

From: [Graham Petit](#)
To: [Vidaver, Regina](#)
Cc: [All Alders](#); [Neighborhood Meeting 2](#)
Subject: Re: Increase maximum allowed heights in height transition areas
Date: Tuesday, September 30, 2025 10:35:58 AM
Attachments: [image.png](#)

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Regina,

Thanks for responding. My concern with the proposal is that it bases requirements on the height of the adjacent district rather than building stories. Adding 10 feet (25ft to 35ft) is essentially adding an additional story to the building. The proposal documents include helpful illustrations that highlight this difference (see below).

Additionally, there are a number of valid reasons to keep the current step-back requirements, including:

Mitigating negative impacts

- **Preserves light and air:** prevents taller buildings from casting excessive shadows or blocking ventilation and/or solar power.
- **Protects privacy:** reduces sightlines into nearby homes and yards.
- **Reduces noise:** increases distance between commercial activity and residences.
- **Controls massing:** prevents large structures from overwhelming smaller homes.
- **Manages wind:** lessens canyon effects that funnel strong winds at street level.

Improving the urban environment

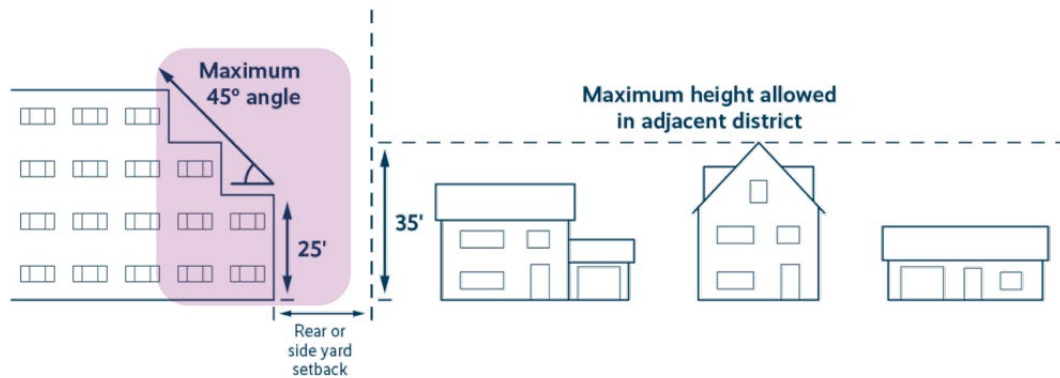
- **Creates a visual transition:** softens the scale shift between commercial and residential areas.
- **Enhances street-level experience:** improves sunlight, air, and comfort for pedestrians.
- **Allows green space:** setbacks can provide landscaping and trees.
- **Promotes consistent aesthetics:** ensures cohesive neighborhood character.
- **Improves safety and access:** supports emergency response and reduces fire spread risk.

I understand your priority is to facilitate profitable development in Madison, but this should not come at the expense of your constituents. If I were to revise the proposal, it would state:

*Subdivision (d) entitled "Rear or Side Yard Height Transition to Residential Districts" of Subsection (3) entitled "Dimensional Requirements" of Section 28.064 entitled "Neighborhood Mixed-Use District" of the Madison General Ordinances is amended as follows: "(d) Rear or Side Yard Height Transition to Residential Districts. **Where the NMX District abuts a residential district at the rear or side lot line, the maximum building height at the required setback shall not exceed the ceiling elevation of the highest occupiable story of the abutting structure as a permitted use.** From this point, building height may increase at a ratio of one foot of rise to one foot of horizontal distance away from the property line, (a 45° angle) up to the maximum allowed height. Transitions exceeding this height and/or ratio*

limitation require conditional use approval. (See Figure D12)

This wording change will ensure a gradual transition between residential and commercial buildings, covering a variety of circumstances, while still allowing for the option of a higher height limit where appropriate.



Thank you for your time,
Graham Petit
608.320.2170

On Sun, Sep 28, 2025 at 4:30 PM Vidaver, Regina <district5@cityofmadison.com> wrote:

Hi Graham,

Thanks for sharing your concerns with me.

I'm not entirely sure I follow your argument. The goal is to have the area of a new building adjacent to an existing height limit match that height limit. So, if the height limit for the adjacent area is 2 stories, the new building will be limited to that at the step-back point (like for the new building that's been approved on University Ave), but if the height limit for the adjacent area is 3 stories, then that will be the limit. It creates a standard process of matching area height limits, rather than having the arbitrary height limit of 2 stories regardless of the area next to the new build.

There are often a number of conditional uses that need to be ironed out with these projects, with the height limit/step back being only one, so I don't agree these changes will necessarily circumvent the conditional use approval process. Again, using the new building on University Ave as an example, they needed a conditional use approval on that transition because a couple of the balconies are proposed to overhang the 45 degree line of transition on one of the floors by a few inches. So, although they are in keeping with the majority of the zoning and step-back requirements, they needed conditional use approval for that small issue.

I am a sponsor of this ordinance change, so will support it, but if you have concerns that I'm not understanding well, please let me know – there may be opportunities to improve the proposed ordinance change. Please feel free to use the existing language and provide suggested mark up if you see it as a way to improve understanding.

Thanks for remaining engaged!

Best wishes,

Regina Vidaver, District 5 Alder

Common Council President

City of Madison, WI

District5@cityofmadison.com

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For Zoning related questions: <https://www.cityofmadison.com/dpced/bi/zoning-signs/14/>

From: Graham Petit <gpetit@gmail.com>

Sent: Thursday, September 11, 2025 11:28 AM

To: Vidaver, Regina <district5@cityofmadison.com>

Subject: Increase maximum allowed heights in height transition areas

Caution: This email was sent from an external source. Avoid unknown links and attachments.

Hello Regina,

I am writing to express my strong opposition to the proposed zoning amendment that would increase the maximum allowed heights in height transition areas by replacing the current 25-foot/two-story step-down limit with the maximum height permitted in the adjacent residential district.

The existing “step down” rule serves an important purpose: it creates a clear buffer between larger commercial or mixed-use development and nearby homes. This protects neighborhood character, maintains access to light and air, and prevents residential properties from being overshadowed by abrupt height increases.

This proposal is also inconsistent with the City of Madison’s **Comprehensive Plan**, which specifically emphasizes the need for sensitive transitions. On page 36, *Action b* states: *“Ensure that redevelopment is well-integrated with adjacent low-density residential areas.”* The plan further clarifies that *“Mixed-use development must also be carefully designed where the use adjoins less intense residential development. Additional setbacks and architectural features such as stepbacks may be needed to transition mixed-use development to less intense surrounding development.”*

By raising the step-down limit to match the maximum residential district height, the proposal undermines these policies. Instead of reinforcing a transition, it effectively eliminates it, allowing taller structures to loom directly over neighboring properties.

Additionally, this change appears to sidestep the **conditional use process**, which currently provides a safeguard by requiring the Plan Commission to evaluate whether proposed development would impair “the uses, values, and enjoyment of other property in the neighborhood for purposes already established.” Removing this review takes away an important layer of community input and oversight that ensures new development respects the character and livability of established neighborhoods.

While I recognize the City’s goals to expand housing opportunities, this approach tilts too far in favor of development intensity at the expense of the Comprehensive Plan’s principles of compatibility, balance, and neighborhood protection. Madison can grow without disregarding the very standards meant to integrate new buildings with existing communities.

For these reasons, I urge you to oppose this zoning change and maintain the current 25-foot/two-story height transition standard.

Thank you for your consideration and for continuing to represent the interests of our neighborhoods.

Graham Petit
334 Glenway Street

From: gordian@nym.hush.com
To: [Plan Commission Comments](#)
Cc: [All Alders](#)
Subject: Oppose Item 13; Legistar 89917
Date: Friday, October 3, 2025 2:51:07 PM

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Fri. Oct. 3, 2025

Madison Plan Commission members,

Please oppose Item 13, Legistar 89917, which would increase the minimum required heights of building setbacks in transition areas. [1] This change would turn Madison streets into areas of ugly, concrete canyons and is inconsistent with Madison's Comprehensive Plan, Amended December 5, 2023.

First, a note on terminology is needed. What the "Fall 2025 Housing Forward Proposals" web page calls a "step down" is what Madison's Comprehensive Plan, Amended December 5, 2023 [2] calls a "setback". This comment will use the word "setback".

The web page for "Fall 2025 Housing Forward Proposals" says,

"This [step down] requirement is called the "height transition area" and is intended to help transition the scale of buildings when moving from a more intense to a less intense zoning district." [3]

Aesthetic concerns about the scale of adjacent buildings are not the main purpose of setbacks. The Madison Comprehensive Plan, Amended December 5, 2023, calls for, "4. Building setbacks to lessen massing and shadow impacts;" [2; p. 43] The purpose of setbacks is avoid narrow concrete canyons between adjacent tall buildings and to admit light and air to the street level. Given this understanding of the purpose of setbacks, the presence of tall buildings adjacent to new buildings makes the lower, 25 foot standard for the start of setbacks even more imperative. Two adjacent tall buildings increase the importance of setbacks to "lessen massing and shadow impacts" as Madison's Comprehensive Plan requires.

Madison's zoning code must be consistent with the Comprehensive Plan. [4] Legistar 89917 is inconsistent with Madison's Comprehensive Plan and must be rejected.

The PLANNING DIVISION STAFF REPORT on Legistar 89917, of October 6, 2025, admits that Legistar 89917, "allows for some additional building mass in the lowest stories of some buildings by-right". [5; p. 3] Legistar 89917 thus contradicts the Madison Comprehensive Plan, Amended December 5, 2023, which calls for, "4. Building setbacks to lessen massing and shadow impacts;" [2; p. 43] The contradiction is "**additional building mass** in the lowest stories" versus

"building setbacks to **lessen massing** and shadow impacts. [Emphasis added]

The web page for "Fall 2025 Housing Forward Proposals" offers an example which shows how the proposed increase in the height of the first setback would lead to adjacent buildings with flat facades that do not admit light and air to the street level.

"Here is another example: if a development was being proposed for a lot that was directly next to a Traditional Residential – Urban 2 (TR-U2) zoning district, which has a higher maximum height allowed due to its more urban setting, an increase from the current 25-foot maximum to the TR-U2 maximum of 52 feet could result in several additional full floors of homes on the sides and rear of the building that weren't possible under current requirements". [3]

Two building facades on adjacent buildings that rise 52 feet before the first setback do not "lessen massing and shadow impacts" as Madison's Comprehensive Plan requires. [2; p. 43]

Future generations will be condemned to live in a dark, claustrophobic environment. In their obsession with the quantity of housing units, City officials are ignoring the quality of life that future residents will experience.

Thank you for reading this comment.

Don Lindsay

SOURCES

[1] Legistar 89917 web page

<https://madison.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=7656025&GUID=8C69D5DE-950D-427F-8C7B-92B5A6EBC0E2&Options=ID|Text|Attachments|Other|&Search=>

Accessed 20250915

[2] Madison Comprehensive Plan, Amended December 5, 2023 Part 1:

https://www.cityofmadison.com/dpced/planning/documents/2024_Comprehensive_Plan_Part1.pdf

Accessed 20250922

"4. Building setbacks to lessen massing and shadow impacts;" [p. 43]

[3] Housing Forward Fall 2025 web page

<https://www.cityofmadison.com/mayor/priorities/housing-forward/fall-2025-housing-forward-proposals>

Accessed 20250911

[4] [MGO] 28.003 Relationship to Comprehensive Plan.

https://library.municode.com/wi/madison/codes/code_of_ordinances?nodeId=COORMAWIVOIICH20--31_CH28ZOCOOR_SUBCHAPTER_28AINPR_28.003RECOPL

Accessed 20250826

"[MGO] 28.003 Relationship to Comprehensive Plan.

"The Madison Comprehensive Plan establishes the goals, objectives and strategies that serve as a basis for this zoning code. All regulations or amendments adopted pursuant to this ordinance shall be generally consistent with the Comprehensive Plan as adopted and revised or updated."

[5] PLANNING DIVISION STAFF REPORT of October 6, 2025

<https://madison.legistar.com/View.ashx?M=F&ID=14818238&GUID=CA129F7F-578A-4DD6-ABDF-E2EDC270DFF0>

Accessed 20250925

"While this code change increases the height at which this transition is required to occur, and thus allows for some additional building mass in the lowest stories of some buildings by-right, a conditional use will still be required for any requested exceptions to these height transition rules."

p. 3