

Realtors, residents push back on controversial Cascade zoning plan

Kate Carlson - November 7, 2025



Credit: Courtesy of Cascade Township

The head of Cascade Township's planning commission called prospective housing and commercial developers "barbarians at the gate," as officials advance a controversial zoning overhaul that's drawing concerns from the real estate community for being anti-development.

The new comprehensive zoning ordinance comes as Cascade Township confronts growing development interest, but real estate experts and some residents say the plan is counterproductive and infringes on property rights.

Critics point to the township's ongoing efforts to limit residential density as well as industrial development in outlying areas near Gerald R. Ford International Airport, the latter of which has already brought a court ruling against the township.

The debate came to a head on Wednesday night during a packed township board of trustees meeting, when dozens of members of the public weighed in on the proposed ordinance.

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That included the brazen remarks from Cascade Township Planning Commission Chairman Alan Rowland that took aim at prospective developers.

"The barbarians are the people that want to develop and put seven-story apartment complexes in, that want to have low-income housing, that want to have hotels and banks

and truck stops, and the planning commission has held the line and stopped that," Rowland, who's lived in the township for nearly 50 years and has served on the planning commission for five, said during the public comment portion of Wednesday's meeting.

As planning commission chair, Rowland said he was "intimately involved" with reviewing the ordinance.

"I'm looking to keep Cascade special so that it's special when my kids come here and live here," he added. "I understand that it's tough for a young family to get in here, but again I think part of the reason Cascade is so special is because it's something you strive for, something you attain. ...When you get here you realize how special it is because it was so hard to get here."

The township board of trustees voted 4-3 Wednesday to formally introduce the zoning ordinance and zoning map that will replace its existing ordinance. The board will likely deliberate over the proposed ordinance for months. Trustees pledged to hold educational sessions with the community on proposed changes, while an economic study will be conducted to determine how proposed zoning changes would affect businesses and property owners.

Meanwhile, local real estate experts and other opponents are digging in.

Mark Ansara, partner and senior vice president at Advantage Commercial Real Estate, said the proposed zoning plan "limits development dramatically from what it is today." He joined several residents who spoke at the meeting to urge the township to gather more public input before voting.

"The goal of (the zoning ordinance) is to enhance the village, but at what cost and to whom?" Ansara said. "It's a huge infringement on property rights, my investors and myself included. It may end up lowering property values."



Attendees at the Cascade Township Board of Trustees meeting on Nov. 5. Credit: Kate Carlson, Crain's Grand Rapids Business

'Containing industrial'

Cascade Township spans about 34 square miles southeast of the city of Grand Rapids, with a population of just fewer than 20,000 people and median household income of nearly \$114,000 in 2021. The township includes the Gerald R. Ford International Airport, the confluence of I-96 and M-6, a section of the Thornapple River just south of the Grand River, and a 2.5-mile commercial corridor along 28th Street SE.

The township started revisiting its zoning ordinance as a result of updating its master plan, which was adopted in July 2024. At the beginning of the master plan document, Cascade Township Supervisor Grace Lesperance states in a memo that the township's former master plan from 2019 "encouraged industrial development" around the airport, which she said would "drastically change the nearby rural areas and neighborhoods."

"Our 2024 master plan protects and buffers this part of Cascade, and emphasizes smart growth that (complements) and enhances residents' safety, quality of life and property values."

Indeed, the new master plan states that industrial areas "are not intended or envisioned to expand."

John Kuiper, CEO of Advantage Commercial Real Estate and broker specializing in industrial deals, called the proposed zoning ordinance "incredibly inhibitive to any kind of development."

"If you look back at the (origin) of most communities, people lived, worked, worshiped and educated their kids all in a community," Kuiper said. "We can't just have residential without

the retail, without the office, without the industrial.

"It strikes me as so odd that you would push so hard against additional development next to an airport," Kuiper said. "Why can't there be a concept from this township where we have quality residential and quality retail and quality office and quality industrial, and not just exclusively what a few people have an agenda to drive, which may be high-end residential."

However, the township's recent attempts to restrict industrial development near the airport have been rejected by a local judge.

In March 2024, the Gerald R. Ford International Airport Authority sued Cascade Township in Kent County Circuit Court for violating the Zoning Enabling Act, as well as encroaching on the airport's ability to exercise its development rights as a regional airport. Through a master plan amendment, the township sought to rezone areas east of the airport from industrial to residential.

While township officials have said the industrial restrictions are meant to prevent the spread of legacy PFAS contamination, Circuit Judge Mark Trusock ruled in favor of the airport last fall and denied the township's attempt to dismiss the case. The township appealed to the Michigan Court of Appeals, where the case is pending.

Housing problem

Andrea Hendrick, the township's community planning and development director, said the proposed zoning ordinance largely keeps regulations in place but updates and eliminates some conflicting language.

Township trustees initially sought to eliminate new residential development in Cascade Village, centered at the corner of Cascade Road and Thornapple River Drive, but added it back in as an allowable use in October following community feedback, Hendrick said. Across the township, the density of new residential projects that could be built has mostly increased slightly or stayed the same, Hendrick said.

The highest amount of residential density allowed in the proposed zoning plan is 20 units per acre in the Starr and Glenwood overlay districts, if developers qualify for additional density by making certain commitments, such as preserving natural spaces and existing trees on site, or include active or passive recreation space. The two overlay districts are west of I-96 near 28th Street and Kraft Avenue.

Several residents on Wednesday called on township officials to allow more housing, especially rental units that younger people and seniors could afford.

"Seniors like myself and my wife are looking at downsizing and there aren't many options for us," township resident Glenn Turek told the board. "That's a problem. Both our youth

and seniors have similar housing needs. We want smaller housing but we want high quality and affordable housing. The secret to solving this housing problem is really in your hands.”

Township pushes preservation

Kuiper, Ansara and several residents and realtors also raised concerns over proposed form-based code districts that add restrictions in Cascade Village and surrounding areas along Cascade Road, 28th Street and Old 28th Street.

The form-based code does allow for vertical mixed use development in some areas, but also is prescriptive in specific building massing, architectural features and design of new developments.

“The info that has been provided and what’s on the table is excessive at the minimum,” Kuiper said. “The form-based code basically is nothing more than a document that allows the township to tell anybody that they can or can’t do anything.”

The township’s current zoning ordinance failed to address “intense growth pressures,” said Township Supervisor Grace Lesperance.

She said the township’s goals of the proposed zoning ordinance include “containing industrial” development, preserving property values and neighborhood quality of life, and increasing the quality of development. She also said goals include increasing residential and mixed-use districts where they were not previously permitted and developing a walkable village area by promoting growth.

“In short, to make sure the Cascade community has the right development in the right place, done right,” Lesperance said.

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