



MCKENNA

Memorandum

TO: Grosse Pointe Woods
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FROM: Ashley E. Amey, Assistant Planner
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SUBJECT: **Front Yard Structures**

DATE: August 15, 2023

Post-pandemic, home gardening has become more popular, as the pandemic prompted many people to spend more time at home, leading to increased interest in gardening as a productive and fulfilling activity. Home gardens are a cheaper alternative to shopping at grocery stores, promote food security, and benefit the environment through local diversity and pollinator habitat. Additionally, in the last decade, mini libraries, also known as Little Free Libraries, have been gaining popularity. The concept of Little Free Libraries involves placing small outdoor book-sharing stations in neighborhoods, allowing people to take or leave books.



The demand for front yard structures like gardens and Little Free Libraries has placed pressure on communities to change otherwise restrictive Zoning Ordinances that limit or do not allow front yard structures. Many communities and their residents see the value in having front yard structures that have the potential to increase sense of place and well-being, among providing other benefits.

Presently, **Section 8-336** of the Grosse Pointe Woods City Charter and Code explicitly **prohibits** front yard structures. We offer Ann Arbor and Marquette, Michigan as example communities for your consideration. Each city allows accessory structures within residential front yards.

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FRONT YARD STRUCTURES IN MICHIGAN

The City of Marquette, MI

The City of Marquette, Michigan, defines accessory structures as “a building and/or structure, the use of which is clearly subordinate and incidental to that of the principal building or to the use of the land located on the same lot.” The city allows for front yard structures in residential areas, provided that accessory structures:

- Follow setback and height requirements of the zoning district.
- Are erected on parcels of land that have a principal use building or use already established or being established with the accessory structure.
- Maintain any minimum separation requirements, as required by the Building Official.

The city’s broad definition and requirements of an accessory structure offer a wider range of flexibility for both residents and the city. A broader definition accounts for changes in lifestyle and technological advancements, ensuring that new and innovative structures like renewable energy-related structures are covered under zoning regulations. This is important, as well-designed accessory structures can add value to properties and enhance overall curb appeal, potentially leading to increased property values.

However, even though a broad definition of accessory structures is useful, it’s still necessary to ensure that new accessory structures are compatible with Grosse Pointe Woods. As such, accessory structures that are considered undesirable and potentially posing as nuisances should be explicitly prohibited within the ordinance.

The City of Marquette treats structures related to Minor Food Production, such as raised garden beds, differently than other accessory structures. Below we have summarized the requirements from Marquette’s Zoning Code, relevant to Grosse Pointe Woods, for Minor Food Production:

- 1. Minimum Setbacks and Clear Vision Triangle Area.** All garden structures must maintain a three-foot setback from all property lines as well as meet traffic visibility regulations. Garden vegetation shall not encroach onto adjacent lots.
- 2. Permitted Structures.** The following structures do not require a permit.
 - a) Trellises and Arbors** if located in a required setback, a maximum height of 8 ft.
 - b) Raised Planting Beds** if located in a required setback or in a front yard, a maximum height of 24 inches.
 - Must be kept out of public rights-of-way.
Planting beds higher than 24 inches must meet minimum setback requirements for accessory structures in the district.



An example of an arbor/trellis

By treating accessory structures that are related to minor food production differently than other accessory structures, the City of Marquette is promoting sustainability, local food systems, and community resilience. It’s recognized too that if garden-related structures are not maintained, they could become unsightly and take away from the purpose of allowing for them in the first place. Therefore, it’s also important to include language within the ordinance that requires the accessory structures be maintained properly.



The City of Ann Arbor, MI

The city of Ann Arbor, Michigan, takes a different approach to accessory structures by separating them into two different categories: enclosed and unenclosed.

Section 5.37.2 of Ann Arbor’s ordinance states, “The unenclosed portion of a Lot that is devoted to space for recreation, greenery, and household activities. Open Space area may include, but shall not be limited to, lawns, landscaping and gardens, wooded areas, sidewalks and walkways, active and passive recreational areas, unenclosed accessory Structures used for Recreational purposes, permanent or seasonal water surfaces, and protected natural areas. It shall not include areas covered by Parking Lots, Driveways, refuse facilities, or enclosed accessory Structures.”



A Free Little Library in Ann Arbor, MI

While Ann Arbor does not allow enclosed structures, such as sheds, within front yards, they do allow unenclosed structures. Ann Arbor’s approach is broader than Marquette’s approach, as they only regulate front yard structures based on whether or not they are enclosed / unenclosed rather than solely defining and regulating each structure separately.

Like Marquette, the broad definitions within the ordinance account for changes in lifestyle and technological advancements, ensuring that new and innovative structures are regulated. However, even with these broad definitions, certain structures in Ann Arbor are subject to extra regulation under Section 5.16.6 in order to preserve the intent of the zoning ordinance. Examples include dish antennas, solar panels, and wireless communication antennas.

ACCESSORY STRUCTURES IN SURROUNDING MUNICIPALITIES

The surrounding communities of Grosse Pointe Farms, Grosse Pointe, Grosse Pointe Park, Grosse Pointe Shores, and Harper Woods accessory structures with the following restrictions:

	Grosse Pointe Woods	Grosse Pointe Farms	Grosse Pointe	Grosse Pointe Park	Grosse Pointe Shores	Harper Woods
Front Yard						
Driveway/side walks	P	P	P	P	P	P
Accessory Structure	N	N	N	N	N	N
Fences	P (3’ max height)	P (4’ max height)	P (3’ max height)	N	N	P (3’)
Side Yard						
Driveway/side walks	P	P	P	P	P	P
Accessory Structure	N	N	P (3’)	P (Set by Schedule of Regulations, 3-5 ft setback)	P (no closer than principal home)	



Fences	P (6' max height)	P (4' max height)	P (6' max height)	P (4' max height)	N	P (6')
Rear Yard						
Driveway/side walks	P	P	P	P	P	P
Accessory Structure	P (6')	P (3')	P (6')	P (3')	P (10')	P
Fences	P (6' max height)	P (6' max height)	P (6' max height)	P (6' max height)	P (6' max height)	P (6')

(P) Permitted (N) Not permitted

FRONT YARD STRUCTURES IN GROSSE POINTE WOODS

Overall, we recommend that the City of Grosse Pointe Woods amend its zoning ordinance to allow front yard structures within residential zoning districts. This is an opportunity for Grosse Pointe Woods to enhance and personalize its residential areas, while still maintaining their beauty. Front yard structures, when properly regulated, can offer a variety of benefits. Gardens provide sustainability and educational opportunities. Trellises, arbors, and other decorative structures can provide uniqueness and opportunities for residents to personalize their homes.

Grosse Pointe Woods has the opportunity to observe what has worked and has not worked in communities like Ann Arbor and Marquette while making adjustments to fit the needs of the City and its residents. Below, we have listed our recommendations for the Zoning Ordinance.

The Grosse Pointe Woods Zoning Ordinance should be amended to reflect:

1. **A broad definition of front yard structures.** We recommend a definition similar to Ann Arbor, Michigan, which segregates front yard structures based on whether or not they are enclosed or unenclosed. Enclosed structures should remain in side and rear yards, while unenclosed structures be allowed, with some possible exceptions (playgrounds), in front yards.
The City also has the option to leave the definition of enclosed / unenclosed structures up to the Zoning Administrator's interpretation or to explicitly define them within the Zoning Ordinance.
2. **Additional restrictions on certain structures.** We recommend certain structures, such as small-scale wind, solar energy, dish antennas, and wireless communications antennas have additional restrictions. These restrictions can include screening, choosing to keep these structures in the rear and side yards, etc.
3. **A streamlined permitting process.** Grosse Pointe Woods has the opportunity to streamline the permitting process by not requiring them for certain structures. An example of this is how Marquette treats accessory structures related to minor food production, which do not require a permit as long as they comply with Zoning Ordinance standards.