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Mesa's Urban Aspirations Need Tweaks, Expert Says

by Gary Nelson | December 12, 2013

Mesa's efforts to urbanize downtown and the Fiesta District could fall short unless the city adopts more heavy-handed planning policies, according to an expert who spoke this week at the city's second Urban Development Summit.

The setting of the Dec. 9 meeting spoke to the already burgeoning potential of Mesa's downtown core: About 100 developers, investors, city officials and policy wonks gathered on the stage of the widely acclaimed Ikeda Theater in the Mesa Arts Center.

That theater is literally a stone's throw from the light-rail station that will begin to take shape next year at Center and Main streets, the symbolic heart of the city.

A few dozen yards to the west, downtown Mesa's first large-scale privately financed project since the 1980s — an 81-unit senior housing development called Encore on First — was preparing for this week's grand opening.

And a few dozen yards to the east, Benedictine University occupies a historical hospital building, one of two city structures that have been renovated as college campuses.

Next door to Encore, plans are afoot for the \$30 million Barry and Peggy Goldwater Library and Archives, construction of which is on tap for next year. The neighborhood also could see construction of a housing project for artists and their families, although that idea is in its earliest stages.

That kind of "episodic" investment in downtown and along the light-rail line is likely to continue as a result of city policies already in place, one of Monday's speakers said. But he said more is needed if Mesa is to see its urban aspirations fully blossom.

Scott Polikov is president of the Vialta Group, a company that specializes in urban planning and is involved in several ongoing large-scale projects in Texas.

Polikov said he drove all around Mesa last weekend, saw lots of potential development sites and was especially intrigued with opportunities in the Fiesta District. He cited the fenced-off, long-vacant Fiesta Village shopping center that has generated resident complaints and City Hall heartburn for years.

"I drooled when I drove by that," Polikov said.

But while praising Mesa's efforts to plan the light-rail corridor and Fiesta area, Polikov said, "My suspicion is there is still a disconnect" between the city's aspirations and the tools in place to achieve them.



The sign in front of Hambone Sports Bar and Grill on Main Street was among the hundreds of environmental and historical factors weighed by the federal government before it decided the light-rail project could move forward. (Charlie Leight/The Republic)

In recent years, Mesa has developed two master plans for the light-rail corridor, adopted design guidelines for the Fiesta District and approved a “form-based” zoning code designed to encourage dense, vertical downtown development.

But, Polikov said, “The planning and the code, the wonderful community input you’ve done so far and the very specific projects that you have brought to capitalization won’t get you there. Why? Because you don’t have adjacency predictability from parcel to parcel.”

By that he meant that the codes might be so loosely written that a potential investor can’t know what land uses might occur immediately next door to his property. There has to be range of prescribed uses from parcel to parcel, he said, or the uncertainty will keep investors away.

“The key to the success of the downtown plan and the Fiesta District is creating a de facto master developer,” Polikov said. That could be the city or some other agency.

He also said the city should be willing to initiate zoning changes — even on private property — to protect its overall aims. That could be controversial in a city where property-rights issues have created friction between residents and City Hall.

Although Mayor Scott Smith began the meeting with a pep talk about what has been accomplished in Mesa’s downtown, he said Polikov and other experts were not invited to validate civic boosterism.

“The whole question of how do you set the stage and help shape development in the future is always debated,” Smith told the Mesa Republic. “The reason we have the summit ... was not to parrot what we are doing, but so we could learn.”

Smith said he favors a less-onerous government role than Polikov seemed to be recommending.

“We want to make the form-based code enough of an incentive (that) the advantages of using it are so overwhelming that it will be something that developers gladly embrace,” Smith said. “Ours is sort of a carrot approach as opposed to a heavy-stick approach.”

Still, Smith said, “I think he raised some good points. If form-based codes are merely a suggestion, you’re never going to get the benefit out of them that you need to truly be transformative.”

Smith said he also agrees with Polikov’s assertion that “there’s got to be a unified approach, and there’s got to be some authority that somehow defines the vision and does whatever they can to see how that plays out.”

And, he said, the city’s policies on downtown and Fiesta are not cast in stone.

“I would absolutely guarantee you and hope that the council continues to revisit what we’ve done to make sure that we’re headed in the direction we want,” Smith said. “I don’t think anybody assumes that simply because we put an area plan into place or put a form-based code into place, that would be the end of the discussion.”

Other speakers Monday said local and federal policies tilt too much in favor of suburban sprawl-type development, and cities and developers do too little to create distinctive neighborhoods that don’t depend entirely on the automobile.

“In essence, our current system for delivering ‘place’ is broken,” said Michael Hathorne, senior planning manager for the Suburban Land Reserve, which is an arm of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Salt Lake City.

Governments and developers must realize, he said, that people need housing and employment options more like what developed in American cities until about the middle of the 20th century.

“The ability to drive until you qualify is becoming a thing of the past,” he said. “Transportation costs are keeping people from going to the hinterlands to buy a home that is quote/unquote affordable.”