

High Rise Mania

When Robert Harris and his Democrat colleagues took control of the City Council in 1969, the 26 story Tower Plaza skyscraper had just been completed. Several years earlier the 19 story University Towers opened for student tenants on South University. A skyscraper was planned for the Ann Arbor Bank property at the corner of Huron and Main. The Council majority vowed not to allow the business areas to be dominated by skyscrapers. The zoning ordinance was revised to prevent skyscrapers from going straight up from the sidewalk. As buildings increased in height, they had to be stepped back, a requirement that increased the needed size of building footprints. The Ann Arbor Bank skyscraper wasn't approved. Sloan Plaza, One North Main and 301 East Liberty were stepped back in a way that avoided the skyscraper wind tunnel effect.

Decades would pass before South University would see another skyscraper. It remained a vital commercial area used by all city residents. There were stores selling clothing, shoes, books, medicine, groceries, gifts and fine wines. The South University Area Association promoted retail uses and staged annual art fairs.

During the Hieftjje/Taylor era, the step back zoning requirement was removed, and the Council revised the South University zoning. Tall buildings can go straight up from the sidewalk. The small footprint of the retail buildings became available for high rise structures. In 2012 the unsightly 14 story Landmark student housing building was completed at the corner of South University and Forest. We lost the groceries and fine wines of Village Corner. And things went steadily downhill afterward. Retail buildings were torn down for replacement with skyscrapers. There is now bare ground where favorite stores like Middle Earth used to be. About the only retail purchase you can make on South University would be a Michigan Logo T-shirt. Because the retail trade disappeared, the merchants association disbanded.



Landmark

The high rise blight of South University is now moving south toward the Burns Park neighborhood. A nineteen story building is proposed along Church Street. If approved it will block the morning view east from the East Quadrangle dormitory where I spent my freshman year.

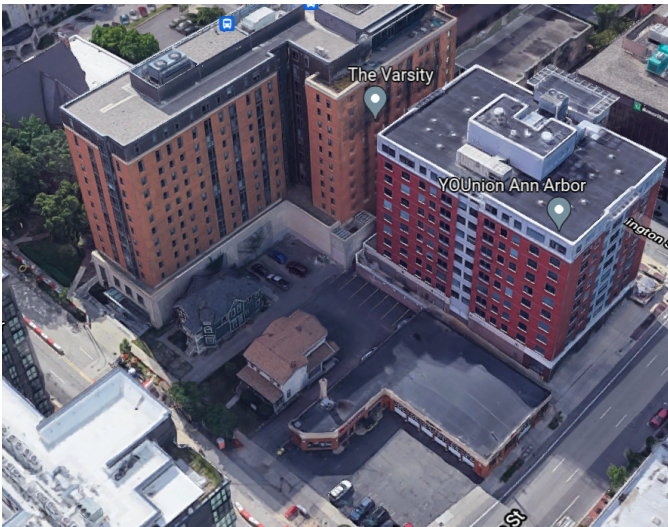


The high rise zoning has been implemented with no regard to how the skyscrapers would affect neighboring properties. North of Huron and east of Division single family homes are restricted by several historic district designations. Exterior changes can only be made with permission of the Historic District Commission. When Sloan Plaza was built on Huron, the stepped back zoning applied. Sloan Plaza did not intrude into the light and air of the properties in the historic districts.

The step back requirements had been eliminated by the time the Foundry Lofts building was proposed. Its fourteen stories block the morning sunlight to the historic properties to its north. The high rise planning has been hostile to residential neighborhoods.



Across the street from the Foundry Lofts is the Parkhurst House. The Old Fourth Ward historic district regulations apply to it although the rest of the district is hidden behind the Foundry Lofts building. But light and air is cut off to it by buildings that the high rise zoning permits. The owners are not permitted to make any changes to the building which would affect its exterior appearance.



The State Street business area may be next to succumb to the high rise mania. A 19 story building on East Washington has been approved which will loom over the State and Liberty commercial area.



A terrible example of the skyscraper planning was the proposed Core Spaces project. A 17 story tower was to be built on top of the library lot parking structure which is surrounded by low rise residential and business buildings. Mayor Taylor signed and had the City Clerk and City Attorney sign a contract to sell the City's air rights and build the tower. The City Council members had not seen or approved the contract. It took a citizen initiated charter amendment and two lawsuits to stop the project.

But the City is now planning a new project across the street that is even worse. The proposal is for the land formerly occupied by the Ann Arbor Y. When I was the head of the Y Board, we voted to add additional floors to the housing wing to bring the number of single room occupancy housing units to 100. That raised the housing wing to 7 stories which included the offices, meeting rooms and class room. The rest of the building included a swimming pool, a gymnasium, exercise rooms and locker rooms.



The former Ann Arbor Y building

When the Ann Arbor Y rejoined the national YMCA, it moved to a newly constructed building and sold the property to the City. The City then demolished the building

The proposed building would consist of two towers having 18 and 17 stories. It has been promoted as providing affordable housing. But only 135 of its 295 units would be made affordable. The rest could be luxury units rented at market rates. That's only 35 more affordable units than the former Y provided in its 7 story housing wing. If the City wants affordable housing in the downtown area, why doesn't it build it instead of packaging it as part of luxury high rises? Other cities seem to be able to approve purely affordable housing projects.

<https://record-eagle-cnhi.newsmemory.com/?publink=01efec885>

The monstrous building would loom over the historic neighborhood to its south and over the Main Street business area.



Among the houses in the block south of it is one owned by my great grandfather. My grandmother was born there and it remained in our family for almost a hundred years.



Having presided over filling central Ann Arbor with eyesore towers, the City Council has shifted its high rise mania to the outskirts of the city. The Council rezoned virtually all the business properties on Stadium and Maple between Pauline and Dexter. Those properties are now part of a TC1 Transit Corridor district which outlaws new single story buildings. That means that almost all the structures in the district are now nonconforming. They can be expanded only if the expansion includes another floor and raises the building height to 24 feet.

High rise construction is permitted in the district without the regulations found elsewhere in the city. 300 foot high buildings (about 21 stories) are permitted if located 1000 feet from residential zones. 120 foot high buildings (about nine stories) are permitted if located 300 feet from residential zones. Applying those dimensions to the rezoned district means that 21 story towers can be placed in most of Westgate and much of Maple Village. Nine story buildings may be erected in the district all along the west side of Stadium.

There would be no legal barrier to building the new high rises in the current retail parking lots. Although the new zoning requires bicycle parking, it eliminates the minimum required parking area throughout the district.

One can only speculate on what vision council members had for Ann Arbor when they rezoned the entire west side business area. The TC1 ordinance says, "The specific standards below are intended to ensure development in the TC1 district creates places where people can live, work, socialize, play and shop in well-designed, comfortable places that support active, sustainable, city living." Somehow that is to be achieved without provision for ground level grocery stores, restaurants and vehicle service facilities. No mention is made of the appearance of the city.

On a recent trip to Paris, I enjoyed a beautiful walk down the Champs-Élysées to the Louvre. I asked myself, "What would this beautiful area look like under the planning of the Hieftjie/Taylor era?" Fortunately, the Paris City Council saw the danger of high rise mania after an eyesore office tower was built in 1973. It established a new building height limit of 121 feet.

Front Street in Traverse City was in danger of the changes seen on South University. But a group calling itself Save Our Downtown persuaded the city voters to pass a charter amendment limiting the height of new buildings to 60 feet unless approved by the voters. Front Street now thrives.

Among my grandfather's belongings, I found a brochure about Ann Arbor entitled "The Athens of the West." Its introduction stated, "Situated in a rich agricultural district, native woodlands and towering hills on every side, the beautiful Huron River winding whither it will through and about the town, Ann Arbor is both picturesque and beautiful." Is it now destined to become known as the City of Eyesores?

In their pursuit of tall buildings, do City Council members really think they are representing the residents of Ann Arbor. Or do they feel beholden to the developers, landlords and unions who have generously contributed to their campaigns?

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