

MEMORANDUM

To: Harbor Springs Planning Commission
Date: February 2, 2026
From: Lynée Wells, AICP
RE: Height in Residential and Commercial Districts

For decades, the City's zoning code limited principal building height to 35' and 2 stories (2 ½ in R-1-A and R-1-E). To achieve the most interior volume of space, the half story enables extra space, often used as storage, attic, sleeping quarters, bonus room, play room, etc. The half story would be under a pitched roof, such as a gable, hip or gambrel roof. A half story is defined as space that does not exceed 50% of the area of the story below it, and where the distance between the floor and the sloping roof above it is more than 4'. If it is less than 4', that space would not be considered in the square footage limitation of 50% for a half story.

Historically, the pitched roof was utilized out of necessity due to snow load, allowing for shedding of water, ice and snow. The existing building pattern in the City is a 1-2.5 story home, most often with a pitch. New construction may have a flat roof, but that is limited to a one or two-story building.

The concern about introducing an additional permitted half story, by only regulating height in feet at 35', is the compatibility with the existing building stock and neighborhood/historic character of the City. Without limiting stories, it is likely we will see more 3 story buildings in the residential districts, especially where 1-2 story homes are the norm, changing the character of the community as land values rise and leasable space becomes more valuable, these larger and more voluminous structures may become the more prevalent. Additionally, similar to the images below, we may see more first-floor garage frontages along the street face.

(19) [Story, Half. The top story of a building, the entirety of which story lies under a sloping roof and/or a sloping roofing system, and: (a) Each roof composing the roofing system slopes an equal distance in each direction from the peak of each roof, and each roof within the roofing system has a minimum slope of 4/12 pitch; and, (b) Wall plates on at least two opposite exterior walls under each roof within the roofing system do not extend more than one foot above the finished floor of the top story; and, (c) The floor area of the top story does not exceed fifty (50%) percent of the area within the exterior walls of the building beneath the top story, provided that for purposes of this calculation, any portion of the floor area of the top story where the distance between the base floor and the base of the sloping roof is four feet or less, shall be excluded. If the top story of a building does not fit within the definition of a half-story, or within the definition of an unhabitable attic, the top story shall be considered a full story.]⁵⁸

Below are examples of new construction of three-story homes in Michigan lake shore communities.





To ensure compatibility and the continuation of the existing residential pattern, the Planning Commission may wish to return to the practice of regulating the maximum number of stories which has always been 2 ½.

Height in Commercial Districts

While the number stories may not be as much of a concern in the Commercial districts, since examples exist of 1-2-3 story buildings within the downtown area, the factor to consider is the height of the first story. The Harbor Springs commercial business district currently regulates building height through a maximum of 35 feet but lacks provisions for minimum first-floor heights or story requirements.

Without a minimum first-floor height standard, the ordinance permits commercial buildings with residential-scale ground floors (8-10 feet) that severely limit functional flexibility and long-term adaptability. While such buildings may initially house offices or small retail, they cannot accommodate restaurants with grease interceptors and ductwork, breweries or distilleries with tank systems, or retail operations requiring significant mechanical systems. This effectively locks buildings into limited use categories for their entire lifespan, reducing the economic resilience of the district. Historic commercial buildings in Harbor Springs and comparable Michigan resort communities typically feature 14-16 foot first-floor heights precisely because this dimension accommodated the diverse commercial activities that created vibrant downtowns.

The absence of story requirements compounds this issue by allowing developers to meet the 35-foot maximum through various configurations - potentially a single-story commercial building with excessive height, or a three-story building with inadequately proportioned floors. A thoughtful approach would establish minimum first-floor heights (12-15 feet is standard in contemporary downtown codes).

This ensures new construction complements Harbor Springs' historic pattern while maintaining the functional flexibility that allows commercial districts to evolve with changing market conditions. Such standards don't meaningfully constrain development but do ensure that new buildings contribute to long-term district vitality rather than creating future adaptive reuse challenges.

Grand Haven, out of scale first floor, without transparency (windows) at the ground floor, and the stories not matching the adjacent building.

South Haven bank building without a clear differentiation of stories, where the building may only have one story.

The design standards in the Downtown Overlay, Section 4.3.3 do provide for a minimum transparency on the ground level, but do not stipulate upper floor transparency.

Requiring a range of first floor heights between 12'-15' would help to create a consistent pattern of permeable edges along the pedestrian-oriented downtown streets.

These proposed standards don't restrict what can currently be built in Harbor Springs' downtown - rather, they codify the successful development pattern that already exists and that the community values.

The historic commercial district's walkable, human-scaled character with active ground floors and upper-story uses resulted from building practices that created adaptable, proportioned structures. Without minimum first-floor heights and story requirements, the current ordinance allows development that could fundamentally alter this character - single-story buildings stretched to maximum height, or multi-story buildings with ground floors too shallow to accommodate the restaurants, retail, and mixed uses that activate the district.

