

## **Revolutionary downtown Mesa zoning plan advances**

*Mesa council likes concepts in revolutionary downtown zoning code*

by Gary Nelson - Dec. 9, 2011 11:14 AM

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A revolutionary zoning code for downtown Mesa is now available for public review as it moves toward City Council approval next year.

The code is an addition to a massive rewrite of the overall zoning code that went into effect this year.

Downtown was singled out for special attention because Mesa believes that the coming of light rail, scheduled for 2015, could transform the district into a magnetic urban center.

The council, meeting jointly with the Planning and Zoning Board, got an overview of the richly illustrated, nearly 200-page document this week from Daniel Parolek, a California consultant who has been working on the code since early 2010.

Downtown is "making incremental steps in evolution," Parolek said.

"But I think the form-based code can be a tool to light a fire under that transformation."

Form-based zoning pays more attention to the size and shape of buildings than the activities that go on inside them.

Parolek said changes in Mesa should not mirror that of downtown Phoenix, which, for all its recent construction activity, "doesn't create any real sense of place."

Parolek is a nationally recognized expert in form-based zoning, which would be the basis for the new rules governing downtown.

In downtown Mesa, the code would require future developers to erect larger buildings along Main Street and other major arteries, while allowing flexibility in other areas.

The term Parolek used for that is a "hierarchy of places," all of which allow for a variety of uses.

The code offers only general guidelines for those uses, although Mayor Scott Smith pointed out, for example, that Mesa has no intention of allowing an "arsenic factory" to set up shop downtown.

"It's not a free-for-all," Smith said.

With the code in place, Parolek said Mesa would have to stick to its guns to make sure it produces the intended result.

He showed a photo of the southeastern corner of Main and Robson streets, now occupied by a sandwich shop.

Somebody, he said, is likely to propose an "auto-dependent" reuse of the corner but Mesa must insist on an "urban, transit-oriented format."

A couple of slides later, in a hypothetical future view, the south side of Main Street from Robson eastward is an uninterrupted wall of four- and five-story buildings.

Although the code is aimed primarily at private development, Parolek said the city has numerous opportunities to turn downtown into something special.

Responding to comments from people who said the area needs more public gathering spaces, Parolek singled out the government complex between Main and First streets, straddling Pepper Place.

He said over time that area could become a true civic center offering public plazas and a million square feet of high-end office space to attract businesses.

Smith noted that since Mesa owns land on both sides of Pepper Place, the street could easily be vacated for such a project.

Any such development would be years in the future and require millions of dollars in financing.

Parolek also identified three "special planning areas" consisting mostly of city-owned property:

The vacant 25-acre Site 17 at Mesa and University drives.

Just west of there, the site of the Mesa Convention Center.

The southeastern corner of First Avenue and Macdonald.

Those sites, Parolek said, could be "game-changers for your downtown" if the city uses all the tools provided in the code.

He did not offer specific ideas for those parcels, however.

Council and planning board members raised no objections to Parolek's proposals.

Planning director John Wesley said the code now enters a public-comment phase.

With passage, its requirements would become law. There would be no future one- or two-story construction along Main Street through the downtown core.

At the same time, flexibility would be offered in other areas.

Whereas current zoning might require single-family homes on some lots, the new code would allow condos and apartments as long as they mesh with the neighborhood.

Form-based principles

Preserve and enhance community character.

Encourage appropriate infill.

Encourage trails and bike routes that support more frequent transit service.

Preserve agriculture and open space at edges.

Support existing walkable neighborhoods and retrofit those that are not walkable.

Support a range of vibrant human habitats.

See the code at [www.mesaaz.gov](http://www.mesaaz.gov).

Read more:

<http://www.azcentral.com/community/mesa/articles/2011/12/08/20111208downtown-mesa-zoning-plan-advances.html#ixzz1jBeqhYDK>

Click on "Building a better Mesa," then "Mesa downtown focus," "Central Main Street plan," and finally "form-based zoning."

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