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Good Afternoon,

I am reaching out to understand where I can begin receiving support within our housing community and to share ongoing challenges I have experienced while developing in the City of Madison.

I have been a developer for 11 years and a Realtor for 16. I grew up in Sun Prairie and have lived with my family in Madison for nearly 20 years. I have completed successful projects in surrounding communities, yet Madison continues to be the most difficult environment in which to operate.

At Jannah Village, we followed the neighborhood plan closely, with a mix of single-family and multi-family homes. We have consistently drawn strong interest from reputable builders, but four separate builders, including Lennar, Eldon, DR Horton, and now Loos, have placed lots under contract and later withdrawn (Hoping Loos wont). All cited the same issues: unclear expectations, excessive regulatory control, and long approval timelines. A single-home approval should not take three months, nor should minor revisions require multiple 2 to 3 week review cycles.

One of the largest barriers is the attached garage ordinance, which limits street-facing garage doors to 50 percent of the home's façade and requires a mandatory 2-foot recess. I understand the original intent, which was to reduce garage dominance and promote walkable, porch-focused streets based on early New Urbanist design principles. While well intended at the time, this standard no longer aligns with modern construction realities. Most national and regional builders rely on standardized home designs with front-loaded garages. These plans do not comply with the strict percentage rule or recess requirement, and redesigning models solely for Madison is not economically feasible.

As a result, the ordinance unintentionally eliminates many standard home models, slows down approvals, increases construction costs, and limits the supply of starter and mid-priced homes. Surrounding communities like Sun Prairie, Fitchburg, Middleton, Verona, and Waunakee either do not regulate garage width at all or treat it as a flexible guideline rather than a rigid mandate. Madison's approach is now one of the most restrictive in the region and has become a primary driver of builder withdrawals.

Below is a recent message from our current builder under contract:

“Madison is a completely different process than what I am used to. We have had three models kicked back for zoning issues after the city held our application for at least 10 business days. We redesigned a ranch model after it was kicked back three weeks ago, only for it to be rejected again three weeks later because the garage doors exceeded 50 percent of the façade. Porches, which we assumed counted toward façade width, apparently do not, but the code does not clarify this. We want to gain momentum in Madison, but right now we are spinning our wheels.”

At this point, I am actively seeking assistance from any staff member who can help Loos navigate the current process. It would be incredibly disappointing to see yet another builder pull out of a contract simply due to the city’s slow timelines and lack of responsiveness. No one wants to step on the city staff’s feet but at this point I need to speak up and help assist Loos out in helping them get a direct point of contact that will respond in a timely manner.

Something personally I can speak about to provide an example of how long it takes the city staff to respond would be our Letter of Credit (LOC) reductions in the subdivision. It took over six months just to receive a response. Eventually, my lender had to get creative and send a notice stating that the LOC would be withdrawn within 60 days if we did not hear back. Unsurprisingly, we still did not receive a response, and we ultimately chose not to renew the LOC. These kinds of delays create unnecessary financial strain and discourage future investment.

These issues are compounded by excessive oversight on minor items. The city is understaffed, yet the current level of regulatory control requires staff to review even small changes that could be approved in minutes. For example, removing a railing on a grade-level porch can require 2–4 months of review. Changing a building color requires resubmission and another full city staff approval cycle. This process overburdens staff and slows down projects that could otherwise move forward quickly.

This is not a new problem. Any developer working in Madison can share a similar story. We have another 32 acres down the street from our current development, but we are hesitant to move forward with it unless the City makes improvements to its processes.

Two areas in particular need attention if I may add a suggestion:

1. Ordinances that limit design flexibility

These include:

- Front porch encroachments (Sec. 28.132). Open porches may encroach 7 feet into setbacks, while enclosed porches may not.
- Deck encroachments. Uncovered decks under 3 feet may fully encroach, but other configurations cannot.
- Attached garage regulations. Street-facing garage doors may not exceed 50 percent of the façade width and must be recessed 2 feet. This standard no longer reflects modern building practices or market expectations and eliminates many common home designs used by both national and regional builders.

2. Application timelines and response requirements

Clear, predictable, and enforceable review timelines are essential. Minor modifications should be handled quickly and should not trigger lengthy staff review cycles or repeated multi-week resubmittal rounds.

Most modern home plans, especially from big builders like DR Horton, Lennar, Loos have:

2–3 car garages,

front-facing designs,

attached garages integrated into the main façade.

The 50% rule and the recess requirement make these standard plans non-compliant, forcing custom redesigns for Madison alone.

I understand the original intent of the ordinance, to promote walkable, attractive neighborhoods with active front façades. However, the current market, lot sizes, and builder practices have changed dramatically since the ordinance was created. The rigid percentage calculation and mandatory recess requirements no longer fit today's construction environment and are actively discouraging national and local builders from participating in Madison's housing market.

Comparison to Other Communities (WI + Midwest)

Sun Prairie

No 50% façade-width limit.

No required recess.

Encourages garage recess but does not mandate dimensions.

Fitchburg

Recess preferred but not required.

No numerical garage-door-width percentage requirement.

Middleton

No 50% rule.

Some districts call for “reduced visual prominence,” but not specific dimensions and no recess mandate.

Verona

No garage façade % limit.

No recess requirement.

Waunakee

Recommends garage recess by design, but NOT a hard 2-ft rule.

No 50% façade-width requirement.

DeForest

No % limit.

No recess requirement.

Cottage Grove, Stoughton, Oregon

Same trend: no 50% limit and no fixed recess requirement.

We all share the same goal: to create housing for the people who live and work in Madison. To achieve that, we need a process that is efficient, predictable, and aligned with current construction realities. Updating key ordinances and establishing realistic, accountable timelines would be significant steps forward.

I would appreciate the opportunity to discuss these challenges further and work together on meaningful solutions.

Thank you,

Lindsay Hagens

Have a blessed day!

