

Dear Neighbors,

The temperature has dropped. Today I went to the Farmer's Market and bought plums to make a plum kuchen for Labor Day, some late sweet corn, and some early snow apples. While others are crowding the new stadium to watch a game, I wanted to get this update out to you.

I hate seeing the end of summer.

The City Council meets on Tuesday, September 7th. There are a number of items on the agenda and others on the horizon.

On the agenda:

A Couch ban

This is the second reading and vote on the proposed ban.

The purpose behind the ban on upholstered furniture being used outside is to protect lives and prevent property loss. Upholstered furniture made for indoor use, like couches and chairs, is specially treated with fire retardants. However, once this furniture is exposed to rain and snow for an extended period of time – even if protected by a porch – the retardants deteriorate. I suspect retardants deteriorate over time, anyway, but not nearly as quickly inside.

In 2004, the Council considered banning couches on porches, but tabled the proposed ordinance when it faced opposition from both students and landlords. This past spring, a resident of a rental house died in a house fire that started on a trash container and spread to a couch on the porch – and the fire quickly blocked the door through which the resident tried to run.

The proposed ordinance places the burden of enforcement on the property owner or tenant. It provides exemptions for furniture that is being sold at yard sales – but it has to be for sale, not just placed on the lawn and left there. The penalty is \$1000 plus costs for removal of the furniture.

If you have concerns about this proposed ban, please let me know.

PACE support

You may not have heard about PACE legislation, but this proposed Federal and State program could be something that changes your life. On the agenda is a resolution of support for legislation that will create Property Assessed Clean Energy (PACE) Financing Districts.

So, what the heck is this?

If you've ever looked at the cost of putting in a new furnace or an on-demand, tankless water heater, you know that some significant energy-saving devices require a lot of up-front expense but take a long time to realize the savings in energy. While it all adds up in the end, it can take years for the investment in improving your home's energy use to result in equivalent dollars in your pocket. For some of us, the up-front costs are just too high, especially if we don't expect to be in our homes for many more years.

Enter PACE. PACE Financing Districts would provide funds to homeowners to improve the energy efficiency of their homes but would allow them to pay those funds back through monthly payments – as if through a mortgage. The debt would be on the property, and if the house were sold before the debt was completely paid back, would become part of the sales price. The new homeowner would benefit from the improvements, and would continue to make the payments.

PACE offers homeowners an opportunity to make real long-term investments in their homes, no matter how long they stay in them. Right now, Michigan's House has passed PACE, and it's moving on to the Senate. This resolution of support urges the Senate to pass PACE, as well.

Do you think PACE is a good idea for you and your neighbors?

Fire trucks

We're barely into the 2011 budget, but Tuesday we're considering amending the budget to purchase two (2) new fire trucks.

Why didn't the City plan for this purchase? Actually, this purchase is part of a plan. These trucks replace two other trucks – both purchased in 1991. One has 9,500 hours in operation; the other has 9,700 hours in operation. In addition to the two units being replaced, a backup ladder truck is being removed from service. The plan includes standardizing the equipment within Ann Arbor and with other local fire departments, so training and operation across stations is easier while improving efficiency. Ypsilanti City, Ypsilanti Township, and Ann Arbor Township all use Crimson Fire fire equipment; these fire trucks would be the third and fourth pieces of equipment by Crimson Fire in operation in Ann Arbor.

What do these trucks cost? Each truck will cost the City \$365,340.00 – the total purchase price is \$730,680.00. If these trucks last about the same length of time as the last two, the City will pay about \$38.00 a service hour for each truck. At the same time, the City anticipates saving significant amounts of greenhouse gasses, as these new trucks are rated at near-zero emissions. Because Ypsilanti City recently purchased similar equipment through competitive bids, the City was able to use their bidding process. This mechanism of piggy-backing on already bid purchases by other governmental units is timesaving, but the vendors must otherwise be properly evaluated. Crimson Fire has passed all the evaluations.

Where does the money come from? The Fleet Services Fund set aside money for this purchase.

Area, Height and Placement – a redefining of zoning

I know some of you miss a daily paper that would keep you reminded of changes in Ann Arbor – real and potential. It's hard to keep up and difficult to prioritize our attention. In the near term, the rezoning and revamping of master plans that Ann Arbor has undertaken during the last few years may not matter. But these plans have a way of sneaking up on me, at least, if I look away too long.

Area, Height and Placement – this seems like an odd listing of qualities. However, the City is prepared, this Tuesday, to take up the issue of redefining new construction for all **commercial, industrial, office, manufacturing and multi-family zoned lots outside the DDA.**

First, some definitions:

Area refers to the buildable area allowed. Often, this is a minimum percentage of the lot that can be used for building (for instance, in some zones, only 40% of the lot can be used, no matter what the setbacks are).

Height refers to the number of feet a building can be built. This varies according to zoning. In some cases, the height is variable, depending upon other factors, such as whether underground parking is part of the project.

Placement refers to the location on the lot. In the new zoning the City will consider, the setbacks are variable, encourage building closer to the street and further away from abutting residential, and become

larger if a building is taller. So, if a developer plans a four-story building, the setbacks are larger than for a one-story building.

The redefinition also adds two new zoning categories of residential on smaller lots: R1E Single Family (4000 square foot lots, 3 foot side setbacks, 15 foot front setbacks) and R4E Multi-Family(580 square feet per dwelling unit, 10 foot side setbacks, 15 foot minimum/ 40 foot maximum front setbacks).

If this redefinition of zoning passes, what can you expect to see?

Developers will be encouraged to build new construction to away from residential lots and toward the street. Parking requirements will be redefined and required to be beside, behind or below new construction instead of in front of it. Developers of new multi-family residential construction with underground parking will be allowed to build taller buildings (up to 45 feet) in R4A and R4B zoned areas.

Owners of existing buildings will be allowed to build additions without needing zoning variances. This is important, as seeking variances can delay construction and add costs.

Is this redefinition good for Ann Arbor?

I grew up in a little town about the same age as Ann Arbor, but one that never had a university or major industry. It didn't become the county seat (although it tried to!) and, as a result, its hey-day was reached just after the Civil War. Like many 19th Century towns – including Ann Arbor – it started out with a grid of streets, mixed-use buildings (residences and businesses combined), a pedestrian-friendly downtown with businesses close to sidewalks, clearly defined business entrances, and a central civic area (the town square for my home town; the old Court House square for Ann Arbor, long since gone). By the early 20th Century, my home town was busy laying rails for an interurban rail line to run between communities. People rode the interurban to Cincinnati, Chicago and Indianapolis, with stops in-between. Those were the days.

The lessons of the 19th Century are being replayed in this redefinition of our zoning. The goals are to encourage pedestrian and mass-transit friendly construction (new buildings are closer to the street and further away from any residences) while reducing emphasis on private transportation (parking requirements are reduced; parking is moved to beside, behind or beneath new construction). New residential can be smaller and closer together (those 19th Century houses and lots were often quite small).

There are a lot of small, incremental changes in this proposed ordinance. Most won't affect you directly, but can affect you indirectly. Please ask me questions about the overall affect for Ann Arbor or for your neighborhood. I have maps to share and lots of details.

Panhandling

Last Tuesday, August 31st, I attended a meeting of the Downtown Area Citizens' Advisory Council, at their request (I got the call about 30 minutes before the meeting started!). The topic was downtown safety, including panhandling and crime; Chief Barnett Jones and Deputy Chief John Seto were the invited speakers.

What's the problem?

The people attending the meeting described their concerns about panhandlers and their sense of security in the downtown area. They noted that panhandlers have become more aggressive, blocking the sidewalk, approaching people seated at the outdoor tables, and nearly blocking doorways. In addition, there are people sleeping behind buildings, some people hanging out in parking structures (or there have been) and a bit more property crime.

The Chief outlined the constraints on the police force (i.e., not enough police to meet every possible demand; a tendency to react to events rather than anticipate them) and provided an update on current crime statistics (virtually unchanged in most indicators from the past two years, with the exception of criminal sexual conduct, which he anticipates will be up this year over last, and which was up last year over the year before – it increases when the students come back each fall).

What are the possible solutions?

Chief Jones pointed out that Ann Arbor is noted for being liberal, and this carries over to the way it treats those without homes and employment. Right now, he told those at the meeting, there are people coming to Ann Arbor who are willing to take advantage of our good intentions.

Susan Pollay, DDA Executive Director, reminded everyone that in 2001 when there were many more police, the problem with panhandlers on State Street and Liberty was severe. People were sleeping on the sidewalks and aggressive panhandling was so bad that people were just staying away from downtown. The City established a task force to find ways to address the issue – not just by punishing panhandlers, but also by encouraging Ann Arbor residents to give their support to specific non-profits. The City re-wrote one of the nuisance ordinances to provide the police with better guidance, but also created an outreach campaign involving Dawn Farm and other organizations to help get some of the homeless into treatment and off the streets.

Is this just about downtown?

If we think panhandling and the homeless are issues just for downtown, we're making a mistake. Anyone coming off a freeway exit this past year probably saw someone with a sign asking for money. People in my neighborhood were approached by someone with a gas can, asking for change to buy gas. Others had someone knock on their door, asking for spare change. Several parks had homeless people sleeping in them; the bridges near the UM hospital have a semi-permanent encampment.

I've agreed to ask the City Council to re-establish the task force to look at panhandling, loitering, and proper allocation of police resources. I hope to bring a resolution forward to Council on September 20th.

Sidewalk repair program

The five-year sidewalk repair program started in 2006 and is finishing this year. Some of you will have received reminders from the City to complete work that didn't get done in 2006 – 2009.

Nothing in life is perfect. If you received a letter from the City notifying you that you need to fix your sidewalk, and you believe you've received this letter in error – or you believe you never received the first letter – please let me know. If you have other concerns with this program, I'd like to hear those, as well.

Leaf pick up

This year the City won't be picking up leaves from the street. You can rake and bag your leaves and have them picked up with the compost, or put them in your compost cart. (I'd suggest doing this every week.)

There is a limit to how many bags the City will pick up at any one time. The City will continue to pick up compost – and your leaves – through November.

If you don't have time, or energy, to rake, there is an option, but it's not available from the City. I read about it in AnnArbor.com.

For about the same price as two compost carts at the city's discounted price, Arbor Environmental Alliance will schedule up to three curbside leaf collections between October 15th and December 15th for \$25 per pickup. All leaves will be composted and trees planted to offset the carbon cost of this program.

For more information on this program and on AEA and what more they do for the environment, visit their website at www.arboreenvironmentalalliance.com.

If this interests you, I recommend researching the organization. (I read the website after I read the article, so this is all I know.)

As always, I go on a bit long. I'm sorry if there's too much to take in.

Other issues on the horizon:

Tuesday, September 21, 7:00 pm Planning Commission, City Council Chambers

Fuller Road Station Phase 1 Public Project Review

Medical Marijuana Dispensaries and Home Occupations

Feel free to share this with your neighbors and friends,

Thank you,

Sabra

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