

First Public Workshop Held, More to Come

By Catherine Wines,
Redevelopment Advisory Council

An architecture professor in college once told me, you have to go to Europe to experience a vibrant city. I knew at the time I didn't agree with him but was too naïve to know why?!? I wish I could tell him now, "vibrant cities can exist anywhere, all it takes is people." Seems easy! I'm sure he would fire back, "but how do you get people?" now that's a little harder.

The most important asset any downtown can have is people. People create jobs, assist with public safety, provide education and growth opportunities, foster human interaction for youth and seniors, they eat, they drink, they dance, they shop, they spend... they live.

People want to be comfortable. How do you make a city, or in our case, Elko's downtown, comfortable? There are all kinds of design formulas and tactics that can be employed. One of those, and the first on a list of three the Downtown Redevelopment Advisory Council will employ, is an Urban Design Code Overlay.

WHAT'S A CODE?

Sensible public building codes have been the foundation on which great communities have been built for hundreds of years.

National codes specify minimum standards for constructed objects that ensure safety, general welfare, and fair access. Cities, counties, and other municipalities also have municipal codes that determine zoning, parking standards, natural disaster and weather stabilization, and street numbering are a few of these.

Codes are also often derived in the private sector. Developers and Home Owner Associations' often enforce Covenants Conditions and Restrictions or CC&Rs that are designed to raise minimum public standards to achieve a certain aesthetic and quality.

An Urban Design Code Overlay or UDO, is not unlike CC&Rs, in that it strives to raise the specific design standard for development from bare minimum. A UDO is used to either protect the existing character of an area or create a character that would not otherwise be ensured by minimum development standards. UDOs overlay or complement base zoning laws.

DO WE NEED THEM?

Elko's current zoning code provides bare minimum standards for the central business district. A new UDO will improve development standards in many areas such as

- Relaxing encroachment restrictions into the setback, which creates opportunities for outdoor dining.

- Architectural features like window area ratios, which help to eliminate blank walls that are unfriendly, unattractive, and dangerous, especially when those wall voids don't have adequate lighting.
- Signage standards that eliminate industrial box signs and vinyl banners, which are meant to be temporary.
- Mechanical and trash screening that help to hide those items which are necessary for everyday life, but when visible, create an unattractive public realm.
- Eliminating bars on windows and locked metal gates that tell people this is a scary place... don't visit our downtown.

CODES ARE AN ECONOMIC TOOL

Just like CCRs in private developments encourage and assist more money to be invested, a good, comprehensive UDO for the downtown will act as a kick starter for quality, private investment.

Proof is happening all over the United States. Downtown, as a design element, is on the rise. Revitalized, quality, urban downtown spaces are the hottest thing in retail and entertainment right now. The mega mall, with controlled indoor space and limited access reached it's heyday in the 1980s. As a building form, malls and strip centers have been on the decline since then. They have been replaced with more traditional, public streets lined with shopping, dining, and entertainment opportunities that are pedestrian friendly and consumer, not developer driven. They provide all sectors of the population a quality-of-life public experience rather than controlled spend-and-go-home occurrences.

The result of this new type of development, using traditional design elements, has been astonishing... when you provide quality public space that gives people something to do besides spend money, they spend more money.

When cities provide the traditional downtown atmosphere for development, everyone, especially businesses flourish! When the City of Elko is able to provide a comprehensive, development-friendly, Urban Code, our downtown will be transformed into that vibrant city that rivals any place in Europe!

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The first public workshop for Vision Elko, sponsored by the Elko Downtown Redevelopment Advisory Council and the City of Elko was held on May 29th at the Stockmen's. It was directed at mapping a new UDO and gave everyone a chance to help shape the new and exciting future of Elko's redevelopment district.

Questions about this workshop or any business being conducted by the Redevelopment Agency and its advisors should be directed to Rick Magness, City Planner at 777-7162.

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1405 Idaho Street
Elko, Nevada 89801
775-738-7135