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# City of Detroit

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**TO:** City Planning Commission

**FROM:** Jamie Murphy, Staff  
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**RE:** **Zoning Ordinance text amendment, Chapter 50 of the 2019 Detroit City Code – to update regulations, procedures and definitions relative to housing and parking requirements as requested by the office of the City of Detroit Chief Operating Officer**

**DATE:** July 25, 2025

On July 31, 2025, the City Planning Commission (CPC) will hold a 5:15 PM public hearing to consider revisions to Chapter 50, *Zoning*, of the 2019 Detroit City Code, to encourage the construction of additional housing and to reduce barriers to new development by allowing more flexible parking requirements. The proposed text amendment was drafted by the Administration's Office of the Chief Operating Officer of the City of Detroit.

Below is the CPC staff summary of the background and scope of the proposed amendments as well as staff's preliminary review. Please note that some of the concerns expressed below have begun to be addressed over the last two weeks as we have met to gain mutual understanding, find areas of compromise and build consensus. We are hopeful that continued meetings with the administration and public engagement will produce a final set of draft amendments for your consideration that CPC staff can fully support. Attached you will find the detailed report of the COO's office and a draft copy of the proposed ordinance.

## **BACKGROUND**

The Mayor's Office has continued to explore ways to encourage the construction of additional housing (thus increasing the housing supply and affordability) and ways to reduce barriers to small business development. Toward this end, the Administration is proposing major updates to the Detroit Zoning Ordinance for consideration summarized below.

The Administration indicates dozens of major cities across the country, such as Grand Rapids, Minneapolis, and Buffalo, are updating zoning to help build more housing and thus lower housing costs. The Administration is proposing two key updates regarding housing:

1. To build more housing by expanding the types of housing that can be built in R2 (Two-Family Residential); and
2. To make it easier to build new infill housing on vacant lots.

Furthermore, the Administration indicates the current parking space requirements for both new housing and commercial uses limits development and makes it harder for new business to open. The Administration is proposing three key updates regarding parking:

1. For small commercial buildings, expand the policy of exempting parking requirements for buildings with 3000 square feet gross floor area to include both new and existing buildings up to 6000 square feet. ;
2. Reduce parking requirements for uses near high-frequency corridors; and
3. Make it more feasible for projects to propose alternative parking plans.

## **SCOPE OF THE ORDINANCE**

The proposed text amendments are summarized below.

### **Article VIII. Residential Zoning Districts, Two-Family Residential**

In general, the proposed changes allow townhouses, 3-unit residential buildings, and 4-unit residential buildings by-right in R2 districts and increases the number of residential units permitted conditionally after a public hearing from 8 units to 12 units in R2 districts.

- **Section 50-8-41** – Edit R2 description to add Multiple-family Dwellings up to four units by-right
- **Section 50-8-44** – Add Townhouses (up to 8 units attached) and Multiple-family Dwellings (up to 4 units) as by-right uses in R2
- **Section 50-8-50** – Remove Townhouses (up to 8 attached) from the conditional uses in R2 and increase the maximum number of Multiple-family units to 12 units (from 8)
- **Section 50-8-56** – Specify that the residential compatibility standards apply to all residential not just single- and two-family (this is a problem as Sections 50-14-395 and 50-14-396 which contain the standards currently only apply to single- and two-family buildings)

**CPC Staff Notes:** Currently, R2 only allows one and two-family dwellings by-right and multiple family dwellings and townhouses up to 8 units conditionally. The request is to allow 3-unit and 4-unit residential buildings by-right in R2 districts, to allow up to 8 attached townhouses by-right, and to allow multiple-family dwelling units up to 12 units conditionally.

### **Article XII Use Regulations, Multi-family dwellings**

- **Section 50-12-22** – update use table to allow multi-family in R2 both conditionally and by-right; allow townhouse by-right instead of conditionally
- **Section 50-12-162** – Increases the maximum number of Multi-family units to 12 (from 8) in R2

**CPC staff notes:** Article XII includes both the use table and use regulations including residential in R2. The proposed changes make Article XII consistent with proposed changes to Article VIII.

### **Article XIII. Intensity and Dimensional Standards, General Dimensional Standards for Residential Districts**

In general, the changes seek to promote infill housing development on vacant lots that align with existing neighborhood character by amending the dimensional requirements that apply to residential lots below the minimum size or width and platted before 1968, which is the year a major update to the Zoning Ordinance was approved (referred to as Ordinance 390G).

- **Section 50-13-21** – multiple changes:
  - Change title to include “and dimensional” and “for parcels platted before 1968”
  - Add preamble “In order to allow for the development of residential lots platted before December 22, 1968, the following requirements shall apply in all residential districts”
  - Add that in R1-R6 districts, a townhouse can be built on a lot of record from 1968 (in addition to a two-family house). Also, change minimum size requirement for these building types from 40 feet wide and 4,000 square feet (SF) to 25 feet wide and 2,000 SF
  - Add that multi-family dwellings can be built on a lot of record from 1968 in R2 districts (in addition to the R3-R6 districts). Also, change the minimum size requirement for these building types from 50 feet wide and 6,000 SF to 25 feet wide and 2,000 SF
  - Add a subsection with setback exceptions, specifically:
    - In R1-R6 for single-family, side setback minimums are 3 feet each and a combined 10 feet (current requirement is 4 feet each and 14 feet combined)
    - In R2-R6 for townhouse, two-family, and multi-family, side setback minimums are 3 feet each and a combined 10 feet (current requirement is 4 feet each, 14 feet combined or Formula A or B)
    - In R1-R6 for single-family, front setback minimum is 10 feet or match adjacent smaller setback if greater (current requirement is 20 feet)
    - In R2-R6 for townhouse, two-family, and multi-family, front setback minimum is 10 feet or match adjacent smaller setback if greater (current requirement 20 feet)
    - In R1-R6 for single-family, rear setback is 20 feet (current requirement is 30 feet)
    - In R2-R6 for townhouse, two-family, and multi-family, rear setback is 20 feet (current requirement is 30 feet)
  - Add a subsection with height, lot coverage, and floor area ratio (FAR) exceptions, specifically:
    - In R1-R6 for single-family, lot coverage is 60% max (current requirement is 35%)
    - In R2-R6 for townhouse, two-family, and multi-family, lot coverage is 60% max (current requirement is 35% or none)
    - In R2-R3 for townhouse, two-family, and multi-family, max height is 35 feet (current requirement is 35 feet or no max)
    - In R2-R3 for townhouse, two-family, and multi-family, no FAR (current is none, 0.50, or 0.70)
- **Section 50-13-24** – Special provisions for side setbacks:
  - Eliminate provision for reducing side setbacks for single and two-family on narrow lots

- Change the required lot width from 40 feet to 25 feet and lot area from 4,000 SF to 2,000 SF for a two-family dwelling, but allow the reduction of setbacks to 3 feet each and 6 feet combined depending on the width of the lot
- For a two-family built one behind the other, change side setbacks from 10 feet each to 5 feet each
- **Section 50-13-185** – the current Ordinance has an exception for lot coverage for single family on small lots; the proposal is to decrease its application from lots smaller than 4,000 SF to lots smaller than 2,000 SF. *(CPC staff note: max with exception is 45% so this section doesn't seem to be needed anymore?)*
- **Section 50-13-187** – the current Ordinance has exception for lot coverage for two-family on small lots; the proposal is to decrease its application from smaller than 4,300 SF to smaller than 2,000 SF. *(CPC staff note: max with exception is 45% so this section doesn't seem to be needed anymore?)*
- **Section 50-13-254** – Change definition of small lots from less than 5,000 SF to less than 2,000 SF. *(CPC staff notes: These provisions may be better placed in the dimensional tables for ease of use and consistency)*

#### **Article XIV, Development Standards, Off-street Parking**

In general the amendments seek to allow for fewer parking spaces for small buildings, buildings near high-frequency transit lines and used for residential, public/civic/institutional, and retail/service/commercial uses (except for vehicle repair and service), and for small pedestrian-oriented retail, service, or commercial uses within a larger building that is near high-frequency transit lines.

The proposal also seeks to allow the Buildings, Safety Engineering, and Environmental Department (BSEED) to approve an alternative parking plan through the building permit process for residential uses, public/civic/institutional uses, and retail/service/commercial uses, except for vehicle repair and service, and setting out the required information and analysis that must be submitted with a proposed alternative parking plan.

- **Section 50-14-7** – Current provisions allow buildings built before 1998 and less than 3,000 SF to not provide parking; the proposal is to strike age limit and increase to 6,000 SF. Also, strike provision about expanding into an adjacent structure (which would no longer be needed)
- **Section 50-14-152** – Add language about BSEED making administrative rules for alternative parking plans
- **Section 50-14-153(a)(3)** – Add provision for residential, public/civic/institutional, retail/service/commercial (excluding vehicle) uses near High-Frequency Transit Corridors (HFTC) where 30% of required parking can be waived up to 20 spaces. Currently, 20% or 10 spaces for any building/use. This addition does not include extensive language about procedure that is included in the existing Zoning Ordinance.
- **Section 50-14-153(c)** – Add provision allowing the Planning and Development Department (PDD) to waive parking for the first 3,000 SF of pedestrian-oriented retail within HFTC areas. For buildings with multiple spaces, up to 45 spaces can be waived.

Currently this applies to SD1 and SD2 zoning districts. (*CPC staff note: how does this work with 6,000 SF waiver?*)

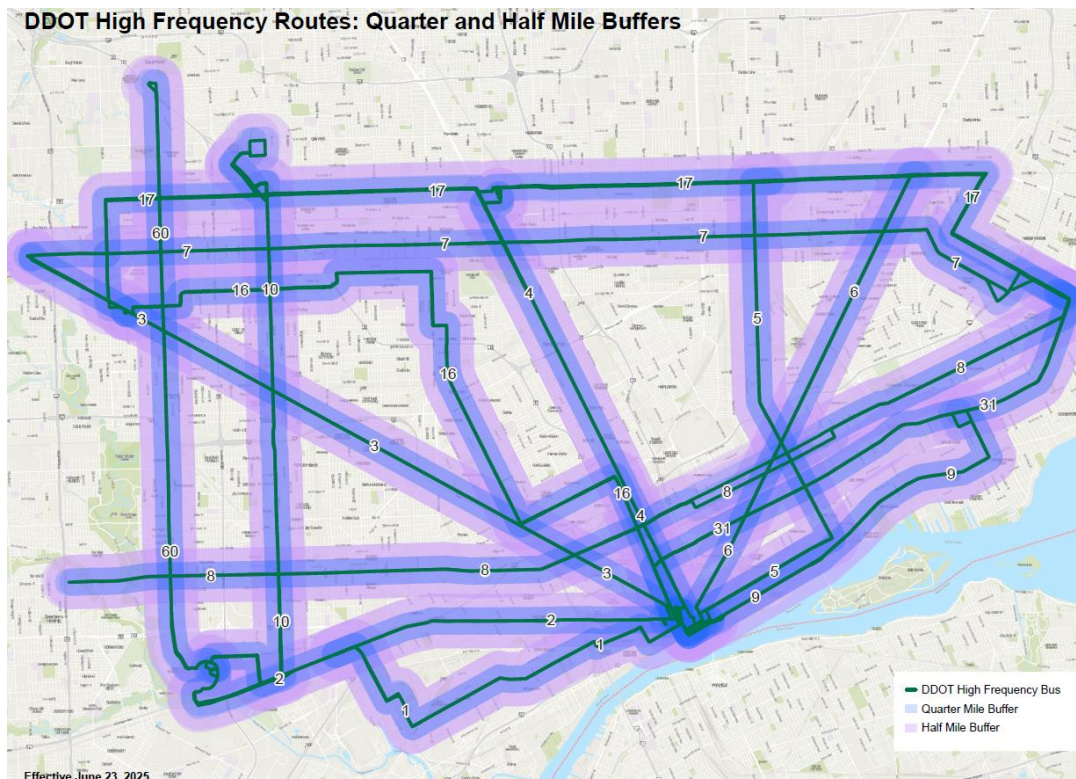
- **Section 50-14-154** – The request changes the procedure for alternative parking plans—it would eliminate the current hearing requirement and require PDD and BSEED to collaborate.
- **Section 50-14-155** – The request adds required contents of alternative parking plan
- **Section 50-14-156** – The request eliminates requirements for alternative parking plan to be recorded with the Register of Deeds

**CPC staff notes:** The Buildings, Safety Engineering, and Environmental Department does not believe this provision has been utilized since it was added the last time a major revision of the Zoning Ordinance was adopted in 2005. The proposed amendment would make the provision more viable, providing a more project specific relief from parking requirements. However, additional criteria and operating parameters are required in order to guide.

#### Article XVI, Rules of Construction and Definitions

- **Section 50-16-242** – Add two new HFTC's: one along Eight Mile and one along Dexter Avenue
- **Section 50-16-384** – Update the definition of small lot to eliminate width and decrease area from 5,000 SF to 2,000 SF

**CPC staff notes:** A map of the proposed HFTC's as currently proposed is shown below.



## **PRELIMINARY REVIEW**

Initially, we found the original ask of the COO's office to be too ambitious both in terms of the scope of the proposed amendments and the timeline. The ordinance now before the Commission is less so. While we are now moving in the right direction, additional work is needed to reach consensus, primarily with respect to the parking provisions and the timeline whereby the amendments are being pursued. The proposed changes to the residential provisions, including the R2 (Two Family Residential) zoning district are generally acceptable for consideration, but will require some tweaks. There are also some related sections to which corresponding amendments will need to be made. Lastly, there are other items we believe should be added to these amendments.

### **Parking**

Concerning the proposed parking changes, we believe this proposal may result in more confusion regarding minimum parking requirements. The ordinance as drafted expands upon the administrative waiver, parking exemptions and offers further reductions via the high frequency transit corridor provisions. These changes could certainly benefit housing production in the City, but they also would lessen requirements for civic, institutional and commercial land uses. We seek to continue working together to refine the provisions to better consider the total community in terms of impact and parking demand and mitigate any risk of unintended consequences in terms of parking challenges along commercial corridors or spillover impact to adjacent neighborhoods.

Ideally, changes of this sort to parking requirements should also be complemented by government enhancements to transit access and municipal parking programs. Additionally, with the two or three tracks of parking reductions that are available, the baseline minimum parking requirements become lost and unclear. A better approach may be to simply reduce baseline parking requirements and then provide simple, clear location-based exemptions. This is something we have been considering with Zone Detroit, but the proposed amendment will likely take the city further from providing staff and the public with clear, simple minimum parking requirements and where reductions should be given.

The recasting of the alternative parking plan provisions hopefully will allow this tool to finally be employed. It will offer developers the much-needed parking relief valve that certain projects warrant. However, parameters and additional criteria are needed to further dictate how it will be administered. The Traffic Engineering Division of DPW should be added for consultation along with the Planning and Development Department. A role for Municipal Parking may also be advantageous.

### **Communication**

It is important to present the purpose of the proposed amendments and also provide a thorough understanding of what the proposed amendments do. The larger context into which the amendments fit and relate is also important. While the driver of this initiative and intended benefit is increased housing production, the ordinance itself primarily has direct impact to the R2 zoning district and facilitating infill housing. A good portion of the amendment alters parking regulations, impacting more than just residential land uses as spoken to above. Also, we intend to do more significant housing-related amendments to the Zoning Ordinance in conjunction with work being done under Plan Detroit and the work to be done with HRD under the Pro Housing Grant. Whatever this effort is dubbed, the presentation of the proposed amendment must be accurate and detailed in order to ensure the audience's understanding of not just the intent, but the effect of these changes, and thereby validate the public response, pro or con.

Similarly, we believe the entire effort will benefit from a presentation that is more comprehensive. These amendments should be placed within the context of the larger planning, zoning and housing narratives.

### **Draft Ordinance**

The ordinance as drafted clearly attempts to address some of the regulatory hinderances to housing development in the City. However, there are some missed sections which should be included, there are also some missed opportunities and lastly there may be better ways of approaching this that are less complicating and better follow the protocols and practices the CPC has followed over the years. Following the CPC public hearing, we believe that staff should take over the drafting of the ordinance and work with the COO office to ensure our common understanding of the provisions to be advanced and address the issues where staff and the Administration may still disagree.

The public hearing on this matter will provide an update as to the status of a number of these issues indicating the progress made and the work that continues. There is a growing collaborative spirit among CPC staff and the Administration, which bodes well for this undertaking.

Attachments   COO Report  
                     Draft Ordinance  
                     Letters of Support

cc:     Alexa Bush, Director PDD  
         David Bell, Director BSEED  
         Julie Schneider, Director, HRD  
         Joshua Roberson, Deputy Director, Department of Neighborhoods  
         Hassan Beydoun, Group Executive Jobs and Economy  
         Raymond Solomon, II, Chief of Staff  
         Bruce Goldman, Law Department  
         Daniel Arking, Law Department