

# Position Paper on Ground Floor Office Use in the Wealthy Street Business District

## Overview.

Recent economic growth has transformed the Wealthy Street Business District into one of Grand Rapids' premiere neighborhoods for business development. The stretch of Wealthy Street from Fuller to Union, previously an area populated with empty storefronts and dilapidated buildings, is now a thriving, vibrant and popular community for residents and businesses alike.

This shifting dynamic has given the area's residents and business leaders an opportunity to help guide the area's development through the City's zoning and planning process. The Wealthy Street Business Alliance (WSBA), a local organization made up of neighborhood business owners, is often asked by City officials to take a position on upcoming development decisions. The WSBA's position is often a significant consideration in the City's decision whether or not to provide Special Land Use permits to applicants. This document can serve as a guide in the process of locating your business in the Wealthy Street Business Alliance service area.

## Zoning.

The [City of Grand Rapids Zoning Ordinance](#) provides the legal basis for land use decisions in the municipality. As defined by Section 5.1.03, the Zoning Ordinance describes its purpose as to (in relevant part):

- *Provide places for residence, recreation, industry, trade, services, and other uses of land;*
- *Ensure uses of land are situated in appropriate locations;*
- *Preserve the overall quality of life for residents and visitors;*
- *Protect the character and quality of established residential neighborhoods;*
- *Maintain and enhance economically vibrant as well as attractive business and commercial areas;*

- *Promote pedestrian, bicycle and public transit use;*
- *Ensure adequate light, air, privacy, and access to property;*
- *Encourage environmentally responsible development practices;*
- *Promote rehabilitation and reuse of older buildings;*
- *Establish clear, fair and efficient development review and approval procedures;*
- *And more....*

In support of these goals, the Zoning Ordinance defines the vast majority of the WSBA service area as falling under the Traditional Business Area (TN-TBA) zoning designation. This zoning designation is defined in Section 5.6.02.C as:

*The TN–TBA Zone District is designed to reinforce a pedestrian- and transit-friendly environment in a compact area characterized by a mix of uses. Small lot sizes, storefront windows, observable building entrances, structures that abut the sidewalk and on-street or hidden off-street parking all contribute towards the establishment of a pedestrian-oriented Zone District. A mix of small-scale retail, service, entertainment, civic, and upper-level office and residential uses are encouraged to enhance the vitality of the areas. High quality architectural design and materials are important components of all structures to reinforce existing neighborhood character. New development on primary and secondary street frontages shall be compatible in use and scale with surrounding, existing uses and structures. The recommendations for Traditional Business Area in a Pre-World War II Neighborhood Context, Chapter 10, Section 10.4. of the Master Plan applies to these areas.*

Under this definition, and further explained in use Table 5.6.06.B., a TN-TBA zoned district is a robust and flexible district. Yet, because many allowed land uses impact the surrounding area, **a Special Land Use (SLU) permit may be required** in advance of occupancy and use of the premises by the tenant/landowner. A Special Land Use permit is required in a TN-TBA district for uses such as: ground floor office, ground floor social services, educational uses, ground floor medical offices, or ground floor bank uses.

Alternatively, a TN-TBA zoned district allows many uses by right, meaning they do not require any type of clearance of the use prior to occupancy. Examples of uses in a TN-TBA zoned district that are allowed by right include: ground floor retail uses like antique shops or clothing stores, restaurants that do not serve alcohol, fitness/dance/yoga studios, upper floor office uses, or upper floor medical uses.

A SLU permit is obtained through an application process and a hearing with the City of Grand Rapids Planning Commission. This hearing gives the Planning Commission the opportunity to evaluate how a proposed use will impact the City's planning goals as defined by the area's zoning designation. As part of the Planning Commission's effort to determine the appropriateness of a proposed use, significant deference is given to the opinions of neighbors, residents and local business leaders. Groups like the WSBA then provide the Planning Commission with an assessment of how the proposed use meets the needs of the neighborhood in light of the goals of the zoning ordinance.

### **The WSBA and Land Use**

In providing feedback to the Planning Commission on the appropriateness of a specific Special Land Use request within the Wealthy Street Business Alliance service area, the WSBA is primarily concerned with how the proposed use improves our neighborhood. With this in mind, the WSBA may or may not issue letters of support for uses after reviewing a set of criteria and determining whether the proposed use meets our goals for the neighborhood. The WSBA's goals for the neighborhood include (but are not limited to): support for diversity, increasing economic and social vibrancy, and building a community that is interesting, welcoming, environmentally sustainable, and engaged.

SLU requests for ground floor office uses are a specific concern to the WSBA and the Planning Commission. These requests are controversial because ground floor office uses often fail to increase the vibrancy of a neighborhood. Offices are generally characterized by having a limited number of employees and defined clientele that visit the office for a specific purpose, and therefore seldom interact with other area businesses. Alternately, patrons of restaurants

or retail stores tend to come to the area for a more social purpose, and are more likely to visit other area businesses. As a result, the WSBA looks for compelling reasons to support SLU applications for ground floor offices. To help provide transparency to applicants requesting a SLU for a ground floor office, the WSBA has put together a list of information we seek from an applicant before we can come to a position on their SLU request.

In determining whether the WSBA will support a particular SLU request, the specific location of the proposed use is a primary consideration. As the WSBA service area is not a uniform block of buildings and uses, it is important for us to assess how a use will fit the fabric of its immediate area. In this respect, we have developed a map to show our preferred development patterns.

Areas coded in red on the map are less likely to receive our support for ground floor office uses. Areas coded green are more likely to receive our support for ground floor office use. These color codes largely reflect our view of the appropriateness of additional ground floor office uses in an area.

The close proximity of the buildings in areas coded red result in distinct "park and walk" sections of the street, making them conducive to foot traffic and urban vibrancy. Therefore, ground floor office use requests in these areas are less likely to receive WSBA support. Areas with a less coherent urban dynamic and less dense structural footprint are generally coded green, making office uses in these areas more likely to receive our support.

Whether in a green or red area on our associated map, the WSBA hopes to understand the potential impact of your use. To do so, we ask that applicants for ground floor office SLUs answer the following questions on their proposed use:

1. How would your ground floor office use improve the area's vibrancy?
2. What is your intention regarding interactive engagement with the neighborhood and community?
3. How will your ground floor office use impact the street level transparency of the area?

4. Is your business locally based and organized? How will you improve WSBA's support for local business?
5. What are your hours of operation?
6. How much investment will you put into your building? Are you an owner/operator?
7. How many employees will reside in the building?
8. What is the service area of your business customers/clients?
9. How many customers/clients do you expect to come to the building for your services on a weekly basis?
10. How will you advance community engagement in the area?

### **Conclusion.**

The vast majority of the property located in the Wealthy Street Business Alliance's service area is zoned as TN-TBA. Under the City of Grand Rapids Zoning Ordinance, TN-TBA zoned districts are permissive but still require many business uses in to gain Special Land Use (SLU) permits prior to operation. Because of their impact on a neighborhood, Special Land Use permits are required for ground floor office uses. The City of Grand Rapids Planning Commission solicits feedback from local residents and neighborhood groups when deciding whether to grant a SLU permit. In providing this feedback to the Planning Commission, the WSBA asks that you take the time to consider our goals for the neighborhood and how your proposed ground floor office use will impact those goals. Our decision to support or deny support to a proposed use will be done on the basis of a set of criteria that will help us understand how your proposed use will improve the neighborhood.

Thank you,

Wealthy Street Business Alliance