

July 2, 2007

Commissioner David Potts, Chairperson  
Oakland County Coordinating Zoning Committee  
1200 North Telegraph Road  
Pontiac, MI 48341

SUBJECT: County Code No. MP 07-02, Planning & Economic Development Services' review of the City of Birmingham Triangle District Urban Design Plan (dated May 17, 2007)

Dear Chairperson Potts and Committee Members:

The City of Birmingham Planning Board is proposing to amend its 1980 The Birmingham Plan by adding a plan for the Triangle District, which is the area generally bounded by Woodward Avenue, Maple, and Adams Road. The following is a review and analysis of the amendment.

Under the recent amendments to the Municipal Planning Act, which took effect December 20, 2006, the City of Birmingham is required to send a copy of the draft amendment to Oakland County and neighboring communities for comment prior to adoption. Oakland County has 40 days to submit comments on an amendment. The July 10, 2007 Oakland County Coordinating Zoning Committee (CZC) meeting falls within our 40-day comment period. Neighboring communities also have 40 days to submit comments directly to Birmingham and are asked to send a copy of any comments to the County as well. Once the comment period has expired, the Planning Board can hold a public hearing on the amendment and take final action to amend the plan.

According to the Birmingham Planning Department, the Cities of Bloomfield Hills, Royal Oak, and Troy; Bloomfield Township; the Village of Beverly Hills; Detroit Edison, Consumers Energy, Ameritech, Comcast Cable, Grand Trunk Western Railroad; and SEMCOG were sent a copy of the draft plan. All of these communities and agencies have received notice of the CZC meeting; however, the notice to Grand Trunk Western Railroad came back undeliverable. Comments have been received from the City of Troy and are attached.

### **Public Participation Process**

The City of Birmingham undertook an extensive citizen participation effort in the formulation of the Triangle District Plan. Besides the involvement of the Planning Board and City Commission, the City created a "Discussion Group" to help in the process. *"A Discussion Group, comprised of representatives of various city boards and commissions, staff, development professionals, and area business owners and residents, was established to serve as an intermediary between the Planning Board and the public and to provide feedback on the plan concepts throughout the project timeline."* (Acknowledgements' Page)

In addition, a major public involvement activity was provided in February 2007 when a two-day design charrette was held. A charrette is an intensive design exercise where in a limited period of time, a variety of ideas are provided, quickly sketched, and debated. Key stakeholders, property owners, and the public were invited to participate. Through interviews and focus groups, topics like traffic and parking were addressed. Design considerations that came from the charrette were refined and included in the draft plan.

### **Study Area**

The Triangle District is centrally located in the City of Birmingham and is bounded by Woodward Avenue to the west, Maple Road to the north, and Adams Road to the east. Although adjacent to Birmingham's thriving downtown, the Triangle District is physically separated from the downtown by Woodward Avenue. The district is sandwiched between the downtown to the west and residential neighborhoods to the east. Consequently, this area lacks focus and a distinct identity. The intent behind the Triangle District Urban Design Plan is to allow for a walkable, mixed-use area that complements the downtown.

### **Plan Contents**

The plan starts with a vision for the District. A variety of land uses are envisioned within the Triangle District. Mixed-use buildings of retail, office, and residential are planned along Maple, Woodward Avenue, and south of Bowers. Residential choices will include single family homes, townhomes, condominiums, and apartments. The existing single family neighborhood north of Bowers is intended to remain. Over the 20 year timeframe of the plan, it is assumed that Adams Square, an existing commercial center east of Adams Road, will be redeveloped with residential townhomes. Residents, workers, and shoppers will have attractive, tree-lined streets and small public gathering spaces, making this a highly walkable and desirable neighborhood.

The plan addresses a variety of design issues related to the study area. Topics covered include building height, building design, circulation, public spaces, wayfinding, signage, and parking. The following summarizes some of the key recommendations related to these topics.

**Building Height:** The plan is very specific in terms of addressing building height. *“The hierarchy of height ranges from taller mixed-use buildings along Woodward Avenue that are 7 stories and higher, medium height mixed-use buildings of 4-5 stories in the District’s interior and along Maple to create a more intimate urban neighborhood, and structures at a smaller scale of 3 stories when abutting existing residential neighborhoods. Buildings should step back from the street at the higher stories.”* (Pages 4-5) The Height Plan graphic shows allowable height by location within the District. The three story height limitation along Adams Road for both mixed-use and single family attached developments is designed to respect the single family neighborhoods to the east of the Triangle District. Conversely, seven to nine story buildings along Woodward Avenue are intended to balance the height of the much taller buildings along the west side of Woodward, creating a sense of enclosure that will make this portion of Woodward Avenue more inviting to pedestrians.

**Building Design:** For this study, consultants prepared digital three-dimensional building models to communicate the massing of buildings. The height and massing models are shown from different locations along key roads. These graphic perspectives help to show how new, taller

mixed-use buildings can be compatible with surrounding development. This intensification of building mass will create more of an urban character and form that is appropriate in this location of the city. Quality in architectural design is expected of new development with attention given to pedestrian details for both buildings and streetscape.

***Circulation:*** The street network and circulation patterns within the District were investigated as part of the planning process. A significant change to Maple Road is recommended. Currently, Maple Road is two lanes in each direction. The plan suggests changing this configuration to two westbound lanes, one eastbound lane, and converting the other eastbound lane into a middle turn lane. Changes in alignment also are recommended for several streets, notably Elm and Worth. The current intersections of Elm and Worth with Woodward Avenue allow traffic to veer off Woodward at higher speeds when entering either of these two side streets. The plan recommends that both streets be reconfigured at Woodward to come in at right angles to slow traffic down. In addition, the plan calls for another major change to Worth, extending it to Bowers and realigning it to be parallel with Woodward Avenue from Holland to Bowers.

***Public Spaces:*** The realignment of Worth Street as noted above will create a triangular piece of property between Holland and Haynes. The plan identifies this as Worth Plaza, a new public space that “*As a lively triangle-shaped place it is a metaphor for the District as a whole, lined with shops, residences, and sidewalk dining.*” (Page 1) Although small in scale, this public space is very important as a focal point for the District. Pedestrian activity and public art will be hallmarks of Worth Plaza. One of the key conceptual drawings in the plan shows the potential vitality of this space with taller mixed-use buildings surrounding the plaza. Other small open spaces will be created in the District by road reconfigurations or redevelopment of Adams Square. These spaces can become special places for pedestrians and may provide opportunities for public art and/or gateway signage.

***Parking:*** One of the key concerns in the Triangle District is parking. Surface parking lots are scattered throughout the District but parking shortages still exist in certain locations. Since these lots are not the most efficient use of the land, the plan identifies the need to consolidate parking into a few well-placed parking structures, freeing up some of these parking lots for new in-fill development. Locations for two new public parking structures are identified, one at Maple and Woodward and the other south of Haynes along Woodward Avenue. New private parking structures are also needed and should be integrated into the design of new mixed-use buildings. Recommended changes to the parking requirements for certain uses are included in the plan.

***Additional Considerations:*** Sustainable design, signage, and walkability are other design considerations mentioned in the plan. Green building development is promoted so buildings use less energy, and there is less impact on the environment due to site development. New public signs identifying the Triangle District are suggested to create an identity and promote this part of the city.

***Woodward Avenue Improvements:*** Crossing Woodward Avenue on foot is a challenge since it is four lanes wide in both directions. In an effort to integrate the Triangle District neighborhood with the downtown, recommendations are made for median and intersection improvements at specific locations to make the corridor more pedestrian-friendly. Adding brick pavers at existing

crosswalks would help alert drivers to the possibility of pedestrians, and placing a pedestrian shelter in the median at Maple may invite more pedestrians to cross the corridor. A long term goal raised in the plan is to consider reducing the number of through lanes along Woodward Avenue to three, and converting the fourth lane into a local access drive. As this is a more involved recommendation, the plan acknowledges the need for additional study and engineering plus “*significant coordination with MDOT.*”

***Design Plan Map:*** The Urban Design Plan map is attached. The map is not intended to be a future land use map per se but rather shows existing buildings and locations of new, mixed-use buildings and public and private parking structures. The single family residential neighborhood north of Bowers is intended to remain. New residential townhomes are shown along Elm Street and in the location where the current Adams Square commercial center exists. New green/open spaces are identified on the map. They will provide opportunities for pedestrians to gather and are intended to enhance the identity of the Triangle District.

***Implementation:*** In order to implement the plan, it is recommended that the City of Birmingham first prepare and adopt a form-based code. This is a zoning technique that places more emphasis on physical form and design than on land use. Design guidelines recommended in the plan could become regulations as part of a form-based code. As properties redevelop within the District, they would be required to adhere to the physical form envisioned in this plan.

Bringing the Triangle District vision to life may take 20 years. While much of the redevelopment will be done by the private sector, public improvements are needed. A phasing plan is included, which indicates three phases for the major improvements identified in the plan. Phase 1 includes the creation of Worth Plaza with the accompanying realignment and extension of Worth Street, and a new public or public-private parking structure in this area. It is believed that these public improvements are needed first to jump start new private investment. Phase 2 includes pedestrian access improvements at Woodward and Maple and a second public parking structure, which would be located in the northern part of the District. During the time frame of Phase 2, the plan envisions the beginning of the redevelopment of Adams Square. Phase 3 would include the completion of the redevelopment of Adams Square and new townhome development along Elm Street.

A market study was prepared as part of the planning process for the Triangle District. The study indicated that 600,000 square feet of retail, commercial, and restaurant space could be absorbed in the market area, of which about half could reasonably be accommodated within the Triangle District. The study also showed a market for up to 500 new residential units in the Birmingham area.

### **Coordination with Surrounding Community Boundaries**

Under state law, the county’s review is required to include a statement indicating whether the proposed plan is “inconsistent with the plan of any city, village, or township” that received notice of the draft plan. The Triangle District is internal within the City of Birmingham and does not impact the boundary of any of the surrounding communities. The Troy Planning Director sent a letter indicating that the Troy Planning Commission found the plan not inconsistent with the Future Land Use Plan of the City of Troy.

## **Analysis**

The City of Birmingham has created a sub-area plan for a small area within the city. The emphasis of the plan is on design and how this part of the city can develop a unique identity. Graphics and photographs throughout the plan help to convey the character that is desired. Some of the graphics are the result of the two-day design charrette. The charrette provided the public with an opportunity to express their hopes and ideas for this area and to have that input translated into conceptual drawings. The charrette was an excellent addition to the planning process, and the graphics produced make this a very readable plan.

The plan provides direction for both public and private investments. Much of the plan will be implemented through the private sector, and the plan gives developers guidance on important design issues. However, the plan also identifies necessary public improvements and indicates phasing for them. These public improvements are viewed as catalysts for the reinvigoration of the District. By identifying these needed infrastructure improvements, the City can start to plan for them and include them in its capital improvement programming.

## **Conclusion**

Through the preparation of this Urban Design Plan, the City of Birmingham has taken the lead to provide the framework for how this area should function. Oakland County Planning and Economic Development Services staff commends the City of Birmingham for preparing this sub-area plan for the Triangle District area.

Because these changes are internal to Birmingham, the City of Birmingham Triangle District Urban Design Plan is **not** inconsistent with the plan of any city, village, or township that received notice of the draft plan. Comments were received from the City of Troy and are attached.

Oakland County has not prepared a countywide development plan, so there is no countywide plan to which to compare the amendment.

Sincerely,

Charlotte P. Burckhardt, AICP, PCP  
Principal Planner

Enclosures