliance and those that should not.

Building material standards are separated into two categories, distinguishing between primary and accent materials. The memorandum provided a suggested list of both types of materials, and also suggested that at least 60% of facades, excluding windows and doors, shall be comprised of primary building materials.

Commission discussion

Question: Why is this issue being raised, particularly in light of the city's long-standing absence of such regulations and its largely developed condition?

In response, City Planner Perdonik and the consultants noted that:

- There has been ongoing interest in establishing design standards, with interest and direction indicated from both City Council and the City Manager.
- Many surrounding communities have already adopted commercial design standards or form-based codes. The proposed standards aim to bring the city in line with regional practices while maintaining flexibility for developers.
- Many of the proposed standards are intended as guidelines rather than mandatory requirements.

Several perspectives were shared by Planning Commission members regarding the overall intent and impact of adopting design standards.

- Commissioners expressed support for the potential of these standards to guide redevelopment and bring consistency and visual improvement to older properties.
- However, some Commissioners cautioned against imposing rigid or sterile uniformity across building districts and styles.
- On the other hand, although the proposed language was not overly restrictive and would allow for quality development, it also lacked the strength to prevent undesirable building outcomes.
- Design standards in general had been under discussion as part of the master plan process and were aligned with the long-standing goal of ensuring accountability in development quality.
- The proposed standards, unlike some more prescriptive ordinances, were drafted to be administered in-house by planning staff without the need for external architectural review.

- Nearly every development proposal in the recent past would likely have been impacted by the proposed standards, particularly new construction and projects coming through the Planned Unit Development process. While the PUD process already allows for some architectural review, these proposed standards would apply more broadly and give more direction.
- The intent is to apply the standards consistently to new development while allowing flexibility for rehabilitations. The ordinance is designed to avoid creating unreasonable barriers for redevelopment and to prevent older properties from becoming stagnant or blighted due to overly burdensome design expectations.
- There was discussion relative to the role of government in regulating design.
 - Local government is not always well-positioned to dictate design outcomes, and the free market has historically driven successful development in the city. From this perspective, traditional zoning regulations that focus on use, height, density, and infrastructure have proven effective without the need for additional design oversight.
 - Codifying design standards might also create difficulties in adapting to evolving trends and materials.
 - Attorney Schultz provided an overview of regulatory frameworks related to materials and design:
 - Building material regulations are common and legally defensible when they serve a legitimate governmental purpose, such as structural integrity, durability, or aesthetics.
 - While it is acceptable to regulate materials, more detailed architectural requirements (e.g., building articulation, window types, façade breaks) often appear in overlay districts or corridor-specific guidelines rather than citywide ordinances.
 - He emphasized the importance of tailoring design regulations to specific areas to avoid overly burdensome or arbitrary citywide mandates.
- Planning Consultant Upfal emphasized that the draft design standards incorporate numerous waiver provisions, providing flexibility to both developers and the Planning Commission. This built-in flexibility allows developers to propose alternatives, while still giving the Planning Commission the authority to evaluate and push back on design elements that may not align with community expectations. She also noted that the proposed 60/40 ratio of primary to secondary building materials is more lenient than many other communities, which often require a stricter 75/25 or greater ratio in favor of primary materials.
- Planning Consultant Tangari stated that establishing a baseline set of expectations increases the likelihood of receiving better quality proposals.
- Commissioners raised the question of banning specific materials like EIFS (Exterior Insulation Finishing Systems). Different communities regulated EIFS in different ways, such as regulating the percentage of EIFS which can be used, the height at which it can be used, etc. Northville Township and Canton ban the use of EIFS entirely, based on the idea that allowing the use of low quality materials negatively affects the community's appearance and property values.
- Commissioners pointed out the recurring issue of applicants presenting high-quality renderings initially, only to return with substantially diminished versions. The lack of formal design guidelines currently leaves the Commission with no authority to reject projects based on aesthetics or diminished quality unaligned with city standards.

Discussion of proposed standards

The Commission discussed specific standards in the draft language.

- Should entrances always be required on the front façade? Certain commercial developments were built around the concept that people entered from a rear parking lot, after entering the site. Certain small offices also had entrances facing inward, away from the street. While street entrances aligned with the Master Plan goal of creating a walkable city, the standards should acknowledge those times when it was appropriate not to have entrances facing the street.
- Fenestration requirements could be refined to better reflect the needs and of the business community and not apply blanket requirements without taking into account variations of design.
- Considerations were raised regarding how to apply the standards to industrial and warehouse buildings. While industrial properties were generally exempt—except where fronting major thoroughfares—discussion centered on balancing aesthetic expectations with the functional nature of such structures. Even utilitarian uses, such as storage facilities, can meet design standards creatively through use of varied forms and treatments.

Summary

There was general—though not unanimous—support for developing design guidelines or standards. This support was tempered by concerns about over-regulation, subjectivity, and enforceability.

One perspective emphasized the need for the city to remain attractive to investment. Overly restrictive regulations could deter developers, potentially reducing opportunities to expand the tax base and fund essential public services.

The alternative viewpoint argued that the proposed standards were not excessively prescriptive but aimed to establish development accountability. The standards seek to prevent aesthetic decline, especially given that modern developers may not adhere to past standards of durability and aesthetics.

Moving forward

The consultants will incorporate tonight’s discussion in the draft *design standards* language.

PUBLIC COMMENT

None.

COMMISSIONER COMMENTS

None.

ADJOURNMENT

MOTION by Brickner, support by Grant, to adjourn.

Motion carried unanimously by voice vote.

The meeting adjourned at 7:22pm.

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Respectfully Submitted,
Kristen Aspinall
Planning Commission Secretary

Approved 04-17-2025

/cem