The idea that Harbor Springs—a town of 1,274 with no stoplight, a town so quiet that you need to whisper when you walk down the street after midnight—is anything other than walkable or bike friendly is a joke. It's like saying the lake needs to be wetter. The sky needs to be bluer. This is the kind of thing you say when you are desperate to signal that you are "with it" or that you are forward-thinking. Talking about walkability and bike friendly in a quiet little town on the lake is just progressive signaling. It's fake, it's performative.

It's not an exaggeration to say that Harbor Springs is one of the most beautiful towns in Michigan. If you have been there, you know what I am talking about. If you have never been, you need to go. Now. Towns like this are an endangered species in our day and age. No weed shops on the corner. No Dollar General downtown. No clogged intersections where people run red lights without thinking twice. No sterile subdivisions. No endless stream of suburban strip malls.

Why would anyone want to throw this away? Why would you ever want to squander something so precious? Why would you want to make it more like everywhere else and less like itself? And why for something so fleeting?

As Fyodor Dostoevsky said, "Your worst sin is that you have destroyed and betrayed yourself for nothing."

Cultural Cultivation

As Fyodor Dostoevsky said, "Your worst sin is that you have destroyed and betrayed yourself for nothing."

The nail isn't in the coffin yet for Harbor Springs. In the wake of Ordinance 439, people have organized. There will be a citywide vote in November. The people will decide whether or not they want to keep Harbor Springs the way it is, or if they want to change Harbor Springs into a worse version of itself.

Driving around Harbor Springs, I see red sign after red sign calling to vote "yes" and Repeal Ord #439." In yards, on fences. Big houses, small houses. "Downtown, out of town. It's an election year, there are the presidential campaign signs all over, but there is something different about these red signs. They aren't signs about Washington D.C. They aren't even regional. They are local. It isn't abstract. It's very real. The battle for local culture is here.

It comes for all of us. It tries to roll over everything that makes us unique. It aims to erode distinction and difference. The cultural steamroller of the 21st century wants everything to be seamlessly interchangeable. The only way we can stop it is if we say no. If we advocate for ourselves. Cultivate the culture we love and protect the places we live.

O.W. Root is a writer based in Northern Michigan, with a focus on nature, food, style, and culture. Follow him on X @NecktieSalvage.

Michigan Enjoyer

It's a Beautiful Day

Michigan. The rhythm of the assembly line, the patter of a lonely trail. Detroit, Kalamazoo, the Upper Peninsula. A rare union of nature and industry. Dark days gone by. It was said to have been lost.

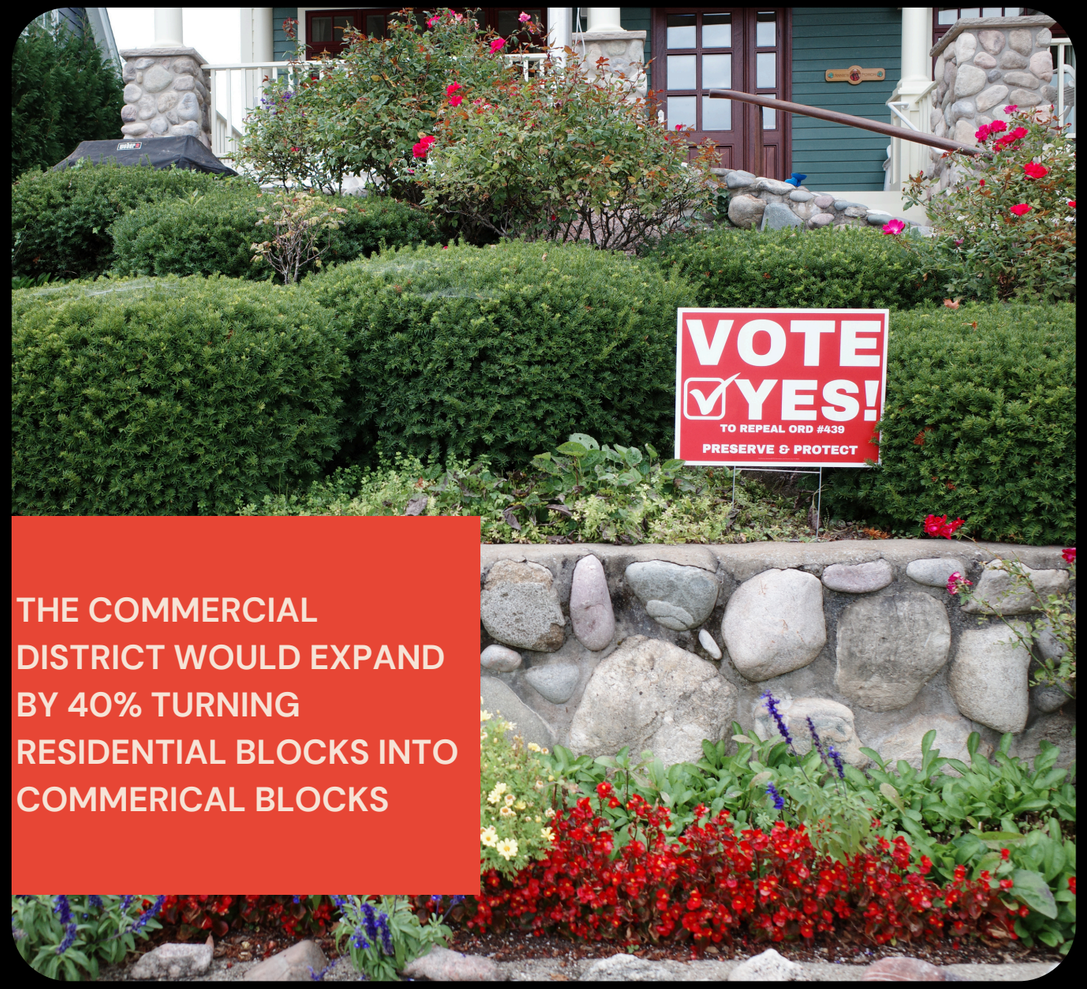
But for those who can see the forest for the trees, who can hear its choir of steel and yearn for urban renewal, it can be the vision of a new American Dream. And now, we need for Enjoyers to fill its sacred spaces, love its wild, and promote its industry. You're one of them.

Get out there and enjoy.

enjoyer.com

hello@enjoyer.com

THE CULTURAL STEAMROLLER HEADS FOR HARBOR SPRINGS



THE COMMERCIAL DISTRICT WOULD EXPAND BY 40% TURNING RESIDENTIAL BLOCKS INTO COMMERICAL BLOCKS

The consultant class wants to make this lakeside gem more like everywhere else

The Cultural Steamroller Heads for Harbor Springs

The consultant class wants to make this lakeside gem more like everywhere else

By O.W. Root **September 26, 2024**

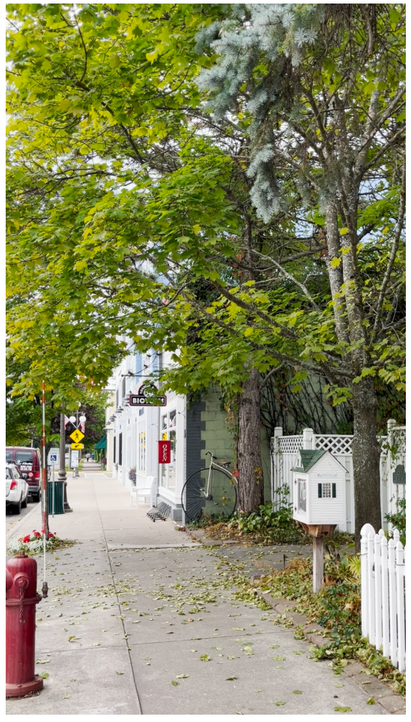


Harbor Springs — POV: You live in a small northern Michigan town with a population of 1,274. A powerful consulting firm, along with a well-funded NGO, is working to make your town more like every other town. They want it to be seamless. Easy to develop. Blandly profitable. How does that make you feel? Not so good, right? This isn't a hypothetical. It's not fiction. This is happening right now in Harbor Springs.

I first learned what was happening in Harbor Springs one humid August morning. Over black coffee, a concerned Harbor Springs resident told me what was going on as the town gently hummed and boats bobbed in the water. The story—like most stories that involve government bureaucracy—is convoluted. When it comes to the nitty gritty details, we have a tendency to zone out. But we can't. We can't look away. What's happening in Harbor Springs is related to you. It's happening to you, even if you don't know it yet. It might even be happening in your town, only you don't follow the local politics.

The story encapsulates our era. Global monoculture vs. local tradition. The urge to make every place interchangeable and the same, because it's better for the bottom line if we can make every place the same. Easier to market. Easier to develop. Easier to to change. The steamroller rolls over our traditions, our language, our homes, our myths, our art, our everything. Today, at every level, we are all up against a cultural steamroller

There is an NGO called the Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC). It encourages towns all around Michigan to streamline their zoning to become more attractive to outside investment and more amenable to development. How do they encourage towns to do this? With money. With grants. They give a portion up front, and then the rest later, as the town implements a liberalized land use policy. Meanwhile, they direct towns to utilize Beckett and Raeder, an Ann Arbor-based consulting firm, to help develop simplified zoning in order to streamline development. This is what is happening in Harbor Springs.





The city, in coordination with the MEDC and Beckett and Raeder, has been quietly rewriting their zoning policy in hopes of remaking this little Lake Michigan town. All this coordination came to fruition in the form of Ordinance 439, approved by the city council on May 12, 2024. Ordinance 439 achieves exactly what the MEDC and Beckett and Raeder hope to achieve. It expands the commercial district of Harbor Springs by 40%, turning previously residential blocks into commercial blocks. It simplifies zoning to make outside development quick and easy. It opens up Harbor Springs to unprecedented change, paving the way for it to be just like some other town in some other place.

"The city, in coordination with the MEDC and Beckett and Raeder, has been quietly rewriting their zoning policy in hopes of remaking this little Lake Michigan town."

Cultural Implications & Big Picture



Unless you have an advanced degree in economics and zoning law, you might have a hard time understanding what the long-term implications are. Brass tacks: You have a small city council working very quietly with an outside consulting firm to transform a picturesque town, made in the image Norman Rockwell, into an easily mutilated economic zone. Expansion for expansion's sake. Selling an endangered species for increased property tax revenue. That might sound extreme, but it's not an exaggeration. Small, beautiful, historical towns are not the way they are because of easy development. They exist because of careful cultivation and protection.

Why do Americans love to visit those little villages in France or Italy? Why do they stir something in us? It's because of the quaint little streets. The old small buildings that haven't been changed in years. We feel the history and culture in every breath. Being there is being somewhere else. It's not a shopping center. It has roots. We ache for that.

Why do Michiganders visit Harbor Springs generation after generation? For all the same reasons. The quiet little streets, the picturesque homes that feel like America ought to feel. They come here so they can get away from the synthetic culture of globalized mundanity. They don't visit so they can see more sleek condos stacked on top of shiny new business fronts. Harbor Springs is beautiful because it isn't like anywhere else. People like to claim that America doesn't have any culture. Well, we do. But we won't if every town with any sense of cultural continuity is gobbled up and flattened.

This push to change places like Harbor Springs isn't just based on economics and development. It's not only so the city can increase the tax revenue by way of property taxes (four condos on top of two businesses brings in more revenue than a single-family home on the same lot). There's a boring and predictable progressivism at play here as well. Apparently, a pressing goal for the planning commission is the desire to make Harbor Springs more walkable and bike friendly.