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TO: City Planning Commission
FROM: Kimani Jeffrey, City Planner

RE: The request of Cezanne Charles to amend Article XVII, Section 50-17-31, District Map No. 29 of the 2019 Detroit City Code, Chapter 50, Zoning, to show an SD1 (Special Development District, Small-Scale, Mixed-Use) zoning classification where a PD (Planned Development District) zoning classification is presently shown at the properties at 716 & 724 Townsend Street. This request also modifies the PD ordinances 588-H and 28-87 and other effected ordinances to reconcile the amended legal description and other necessary changes to accommodate this rezoning

DATE: July 27, 2026

A public hearing is scheduled to be held on July 30, 2026, before the City Planning Commission (CPC) regarding the petition of Cezanne Charles to amend Article XVII, Section 50-17-31, District Map No. 29 of the 2019 Detroit City Code, Chapter 50, Zoning, to show an SD1 zoning classification where a PD zoning classification is shown at the properties commonly known as 716 & 724 Townsend Street. This petition includes modifying the PD ordinances 588-H and 28-87 and other effected ordinances to reconcile the amended legal description and other necessary changes to accommodate this request. The proposed rezoning is indicated as the shaded area on the accompanying map.



Zoning map of the area to be rezoned from PD to SD1

The proposed map amendment is being requested to allow the former transformer substation to be adaptively reused as an office and art studio.



An elevation and map of the proposed rezoning

BACKGROUND

The subject property contains a former City of Detroit Public Lighting Department electrical transformer substation that was constructed as part of the City's historic municipal electric distribution system. Following modernization of Detroit's electrical infrastructure, the facility was decommissioned and has remained vacant for an extended period. Like several other former substations throughout the City, the building is a masonry utility structure that stems from a unique era of Detroit's civic infrastructure heritage.

In 2025, the City of Detroit initiated a program to market several surplus former Public Lighting substations for redevelopment through adaptive reuse. The initiative seeks to return long-vacant public infrastructure to productive use, stabilize architecturally significant buildings, encourage private investment, and promote neighborhood revitalization while preserving structures that contribute to Detroit's historic built environment.

The subject building has experienced deterioration associated with long-term vacancy, including deferred maintenance, obsolete electrical infrastructure, and structural repairs that will be necessary before occupancy. Despite these conditions, the masonry building retains its historic character and presents an opportunity for adaptive reuse that preserves an architecturally unique structure while returning the property to productive use.

PROPOSAL

The applicant purchased the building from the City and proposes to rezone the property from PD to SD1 to facilitate the adaptive reuse of the former transformer substation as the headquarters for Rooftwo, a Detroit-based civic design, research, technology, and arts practice. The project envisions preserving and rehabilitating the historic building while transforming it into a creative workplace, fabrication studio, civic prototyping laboratory, and flexible community gathering space.

The office and fabrication studio will consolidate the applicant's existing operations into a permanent headquarters, providing workspace for staff, clients, and expanded design and fabrication activities. The civic prototyping lab will host participatory design workshops, public engagement sessions, collaborative design initiatives, and assemblies focused on public space, equity, neighborhood improvement, and community-centered technologies. Flexible interior spaces are proposed for exhibitions, lectures, educational programming, and cultural events intended to foster collaboration among artists, designers, residents, neighborhood organizations, and public agencies.

The applicant states that the project is intended to function as a private business headquarters and a community resource supporting civic innovation, creative entrepreneurship, neighborhood programming, and public engagement. The rehabilitation will include structural masonry repairs, removal of obsolete electrical equipment, environmental remediation as necessary, utility upgrades, accessibility improvements, landscaping, security enhancements, while preserving the building's historic character.

PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS

Surrounding Zoning and Land Use

The zoning classification and land uses surrounding the subject area are as follows:

North: R3 (Low Density Residential); Lafayette Street apartments
East: PD & R1 (Single-family Residential); parking lot and single-family homes
South: PD; Riverview Jefferson Health
West: PD; parking lot

A description of the proposed and existing zoning categories is listed below:

SD1 SPECIAL DEVELOPMENT DISTRICT, SMALL-SCALE, MIXED-USE (Proposed)

The SD1 Special Development District is designed to encourage a complementary mixture of small-scale pedestrian and transit-oriented uses that are compatible in a neighborhood setting. It is intended to ensure a neighborhood character and place a proper balance of activities within walking distance of one another while serving the day-to-day needs of residents. Parking requirements are reduced in certain circumstances to promote use of transit and non-motorized transportation; shared parking and a district approach to parking are encouraged to lessen demand for off-street parking spaces. Certain establishments that serve alcohol for consumption on the premises are permitted without a spacing requirement in order to attract increased pedestrian traffic to the area.

PD PLANNED DEVELOPMENT DISTRICT (Existing)

The PD Planned Development District will permit planned developments throughout the City and will be particularly useful in district areas established in accordance with Section 74 of the Michigan Blighted Area Rehabilitation Act, being MCL 125.74, for urban renewal. Such planned developments shall be substantially in accordance with the goals and objectives of the Master Plan, by having a major land use that corresponds to the most general category of land use, which are residential, retail and local services, industrial, mixed use, parks and open space and other, proposed in the Master Plan for the area involved.

Adaptive Reuse Ordinance

This Honorable Body may recall that in November of 2025, consistent to the Commission's action and recommendation, the City Council passed the Institutional Building Adaptive Reuse

ordinance in an attempt to create an easier process for buildings such as the subject building to be adaptively reused. Normally, this site would have been an excellent candidate for use of those ordinance provisions, however, PD is one of the only zoning classifications that was not legally eligible to be included in the adaptive reuse ordinance. Therefore, this particular building would need to be rezoned or the PD modified, in order to be reused.

Master Plan Consistency

The subject rezoning site is located within the Butzel area of Neighborhood Cluster 3 of the Detroit Master Plan of Policies (MP). The Future Land Use map for this area shows Low/Medium Density Residential (RLM). CPC staff is consulting the Planning and Development Department (P&DD) regarding conformance with the Master Plan.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH

The applicant conducted outreach with nearby residents, businesses and neighborhood organizations, including the Church of the Messiah, West Village Association, Jefferson East, the Villages CDC, Riverview Health, Moses Field Center and adjacent condominium representatives. Meetings, phone calls, emails, mailers and a neighborhood presentation were used to introduce the project and gather feedback. Continued coordination is anticipated as redevelopment proceeds.

ZONING MAP AMENDMENT CRITERIA

Recommendations and decisions on a zoning map amendment shall be based on consideration of the criteria below found in Section 50-3-70 of the zoning ordinance. Preliminary CPC staff comments are provided following each criterion:

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

The proposed amendment responds to changing conditions that have occurred since the property was developed as a municipal electrical transformer substation. The building no longer serves its original public utility function and has remained vacant following modernization of the City's electrical infrastructure. The City has initiated a broader effort to dispose of surplus Public Lighting Department substations through adaptive reuse. The proposed rezoning facilitates the productive reuse of a vacant historic structure while responding to current market conditions, neighborhood reinvestment trends, and the City's redevelopment objectives. This proposal would allow a building that would otherwise remain vacant or be demolished, to be repurposed into an asset for the area.

2) Whether the proposed amendment is consistent with the Master Plan and the stated purposes of the zoning code.

The proposed SD1 zoning better aligns with the intended office, studio, and community-oriented uses than the existing Planned Development designation and advances the purposes of the Zoning Ordinance by encouraging compatible mixed-use development, adaptive reuse, and efficient utilization of existing infrastructure. P&DD will provide an official Master Plan Interpretation (MPI), but they have also been actively involved in moving this project forward, generally indicating their support for the effort. An MPI is forthcoming.

3) Whether the proposed amendment will protect the health, safety, and general welfare of the public.

The proposed amendment is expected to promote the public health, safety, and welfare by facilitating the rehabilitation and occupancy of a long-vacant structure. The redevelopment includes structural repairs, removal of obsolete electrical equipment, environmental remediation as necessary, utility upgrades, accessibility improvements, landscaping, lighting, and security enhancements. Occupancy and ongoing maintenance are expected to reduce blighting influences and return the property to productive use, making it a contributing resource to revitalization efforts.

4) Whether the city and other service providers will be able to provide adequate public facilities and services to the subject property, while maintaining adequate levels of service to existing development.

The site is already established with existing public sewer and electrical infrastructure. The proposed office, fabrication studio, and community programming are not anticipated to generate demands beyond the public infrastructure or municipal services that were required for the prior substation.

5) Whether the proposed rezoning will have significant adverse impacts on the natural environment, including air, water, soil, wildlife, and vegetation and with respect to anticipated changes in noise and regarding stormwater management.

CPC staff do not anticipate significant adverse environmental impacts resulting from the proposed rezoning. The proposal consists primarily of the adaptive reuse of an existing building rather than new site development, minimizing disturbance to soils and reducing construction-related impacts. The proposed uses are low-intensity and are not expected to create significant increases in noise, emissions, stormwater runoff, or other environmental impacts.

6) Whether the proposed amendment will have significant adverse impacts on other property that is in the vicinity of the subject tract.

CPC staff do not anticipate significant adverse impacts on surrounding properties. The proposed office, fabrication studio, civic prototyping laboratory, and community programming are compatible with the surrounding mix of residential, institutional, and commercial development. Rehabilitation of the vacant structure is expected to improve the appearance of the property and contribute positively to continued neighborhood investment.

7) The suitability of the subject property for the existing zoning classification and proposed zoning classification.

The existing Planned Development zoning was established to accommodate the property's former municipal utility use and no longer reflects the intended redevelopment of the site. The proposed SD1 Special Development District is better suited to accommodate the adaptive reuse of the building while maintaining compatibility with surrounding development.

8) Whether the proposed rezoning will create an illegal 'spot zone.'

The amendment does not create an illegal spot zone. The proposed SD1 zoning is consistent with surrounding development patterns, supports the adaptive reuse of an existing historic structure, and advances broader City planning objectives rather than conferring an isolated zoning benefit inconsistent with adjacent land uses.

PRELIMINARY CONCLUSION

CPC staff preliminarily finds that the request addresses a changing condition by facilitating the adaptive reuse of a former public utility building that is no longer needed for its original purpose and looks forward to additional feedback from the public hearing.

Attachment

cc: Dara O'Byrne, Deputy Director, P&DD
Greg Moots, P&DD
David Bell, Director, BSEED
Conrad Mallett, Corporation Counsel
Daniel Arking, Law