

A spotty vision for downtown

Phoenix has a General Plan, a Transit Overlay District, and urban villages with defined “cores.” Ignoring every one of them in September, the Planning Commission approved rezoning that will put seven stories of high-density mixed-use development smack between two thriving residential neighborhoods at Seventh Street and Earll.

I’m confused. Skipping out of the Central Corridor to approve the very first PUD (Planned Unit Development) on Seventh Street, next to the one- and two-story homes of the La Hacienda Historic District and across Seventh from the low-rise homes in Phoenix Country Club, is not “planning.” It is, as much as the Planning Commission dislikes the term, “spot zoning.”

Ten years from now when the parking lots and eternally vacant lots near Central have broken ground for live/work space and retail businesses, I will absolutely agree with the Planning Commission chairman’s September statement that “not all density can be along Central.” But in today’s reality, the Central Avenue corridor is exactly where it belongs.

Density in our downtown will help to change Phoenix’s long history of sprawl. Housing opportunities, at all price points, will give people a choice—to commute from a suburban bedroom community, or to live where they work. The current economy can only help to encourage more sustainable choices, encouraging more people to live downtown.

The vision of a thriving urban Phoenix, after years of talk, is finally within reach. The light rail is scheduled to open in December. But if developers are allowed to use PUD zoning to plunk density down, willy-nilly, wherever they want to, how will that momentum continue?

As a resident of the Coronado Historic District, I don’t need to be convinced that downtown is the place to be. I’ve lived here, and worked here, for 15 years. Thanks to the people who lived here before me, who worked long and hard to protect the neighborhood’s character and charm by insisting—sometimes loudly—that new development be compatible, this place adds to the mix needed for a lively and interesting city.

La Hacienda is another “place” that doesn’t need to be envisioned by our city planners. It already exists, has existed since the 1920s, along Verde Lane and Catalina Drive between Third and Seventh streets. If you’re not familiar with it, take a drive and see. While you’re there, look north and try to envision the possible future...the two-story Country Club Apartments replaced by eight and a half acres of Leggo blocks, rising to seven stories...

The Phoenix City Council will have the final say on the future of Seventh and Earll on December 3rd. I ask Council to do what the Planning Commission would not. Encourage smart growth, not growth for growth’s sake. Stick to the plans and develop the core densely within walking distance of the light rail. Insist on compatible redevelopment that compliments, honors and enhances our neighborhoods. PUD is intended to create a superior built environment. This plan for Seventh Street, Z-119-07-04, does not.

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