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City Hall, Get Me Re-Write!

Innovative Grand Rapids designs require new development playbook

By [Andy Guy](#)

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GRAND RAPIDS — Eight months after adopting a nationally applauded plan to create what Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm calls a “cool” city, the City of Grand Rapids is now taking the next step towards creating a choice urban lifestyle: Rewriting its basic code of conduct for construction and land use.

But as officials gear up to revise the local development rules, and urban revival moves to the forefront of Michigan’s political agenda, city leaders are colliding with a fact of current economic life — budget constraints. Rewriting zoning and building codes costs money, particularly when it involves outside consultants, many people, and neighboring governments. And the highly innovative model code many area developers and leaders are most interested in — called SmartCode — would require more staff and financial resources than the city currently has available.

Whether Grand Rapids will secure the funding to completely rework the current development code remains a question. But those familiar with the local law are certain of one thing: the city needs to do something soon. They point to projects like East Hills Center, currently rising at the corner of Diamond Street and Lake Drive, to make their point.

Troubled Dreams

The Center will transform a vacant and polluted piece of property in downtown Grand Rapids into a hub for new businesses, pedestrians, and environmental responsibility. With rain-capturing gardens on both the roof and the ground, it will be the first built-out site in the city that does not discharge dirty storm water into sewers. The project, a partnership with local residents and foundations, will blend with the historic design character of its East Hills neighborhood.

But getting the project’s beneficial and innovative plans approved was no easy stroll through city hall. It failed to conform to many city building and zoning codes, forcing its developer, Guy Bazzani, to officially request exemptions from obsolete rules concerning, among other things, parking spaces and building setbacks.

“It seems like we need a variance every time we want to do something that’s encouraged by the city’s new Master Plan,” Mr. Bazzani said. “The request generally is approved. But the process can take two months. The city’s current zoning law doesn’t resemble its new Master Plan in any way, shape, or form.”

Catch-up Time

Grand Rapids invested two years and approximately \$500,000 designing its 2002 Master Plan, the document that articulates the community’s philosophy about what, where, and how to develop in the city. But the existing zoning code — the rules of the local development game — is geared to the city’s old Master Plan, written in 1963 and embracing a different urban philosophy.

For example, the new plan strives to accommodate pedestrians and encourage public transit services by blending residential and commercial districts. But the current code caters more to the automobile by separating homes, bars, offices, and grocery stores. Experts say the old zoning code also fails to acknowledge the unique identity of individual neighborhoods in development decisions and pays little attention to the physical appearance of new buildings. They add that it is negative in



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As innovative policies propel Grand Rapids’ downtown revival, leaders and citizens will soon begin work on much-needed revisions to city building and zoning codes.

tone and focused on prohibiting unfavorable activities rather than promoting the desired development style.

Developers, city officials, and residents agree that now is the time to change the rules. The new zoning code will reset the local philosophy about construction quality and influence the physical shape and psychological feel of commercial districts and residential neighborhoods. But it also could set a new standard for how Michigan cities evolve in form and function, experts said. In fact, the urban planning process itself has already earned Grand Rapids public praise and national recognition, something that's rare for a Michigan metro area.

Grand Rapids and Its Citizens Lead the Way

The National Civic League named Grand Rapids, the state's second-largest city, as a 2003 All-America City Award finalist. [The city earned the nomination for its 2002 Master Plan to strengthen inner city neighborhoods, breathe new life into dormant business districts, provide better mobility, and protect natural resources.](#)

If Grand Rapids seems ready to lead, Michigan may well be ready to listen. Gov. Granholm, a Democrat, vigorously promotes urban revitalization as a key to economic development. Soon after her election, in February 2003, she joined with the state's Republican leaders to appoint the Michigan Land Use Leadership Council. Ms. Granholm tasked the council with recommending ways the state can effectively curb sprawl, protect working farms and open land, and revitalize cities — [an idea that is central to her larger economic strategy.](#)

"In order to have a truly strong state economy in the future, we must make sure that people are drawn to our cities," the governor said this May in a speech to the Detroit Regional Chamber of Commerce. "We must create cool cities that attract entrepreneurs starting businesses and the young, creative workers they're looking to hire. These are the folks who are driving economic growth, and they want to live in exciting, diverse cities."

Such calls resonate strongly at the grassroots, where there is an increasing push for creative policies to better guide land use and public investments. [For example, more than 1,000 citizens from around Michigan participated this spring in the leadership council's public hearings.](#) And, in Grand Rapids, several thousand residents, business leaders, and public officials reviewed and revised the city's Master Plan.

Now city officials hope to tap the same kind of civic energy and guide the development of the much-needed, new zoning code.

"It's not just public officials and the development community who is paying attention to planning and zoning these days," said Steve Langworthy, of Langworthy, Strader, LeBlanc, and Associates, Inc., the local community-planning firm the city hired to lead the rewriting effort. "More and more the people on the street are interested in land use laws because they realize the potential for these policies to affect their lives and investments."

The Local Challenge

Leaders here want the new code to, among other things, put good development practices on the fast track, provide affordable housing options, reduce the agendas of planning commission and other local panels, and encourage transit-friendly nodes throughout the city. They also hope to synchronize the new code with local neighborhood associations and smaller, neighboring communities, several of which are undertaking major highways and sewer construction projects that will spark new development.

But the re-writing process draws heavily on limited staff and financial resources. And a mere \$60,000 is available to fund this basic piece of business, according to City Planning Director Bill Hoyt. That is barely enough to fund a traditional, more internal process, according to several planning experts. Mr. Hoyt said the city is pursuing outside funding to support the added — and indispensable — work of community outreach and coordination with nearby governments.

"We listened to our residents while we rewrote the Master Plan," he said. "And we need to listen as we rewrite the zoning code. The public input and extensive work with stakeholders such as the neighborhood groups has been integral to our success."

A Smart Option

Despite limited resources, city officials intend to develop an innovative zoning code capable of achieving the vision put forth by the new Master Plan. As they look for ways to get the job done, local planners and developers point to the so-called SmartCode as a prime candidate.

Originally developed by Duany Plater-Zyberk and Company, a Miami-based firm, the model zoning code is gaining national acceptance as a formula for reining in runaway sprawl by nurturing diverse, compact, and walkable community centers. Mark Wyckoff, president of the Planning and Zoning Center in Lansing, says the formula has great potential as long as officials successfully install it throughout the city's entire decision-making process.

"You need everyone singing from the same hymnal," Mr. Wyckoff said. "That's tough to do in the city."

And rehearsing the choir also will cost money. Many communities — from Fort Myers, Fla. to Petaluma, Calif. — have made the program work, but it has yet to be tried in Michigan. Implementing its concepts here would require hiring professionals familiar with the SmartCode, dedicating extensive staff time and financial resources, and conducting significant public education, Mr. Wyckoff said. But he added that the process could raise the bar for how Michigan builds and maintains healthy communities.

"If [Grand Rapids] fully integrated SmartCodes, they would be way out in front of other communities in Michigan," Mr. Wyckoff said. "And other cities certainly would pay attention."

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