

VAN BUREN COUNTY PLANNING COMMISSION

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Van Buren County Planning Commission County Administration Building – 219 E Paw Paw St, Suite 201

October 9, 2024 - Meeting Minutes

1. **Call to Order & Attendance** - The meeting was called to order at 6:30 p.m. by Chairperson Alyssa Hosbein.
Present: Alyssa Hosbein, Scott Cedarquist, Jan Petersen, Kurt Doroh, Barbara Rose, Will Pugsley, Tom Motycka, Jan Peterson, and Nick Carlson. **Absent:** Tony Hemenway and Celinda Gilmore. **Guests:** Lisa Ransler
2. **Approval of Agenda** - Motion by Motycka, supported by Rose, to approve the agenda. Motion approved unanimously.
3. **Approval of Minutes** - Motion by Doroh, supported by Motycka, to approve the minutes from the August 28, 2024, meeting. Motion approved unanimously.
4. **Public Comment** - None.
5. **Public Hearing - Van Buren County's Land Preservation Board's Proposed Amendments to Land Preservation Ordinance**
 - a. The Chairperson opened the public hearing at 6:34 pm and staff provided an overview of the proposed amendments to the ordinance. The changes primarily focused on updating references to the Michigan Planning Enabling Act, adjusting the point-scoring system to prioritize the preservation of land with higher development potential, and improving clarity in the ordinance text to streamline future applications.
 - b. The floor was opened to public comments, but no public comments were received.
 - c. A motion to close the public hearing was made at 6:40 pm by Motycka, supported by Doroh. Motion approved unanimously.
 - d. During a brief discussion, Cedarquist commended the Land Preservation Board for their work on the amendments, noting that it reflected the county's ongoing commitment to sustainable development and conservation. Motycka, supported by Peterson, made a motion to recommend approval of the proposed amendments to the Van Buren County Board of Commissioners. Motion approved unanimously.

Before moving to the next agenda item, Petersen took a moment to thank the members of the Land Preservation Board and county staff for their diligent work on updating the ordinance. She acknowledged the effort put into incorporating community feedback and ensuring the ordinance remained relevant and effective. "We appreciate the dedication and expertise of everyone involved," she said. "These amendments will help us better manage our resources and protect the natural beauty of our county for future generations."
6. **Reports**
 - a. **County Board of Commission (BOC)** - Commissioner Doroh reported that the County recently received the medical examiner's annual report and finalizing year-end budget items. Doroh also commented that

Palisades recently received the \$1.3 Billion loan from the Federal government to assist in restarting the plant.

- b. **Land Preservation Board (LPB)** - The LPB's next meeting is scheduled for November 13, 2024. They are preparing for the upcoming grant application cycle, aiming to secure additional funding for land preservation.
 - c. **Southwest Michigan Planning Commission (SWMPC)** - No meeting held since the last report.
 - d. **Local Visits Report – Doroh** reported that the City of Bangor now has a Parks and Recreation Board, **Motycka** reported that Decatur is working on code enforcement, and **Peterson** reported that she would be attending a Strong Towns housing presentation.
 - e. **Staff Report** - Ransler provided updates on ongoing projects, including the Housing Target Market Analysis and the emphasis on revised zoning to create additional housing options.
7. **Unfinished Business - Planning Commission By-Laws** - A review of the by-laws was completed, and updates were recommended, including clarifications on conflict-of-interest provisions and term limits for members. Motycka supported by Petersen, moved to recommend approval of the revised by-laws to the Van Buren County Commission. Motion approved unanimously.
8. **New Business**
- a. **Alamo Township Notice of Master Plan Amendment**- The Commission received the notice for the Master Plan review and acknowledged receipt from Alamo Township.
 - b. **Proposed Columbia Township Zoning Ordinance Accessory Unit Text Amendment** - A motion by Petersen, supported by Motycka, to not concur with the proposed Columbia Township Text Amendment was approved unanimously.

While the Planning Commission agreed that the proposed amendment would increase flexibility for property owners, allowing them to build accessory structures without a lengthy approval process there is concern of a potential conflict with the Township Master Plan, which emphasizes maintaining the rural and residential character of the community. Reducing oversight might lead to developments that do not align with the broader vision of preserving neighborhood integrity.

Planning Commission members also understand that the proposed amendment establishes clear regulations, including specific size and height limits, ownership, and setback requirements so as to simplify the zoning process, however, there is concern the existing Special Use Permit (SUP) process ensures transparency by notifying neighboring property owners and allowing for community feedback. Removing this step could lead to a lack of community engagement and potential disputes over new developments.

The proposed amendment can be seen as a way to encourage the development of vacant lots, reducing blight and improving the township's appearance to help revitalize underused spaces and contribute positively to the township's aesthetics, but there is also concern that allowing accessory buildings without an SUP risks disrupting the character of residential and agricultural zones, potentially leading to a decline in the unique qualities of certain areas, particularly near sensitive locations like lakefronts.

The Planning Commission recognizes that the amendment aligns with the Master Plan's goal to support growth, particularly in residential and agricultural areas, by enabling owners to use their property for personal storage and other non-commercial uses. Yet, there are concerns that removing the SUP requirement may inadvertently lead to developments that reduce property values, especially in high-visibility or sensitive areas, such as resort districts or lakefront properties. The current process acts as a safeguard to prevent such issues.

Overall, while there is agreement on the benefits of flexibility and clearer regulations, there remains significant concern about the implications for community character, transparency, and alignment with long-term planning goals.

- c. **Proposed South Haven Township Zoning Ordinance Rezoning Amendment** - The Commission discussed the details on the proposed zoning amendments for 73 ½ Street and 01821 73rd Street in South Haven and voted to concur with both of the proposed amendments. Motion by Pugsley, supported by Hemenway, approved unanimously.

The rezoning requests were recommended for approval, citing alignment with surrounding land uses, community support, and consistency with the township's Future Land Use Map. These changes allow local businesses to expand and repurpose properties while maintaining the area's commercial focus.

- 9. **Adjournment** – The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 7:25 p.m.

Next Meeting: October 23, 2024, at 6:30 p.m.