

Support new zoning overlay for downtown
Special zoning for arts and small businesses makes reuse of old buildings easier,
promotes vitality of city's core

By Kimber Lanning

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The central Phoenix area is about to take another great leap forward. In early April, the Phoenix City Council will consider a new zoning ordinance that establishes an Arts, Culture and Small Business Overlay District (ACOD) in downtown Phoenix that will help establish a simplified process for business owners hoping to set up shop in our burgeoning downtown. As we build more density in our central core, it is imperative that we consider ways such as this to encourage and nurture the entrepreneurial spirit that is beginning to thrive here.

The proposed overlay will serve to streamline the process to make it simpler and more cost-effective to renovate older buildings, a process technically termed "adaptive reuse," which currently is quite cumbersome under our zoning code. The conversion of older buildings into spaces for boutiques, restaurants, wine bars and cafés is absolutely essential in order to create an environment that includes walkable neighborhoods, culturally thriving districts, and a 24/7 downtown.

This new overlay will allow for additional types of business that can be opened in existing old houses, including yoga studios or bookstores, where the current zoning would prohibit this kind of integration in the older, downtown neighborhoods.

Additionally, and most importantly, the overlay allows for a relaxation of the parking requirements and lot coverage. What that means to the typical small business owner is a lot more breathing room when applying for a change of use permit, which is required when converting from residential to commercial use in an old building. The overlay also allows for a 25 percent expansion to an existing building—or up to 500 square feet—without requiring additional parking, which can be a major hindrance to an urban property owner. Lastly, the overlay will decriminalize the "A-frame" signs that business owners use to direct people into their stores. Sounds simple enough, but currently it's illegal (except for the light rail signs) for an owner to place any sign on the street.

There are three distinct ways the Arts, Culture and Small Business overlay will benefit the people of Phoenix. First, the economics of adaptive reuse just makes sense. The city doesn't need to subsidize entrepreneurs to renovate older or abandoned buildings, as they often do for new developments. These types of renovations can transform neighborhoods when the momentum of having activity on the street increases, and pride of ownership shines through. All of these businesses bring sales tax revenues into city coffers and at essentially no cost to taxpayers: no incentives given, no additional infrastructure like roads, sewer, water and power is needed, and there is less blight to contend with.

Secondly, adaptive reuse is an environmentally responsible approach, and its impact is measurable on several levels. Obviously there is the immediate savings from simply using what is already here, but figure in the city's overall sustainability in terms of density and infill and one begins to realize the long-term benefits of healthy urban living in which owning a car is not a necessity. Coupled with the light rail, this overlay will help us remain competitive nationally for people who expect a socially responsible and

culturally interesting city when they are deciding where to live. For example, Seattle, Portland, Denver and Austin already have such features in place, and they are all attracting innovators and entrepreneurs into their city centers.

Lastly, we all stand to benefit culturally whenever diversity is nurtured. Every great city has new buildings and old, large developments and small, hip places and government buildings, wealthy people and working class people. Protecting our mid-century buildings will allow the variety of downtown experiences that will create a vibrant hub by enhancing the growth and staying power of small, local businesses. Our very character depends on this type of urban flavor.

I encourage you to let your councilperson know that you support the Arts, Culture and Small Business Overlay. City staff, along with a dedicated group of individuals, have worked 30 months to prepare this bold new code, and the Council will vote on its implementation in April. Mayor Phil Gordon should also be commended for his support and creative leadership on this issue.

Phoenix remains relatively young in its development, and in the last 50 years we have certainly become experts at suburban sprawl. Let us now begin working with new policies that are more economically and environmentally sound while protecting the diversity, culture and built heritage that will keep us unique and thriving.

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