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HONORABLE CITY COUNCIL

**RE: Zoning Ordinance Text Amendment for Institutional Building Adaptive Reuse
(RECOMMEND APPROVAL)**

Before this Honorable Body is the request to consider a text amendment that would amend Chapter 50 of the 2019 Detroit City Code, *Zoning*, with respect to Institutional Building Adaptive Reuse and Tactical Preservation. More specifically the ordinance would:

- Define institutional building adaptive reuse and provide for the adaptive reuse and preservation of vacant or underutilized institutional buildings, such as libraries, fire and police stations, post offices, court houses, schools and educational institutions, religious institutions and religious residential, utility buildings, school buildings and other institutional buildings, in residential and zoning districts where such new uses would otherwise be prohibited;
- Allow approximately 50 permissible uses within these buildings that provide residential units and day-to-day goods and services—including residential, civic, cultural, educational, retail, office, food service, and light industrial uses on a conditional basis, when they contribute positively to the surrounding community and limit adverse impacts;
- Prevent demolition of subject buildings by requiring that a percentage of the building be retained in order to receive certain development standard reductions;
- Allow for tactical preservation practices that modify development standards and permit the partial and incremental reuse of existing buildings through the Buildings, Safety Engineering, and Environmental Department (BSEED) to encourage the preservation of buildings that are revitalized one space at a time; and
- Allow for parking and loading reductions to facilitate the adaptive reuse and tactical preservation of certain existing buildings.

BACKGROUND

Over the years, there have been many efforts to preserve the historic building stock of the city. One of those efforts included an initiative called Old Schools, New Uses, led by the City Planning Commission (CPC) and Historic Designation Advisory Board (HDAB) staff to amend zoning to allow for school buildings in R1-R6 zoning districts to be adaptively reused for 19 uses. This effort was adopted in the Fall of 2012 and permitted schools that were in residential zoning districts to establish new uses that would otherwise not be permitted, such as lofts, multi-family dwellings, medical clinics, offices, etc. (Ord. No. 21-12 is attached and details all 19 uses).

Another initiative, led by the Planning and Development Department (PDD)-Historic District Commission staff (HDC), known as [After School Detroit](#), was a study of vacant historic school buildings. In 2020, this team conducted a one-year assessment of vacant schools in Detroit. The objective of this project was to complete a holistic, comparative study of 63 vacant historic-age school properties (VSP's) in Detroit, including 39 owned by the City of Detroit and 24 owned by the Detroit Public Schools Community District and to make recommendations regarding their redevelopment potential. One key goal of this project was to develop a set of metrics and strategies that could be broadly applied to VSPs across the city, in order to assess, prioritize, and market them for redevelopment.

Another effort that has influenced this proposed ordinance is Tactical Preservation. Tactical Preservation is an effort that was initiated through a partnership with the Urban Land Institute and PDD in 2019. The two entities initiated a workgroup which included CPC staff, other city departments, historic architects, arts organizations, developers, and philanthropic representatives. The goal of this group was to find ways to facilitate strategies focused on the partial and incremental reuse of existing buildings, one space at a time, to increase the viability of their preservation. The workgroup strategized on how to incrementally reuse these buildings by incentivizing their rehabilitation through expedited permitting processes, zoning code amendments, financing, and using market studies to identify and market eligible city-owned buildings. This ordinance seeks to codify provisions to help this process.



In the spirit of trying to preserve more of the historic building stock, CPC staff established a working group in 2019 that would codify work from the previously mentioned efforts. This work was interrupted by the pandemic, but was re-established in 2024. The working group is comprised of staff from CPC, PDD, HDAB and HDC. In 2019, the working group settled on proposing to expand the scope of the original school adaptive reuse ordinance. The aim was to include more building typologies, beyond schools, as eligible to be adaptively reused. Buildings such as religious institutions, utility buildings and older municipal buildings often fall in limbo once their original use is extinguished, because the legally permissible uses are restrictive. Allowing these buildings to have more possible activities would give them more opportunity to be revitalized. In addition to expanding the types of buildings that are eligible for adaptive reuse, the subject proposal expands the number of uses that are available.

INSTITUTIONAL BUILDING ADAPTIVE REUSE PROPOSAL

The proposal that is before this Honorable Body is an initiative seeking to give new life to Detroit's institutional buildings as they are often the anchors of culture, character, and the fabric of neighborhoods. Historic institutional buildings often hold communities together by serving as a civic anchor, but as the buildings decline, the surrounding communities also decline in many cases. The initiative for consideration is a zoning code amendment to reuse public, civic and institutional buildings in residential zoning districts where they are currently barred from establishing anything other than a single or two family home in many instances.

The proposal seeks to allow approximately 50 uses in residential districts on a conditional basis. This means, that in order to establish one of these 50 uses, a Special Land Use public hearing must be held at BSEED, and the public in proximity to the subject building would be invited by mail, to share their feedback on the proposed project.

The proposed ordinance lists 11 use types. If a building has received a permit and been used for one of these 11 uses in the past, it is eligible to be adaptively reused for the proposed 50 additional uses. The 11 previous uses/activities that qualify a building to be adaptively reused are as follows:

- (1) Child caring institution (not a day care center),
- (2) Educational institution,
- (3) Fire or police station, post office, courthouse, and similar public building,
- (4) Library,
- (5) Mortuary or funeral home,
- (6) Museum,
- (7) Religious institution,
- (8) Religious residential facility,
- (9) Residential-area utility facilities, public,
- (10) School, elementary, middle/junior high, or high, or
- (11) Utility, basic

Additionally, the amendments would allow for tactical preservation strategies where buildings could be incrementally or partially brought back online one space at a time. This is done through an assessment and issuance of a building assessment and "make safe building permit".

The goal of the proposed amendments in this initiative is to:

- Support new housing efforts
- Promote redevelopment activities that serve the day-to-day needs of local residents
- Expedite investment by approving more permissive regulations
- Allow a variety of redevelopment options to accommodate the unique challenges of adaptive reuse
- Reduce annual demolition costs and retain institutional anchors within residential communities
- Contribute to sustainability by reusing existing building stock

The proposed amendments to Chapter 50 would clarify and expand the types of allowable adaptive reuse projects and update related site plan review and permitting requirements to streamline the reuse process. Key components of this amendment to the Zoning Ordinance include:

- Expanded Applicability (Sec. 50-3-113 & Sec. 50-4-43): Adds tactical preservation projects and substantial changes-in-use for qualifying buildings as triggers for needing site plan review or alternative review pathways.
- Conditional Uses (Article VIII): Conditionally allows residential, civic, retail, commercial, low-impact manufacturing, and select agricultural uses in buildings previously occupied by eligible public, civic, or institutional functions when certain standards are met.
- Use Standards (Article XII): Establishes the residential districts in which the newly permissible uses would be allowed as conditional uses, generally R1-R6 districts. This article also outlines the buildings that are eligible to be adaptively reused (e.g., schools, churches, libraries) and compatible new uses (e.g., housing, local retail, light manufacturing) to promote vibrant, neighborhood centers.
- Preservation Focus (Sec. 50-12-138): Establishes minimum building retention requirements (e.g., retaining at least 75% of gross floor area) and demolition restrictions to prioritize preservation of Detroit's architectural heritage.
- New Construction (Sec. 50-12-162): In the R1 district, multi-family dwellings would be permitted on a conditional basis; however, such buildings must be constructed on the same zoning lot as a building previously used for a use eligible for adaptive reuse.
- Parking and Loading (Article XIV): Establishes parking and loading requirement reductions of 50% for Public, Civic or Institutional Building Adaptive Reuse or Tactical Preservation projects to incentivize the rehabilitation of historic buildings.
- Define Tactical Preservation (Sec. 50-16-381): Defines tactical preservation as *a building reuse strategy focused on the partial and incremental reuse of existing buildings through a Buildings & Safety (BSEED) process to ensure that the properties can be activated in a safe, efficient, environmentally sound, aesthetically responsive manner via modifications to development standards*. Tactical preservation allows projects that require substantial capital to be reused one space at a time until they are fully restored. A good example of

tactical preservation being used is the Michigan Central Station building which required huge amounts of work to bring each floor online, one phase at a time. Parking and loading incentives would be applicable to any tactical preservation project city wide. The previously permitted use would not matter, as tactical preservation would apply to any building that is 5,000 square feet or more.

NEWLY PERMISSABLE USES

The newly permissible uses were selected by the internal city working group and altered slightly based on feedback from the public. The guiding principles that were used to select the uses for the institutional building adaptive reuse ordinance are as follows, those uses that will:

- Add to the vibrancy of the neighborhood
- Fulfill the day-to-day needs for goods & services of the surrounding community
- Create opportunity for employment for those within the neighborhood
- Not create burdensome traffic
- Allow the local community to have a say in the process through a Special Land Use (SLU) hearing

Below is the general list of uses that are proposed to be permitted conditionally for adaptive reuse projects:

Category	Use	Category	Use
Residential Uses	• Assisted living facility • Child caring institution • Convalescent, nursing, or rest home • Loft • Apartment (new construction may be permitted on site)	Retail, Service and Commercial Uses	• Office • Printing shops • Radio or television station • Recording studio or photo studio or video studio • Recreation, indoor commercial and health club • Restaurant without drive-up • Dance, gymnastics, music, art or cooking school • Shoe repair shop • Retail store without drive through • Veterinary clinic for small animals • Youth hostel/hostel
Public, civic, and institutional	• Governmental service agency • Educational institution • Adult day care center • Boarding school and dormitory • Child care center • Library • Museum • Neighborhood center, <u>non profit</u>		
Retail, Service and Commercial Uses	• Animal grooming shop • Art gallery • Bake shop, retail • Bank without Drive-up • Barber or beauty shop or Nail Salon • Bed and breakfast inn • Body art facility • Brewpub or microbrewery • Business college or commercial trade school • Dry cleaning, laundry or laundromat • Bar • Medical or dental clinic, physical therapy or massage clinic	Manufacturing and Industrial Uses	• Confection manufacture • Food catering establishment • Jewelry manufacture • Lithographing and sign shop • Low-impact manufacturing or processing • (Limited) Low/Medium-Impact manufacturing or processing • Trade services, general • Wearing apparel manufacturing • Public storage facilities
		Agricultural Uses	• Aquaculture • Aquaponics • Hydroponics

(It should be noted that CPC staff will be requesting an additional use as a friendly amendment once this reaches the Planning and Economic Development Committee. The request is to add “town homes” to the list of possible new uses)

PUBLIC HEARING RESULTS

The City Planning Commission held a public hearing on June 26, 2025. At the public hearing, eight members of the public spoke. Five members of the public expressed support, detailing how this ordinance would allow more opportunity to save buildings and contribute to the revitalization of communities across the city. Two members of the public spoke in opposition, stating that they believed this ordinance would allow uses incompatible with residential neighborhoods. Additionally, one member of the public asked questions about uses that would be permitted if the ordinance is passed.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INPUT

Over the past year, CPC staff has engaged the citizenry, preservation advocates, and local developers to adapt and refine this ordinance. The feedback that staff received was consistently receptive to this proposal. Most of those meetings were held with the Department of Neighborhoods (DON's). The DON meetings that were held are as follows:



The Planning and Development Department and City Planning Commission invite you to attend the...

ADAPTIVE REUSE ORDINANCE MEETINGS

The City of Detroit is making it easier to redevelop former schools, churches, and similar buildings into residential, commercial, or maker spaces—without rezoning!

JOIN OUR VIRTUAL DISTRICT MEETINGS TO LEARN MORE!

D4 APRIL 15 @ 5 PM		
D6 APRIL 17 @ 5 PM	D2 MAY 13 @ 6 PM	D1 MAY 22 @ 5:30 PM
D7 MAY 28 @ 5 PM	D3 JUNE 27 @ 6 PM	D5 JUNE 18 @ 6 PM

Meeting Link: [CityofDetroit.zoom.us/j/3631409738](https://www.cityofdetroit.org/zoom/j/3631409738)
For more information visit: www.detroitmi.gov/adaptivereuse

With advance notice of seven calendar days, the City of Detroit will provide interpreter services at public meetings, including language translation and reasonable ADA accommodations. Please contact the Civil Rights, Inclusion and Opportunity Department (CROID) at 313-224-4950, through the TTY number 771, email croid@detroitmi.gov, or visit www.detroitmi.gov/croid to schedule these services.



In addition to these meetings, staff also held a developer stakeholder meeting, as well as a meeting with City Council Member Calloway in District 2. Staff also presented on this initiative to City Council members individually. The Commission and staff also received 11 letters supporting the effort and two letters opposing.

Notice of Public Hearing

CPC staff emailed the public hearing notice for this matter to 6,000+ subscribers to CPC updates. CPC staff additionally sent a physical mailing out to approximately 1,337 community organizations and block clubs, alerting them of the public hearing for this matter. Lastly, the

information has been posted on the CPC website via a page created solely for access to and review of the [Adaptive Reuse](#) initiative.

Feedback

There were approximately 350 people that attended the DON meetings where city staff presented this proposal. The vast majority of those attendees were very supportive. However, there were two people that did object to this effort out of all of the meetings that were held. The concern for one of those people is that a building next door to their home would possibly be reused as a domestic abuse shelter or similar. However, domestic abuse shelters are not a permissible use in the draft ordinance before you. The SLU hearing will also offer protections for neighbors by providing an opportunity for them to give input on any project as they are proposed.

ANALYSIS & CONCLUSION

Text Amendment Criteria and Analysis

The Zoning Ordinance Sec. 50-3-49 cites that recommendations on all proposed Zoning Ordinance text amendments be based on the following criteria (the CPC's analysis is in italics):

(1) Whether the proposed amendment is consistent with the stated purposes of this chapter;

This proposal seeks to allow for more permissible uses for adaptively reusing existing buildings and decreasing the amount of demolition or derelict buildings that the city has within neighborhoods. Neighborhoods will also have protections through the SLU public hearings that allow feedback and potential conditions, in order for a developer to be able to build. This ordinance is addressing a trend by proactively making provision for building stock that would otherwise deteriorate and be raised. This ordinance seeks to expedite historic building reuse to save the buildings. Currently, there are paths through the Board of Zoning Appeals (BZA) that would possibly allow these uses to be established, but it generally restricts a developer to one use. So for instance, if you have a school building, you would not be able to have a mixed-use building. This ordinance will allow numerous options.

(2) Whether the proposed amendment will protect the health, safety, or general welfare of the public; and

The proposed amendment protects the health, safety and general welfare of the public by facilitating the rehabilitation of declining properties that would become dangerous, blighted buildings. The proposal helps the general welfare of residents in the city, because it is helping to retain the historic character of neighborhoods by preserving the institutional anchors.

(3) Whether the proposed amendment corrects an error or meets the challenge of some changing condition, trend or fact.

The proposed amendment does meet the challenge of a changing condition and/or trend in that, many institutional buildings are going idle after their original use is no longer in demand. Once this happens in a residential zoning district, it removes most other possibilities for that site other than single or two family houses. This initiative meets a changing condition in the real estate market; it seeks to expedite these buildings being brought back online and to be used productively.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

City staff have engaged with over 350 residents in all City Council Districts as outlined above and from the input that was received, the vast majority of the residents strongly support this initiative. On June 26, 2025 after hearing from the public and receiving all of the information addressed above, the City Planning Commission voted for **APPROVAL** of the proposed text amendment that is before this Honorable Body. The CPC conveys this recommendation to the City Council with certain friendly amendments that will be presented to the Planning and Economic Development Standing Committee.

Respectfully submitted,

DONOVAN SMITH, CHAIRPERSON



Marcell R. Todd, Jr., Director
Kimani Jeffrey, City Planner

Attachment: Ord 21-12
Draft Ordinance

cc: Alexa Bush, Director, PDD
Karen Gage, PDD
Greg Moots, PDD
Janese Chapman, Director, HDAB
Garrick Landsberg, Director, HDC
David Bell, Director, BSEED
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