



Midtown Neighborhood Alliance

June 2, 2025

City Plan Commission:

My name is Megan Shepard Smith, and I am the Lead Community Strategist for the Midtown Neighborhood Alliance and a resident of the Midtown neighborhood.

First, thank you to the City Plan Commission and the Department of City Development for responding to community concerns and pausing the Growing MKE plan last year. That pause made room for the public engagement process that followed, bringing us closer to something that reflects what people actually need.

Over the past year, the community has asked for four main things: a pause in the approval process, deeper engagement, a clear analysis of how past planning decisions have affected people, and changes to the plan that reflect real feedback. We've seen movement on each of these, and that progress matters.

But we need to be clear about what made that progress possible. It wasn't new talking points or polished presentations. It was the decision to listen, the deepening understanding of the crucial need to get in front of people early, and to treat residents as *real* partners. That's not just a step in the process, it's the foundation of good planning. You start by sitting down with the community to understand their priorities and build with them, side by side, from beginning to end.

When I testified before this commission last July, I said that much of the public opposition wasn't about the plan itself, but about how it was introduced; that it was without real, community-grounded engagement. Commissioner Crane also pointed out that inner-city communities require an incredibly different approach to engagement. The specific needs of inner-city neighborhoods can't be captured through theory, case studies, or best practices from elsewhere. This work requires relationships, lived experience, and the trust that comes only from working alongside residents who live with the outcomes every day.

The way this plan was shaped after the pause shows what community-led work makes possible. It also shows that people aren't against change. They just want a voice in shaping it.

That same approach needs to become the standard for every zoning update that follows and across all City of Milwaukee departments. Residents must be involved from the beginning, not brought in after decisions are made. We need early conversations, local leadership at the table, and a clear commitment to shared decision-making.



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The updated Housing Element reflects more of that input. It moves closer to what neighborhoods like Midtown have been asking for: a chance to improve their blocks, stay in their homes, and build stability for their families. That's especially true when it comes to Accessory Dwelling Units.

ADUs are not a sweeping overhaul. They're gentle, flexible options that let homeowners use their property to care for aging parents, keep adult children nearby, or generate income that helps them stay in place. These small additions help families stay connected, offer choices across life stages, and let neighborhoods grow in ways that feel natural and familiar.

Arguments against by-right ADUs and duplexes often focus on preserving "neighborhood character." But too many people are already being priced or zoned out of the communities they call home. ADUs and duplexes are small-scale ways to help families stay rooted. They support homeowners, help older adults age in place, and allow extended families to live near each other affordably. These options don't replace homeownership, they actually strengthen it. And when built on owner-occupied lots, they help preserve neighborhood character and accountability.

Fears about doubling density or destabilizing neighborhoods often mask deeper exclusionary instincts. Zoning has long been used to separate people. We have a responsibility to change that. Building only on vacant lots won't meet the scale of the need. If we truly want to make every neighborhood welcoming, we need more housing choices—like ADUs and duplexes in single-family areas—not to convert entire blocks to rentals, but to give people real, affordable options and keep communities whole.

This is a moment for Milwaukee to move forward by listening first and planning in partnership with residents. The work doesn't stop with this plan. In fact, the most important part of the work begins now. Because if the zoning code is going to change, then the way we make those decisions must also change to center community at the table from the first conversation to the final outcome.

Thank you for your time and for staying committed to building a city that listens to its people and plans with them, not just for them.

A handwritten signature in dark ink that reads "M. Shepard Smith". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

Megan Shepard Smith
Lead Community Strategist
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