



LAS CRUCES DOWNTOWN ANALYSIS

September 9, 2013

SUMMARY

Beginning with the 1994 American Institute of Architects Regional/Urban Design Assistance Team (R/UDAT) report, a significant body of planning and thought has gone into revitalizing and restoring the vibrancy of Downtown Las Cruces. One thread runs through each study, including the most recent 2011 Downtown Revitalization Ad Hoc Committee Recommendations: create a Plaza to heal the wounds left by the Urban Renewal destruction of Downtown. The R/UDAT report refers to the Plaza as the “heart” of the community, and in New Mexico that is certainly true.

It is surprising how many recommendations have been accomplished over the years – a testament to the City’s and citizens’ commitment to Downtown. However, there are a few items from the 1994 report that remain a work in progress, and these have been noted in all subsequent reports. Thus, this analysis will address the various reports and plans chronologically, focusing upon the incomplete, or revised recommendations, and culminating in the outstanding recommendations.

1994 R/UDAT RECOMMENDATIONS

Accomplishments:

A number of recommendations from the R/UDAT report have been accomplished including:

- ◆ the St. Genevieve memorial,
- ◆ government facilities remaining downtown,
- ◆ landscape improvements,
- ◆ Tax Increment for Downtown District formed,
- ◆ removal of the Main Street canopy,
- ◆ the Downtown RoadRUNNER Central Transfer Point (CTP) transit center,
- ◆ the ongoing partnership with the Las Cruces Farmers and Crafts Market, and
- ◆ development of the Las Cruces Downtown Marketing & Branding Plan.



Outstanding Recommendations:

There are some recommendations that were initially made by this report that continue to surface through subsequent plans and studies. We will only discuss those here that can be addressed by this Downtown SmartCode study and Master Plan Analysis. They include:

- ◆ create a Downtown Plaza: Plaza Las Culturales,
- ◆ calm downtown traffic,
- ◆ provide connections, including pedestrian facilities, between the Mesquite and Alameda Depot neighborhoods to Downtown,
- ◆ support the historic Downtown character, and
- ◆ encourage housing Downtown.

The R/UDAT Implementation Strategy begins with the reminder that development takes a long time. Although much has been accomplished in the nineteen years since this report, it is good to bear in mind that much of the significant work ahead won't take place quickly.

Suggested Revisions:

While many of the Table A. Menu of Development Options remain relevant to the work at hand, including the limitation of auto-oriented retail and the encouragement of the pedestrian environment, one recommendation has changed dramatically in the last decade. The report indicates there's little demand for high-end or mid-range housing downtown, and that low-income housing would be problematic.

The combination of the sub-prime crisis with the urban preferences of the Millennials and retiring Baby Boomers is converging to create a vast oversupply of suburban housing stock. Arthur C. Nelson, Director of the Metropolitan Research Center, City & Metropolitan Planning at the University of Utah has modeled future demand for various housing types and forecasts a surplus of 22 million large-lot homes by 2025. (Badger, 2013) That is about forty percent of the large-lot homes in existence today. A recent National Association of Realtors survey found that only twelve percent of future homebuyers want the drivable suburban fringe houses that are in such oversupply. Suburbia was hardest hit by the recession's foreclosures, and many communities are seeing empty homes stripped of copper wire by vandals, and drug users and homeless people moving in. Twenty years ago urban housing was a bargain in many cities and today it carries an enormous premium in vibrant downtowns. Per square foot, urban residential space sells and rents for forty to two hundred percent more than suburban space in the same cities. (Leinberger, 2008)



Accomplishments:

Like the R/UDAT report, an impressive number of recommendations from the 2005 Revitalization Plan have been accomplished including:

- ◆ renovation of the Rio Grande Theater,
- ◆ construction of the new Federal Courthouse,
- ◆ Main Street opening to traffic,
- ◆ optimize shade Downtown, and
- ◆ use city-owned properties as catalysts for revitalization (in process with Las Cruces Community Partners agreement).

Outstanding Recommendations:

This plan brings forward some of the outstanding recommendations from the R/UDAT report as well as providing new revitalization strategies that still need to be achieved. The new recommendations include:

- ◆ update the zoning overlays to reflect the goals of the Plan,
- ◆ create a mixed-use zoning district for Downtown,
- ◆ maximize on-street parking, and
- ◆ reestablish the Downtown street wall.

The Plan's Preferred Concept has moved a long way toward implementation with the opening of Main Street and the corresponding streetscape improvements. Many of the identified opportunities for infill remain options, but a few developments in the subsequent years require revisions.

Suggested Revisions:

The 2011 Ad Hoc Committee's report lists some suggested revisions as well as an item that isn't available for implementation due to interim developments. This is reopening Organ Street, which is not possible with the construction of La Placita. However, the pedestrian connection can be interpreted as implementation of this strategy. There are a few additional suggested revisions because of changing economics and current best practices.

- ◆ The suggestion of a Downtown Convention Center is no longer applicable since the Las Cruces Convention Center was built on University Avenue.



- ◆ The Plan calls for the division of Downtown into use-specific districts including Government, Arts, Culture, Entertainment, Specialty Retail, Retail and Office, and Mixed Use. This strategy was common for downtown redevelopment in the last twenty years, but the current best practice is to permit a full mix of uses, with the exception of those that are inappropriate for a Downtown. This allows landowners and developers to respond more effectively to market demand and doesn't limit potential investment because of land use issues.
- ◆ Finally, the Plan calls for three municipal parking structures. While this is aspirational and supports good urbanism, the excess parking currently available makes this recommendation irrelevant in the near term. Parking structures require large investment in the construction alone, not including the land value. While they also can create impressive revenues, the demand must be significant. Studies show that a national average of \$15,552 per space, structured parking typically becomes cost effective only when land prices are extremely high. (vtpi.org, 2013)

2011 RECOMMENDATIONS: DOWNTOWN REVITALIZATION AD HOC COMMITTEE

Accomplishments:

Although the 2011 Ad Hoc Committee Recommendations are only two years old, the City has completed one of the top three priorities – providing a dedicated planning staff member to focus on Downtown needs.

Outstanding Recommendations:

The Ad Hoc Committee had two levels of recommendations. The primary recommendations were a parking management plan and parking structure construction, dedicated staff, and provision for a Plaza. The next tier of priorities included:

- ◆ small public parks,
- ◆ reconfiguring Water and Church as two-way streets, and
- ◆ implementing a cohesive landscape, streetscape, and signage plan.

A more detailed list of recommendations included:

- ◆ encouraging Downtown housing,
- ◆ zoning and subdivision updates, and
- ◆ general improvement for pedestrian and bicycle facilities.



Suggested Revisions:

While most of the Committee’s recommendations built upon prior plans and reports, they did emphasize a new concept that isn’t considered to be a best practice for downtown redevelopment. The report recommends all new construction on public-owned land used for parking must remain parking neutral until a parking management plan is in place. While the goal of a parking management plan is an excellent strategy, and necessary to the successful redevelopment of Downtown, a parking neutral policy will delay investment and limit a number of other goals including encouraging housing in the area.

2012 DOWNTOWN PARKING STUDY UPDATE

This study reinforces the point of the last paragraph by indicating a current parking surplus, with even Market Saturday mornings having a surplus of 300 parking spaces. Since Saturday morning is the heaviest demand the Downtown experiences, the Study posits there is sufficient parking to address all needs with little change in demand over the last four years. On typical weekdays, the surplus is 450 spaces, so the recommendation is the City can support additional development without adding or requiring parking. The Study does not recommend a new public garage at this time.

Current best practice in downtown parking management is to permit development to respond to market demand rather than enforce parking minimums. The study also recommends evaluating a pay parking pilot program. This is supported by the studies of Donald Shoup in *The High Cost of Free Parking*. While suburbanites expect free parking, this policy produces an over abundance of unnecessary parking in urban areas. (Shoup, 1997)

ZONING ANALYSIS

The Las Cruces Land Development Code, Chapter 38 – Zoning has two special zoning districts that are applicable to Downtown, the CDB Central business district and the Main Street Plaza overlay zone. The CBD District certainly makes it possible to development in a meaningful, urban manner, but the biggest hurdle is that it is so permissive many things can be developed that aren’t the most appropriate to the context. If the CDB continues to be the zoning applicable to Downtown, it should be updated at the least to address these potential conflicts.

The 2005 Plan provides an in-depth analysis in Table 8. Current Regulations, beginning on page 59. The table includes columns for code sections, current regulations, consistency with Plan objectives, and recommended amendments. We concur with all the suggested amendments.

While the code allows good development with its permissiveness, the Ad Hoc Committee recommended updating the code, particularly in regard to the administrative process. They stated that the code should “be clear, streamlined, concise, and business friendly to the unique property layout found in downtown.” Their



detailed recommendations included simplifying the application process and making the administration of the code as transparent as possible.

Specific recommendations for updating the CBD are provided in the table on the next page. Many of these recommendations could be more simply folded into a new, contemporary zoning district based on the SmartCode and building on the work to date for the Viva Doña Ana Unified Code for Sustainable Development.

The IDO – Infill development overlay district was not included in the 2005 Plan analysis, although it does apply to downtown. This process is an excellent incentive for the area and saves both time and money for the IDP applicant. The streamlined process and fee waiver applies to business registrations, summary subdivisions, building permits, sign permits, however, rezoning requests do require the general public hearing process.

This overlay certainly provides assistance and incentive to redevelop downtown, but could easily be missed by an applicant unfamiliar with it. The best practice would be to include the process description directly into the applicable zoning district text for clarity and ease of use.



CONCLUSION

The table below lists the outstanding recommendations that can be addressed by a possible Downtown SmartCode.

Origin	Recommendation
1994 R/UDAT	Create a Downtown Plaza
	Calm downtown traffic
	Provide connections, including pedestrian facilities, between the Mesquite and Alameda Depot neighborhoods to Downtown
	Support the historic Downtown character
2005 Master Plan	Encourage housing Downtown
	Update zoning and subdivision regulations to reflect the goals of the Plan
	Maximize on-street parking
2011 Ad Hoc Committee	Reestablish the Downtown street wall and screen parking
	Small public parks
	Reconfiguring Water and Church as two-way streets
	Implementing a cohesive landscape, streetscape, and signage plan
CBD Overlay Zone Analysis	Reconnect S Water Street to W Lohman Avenue
	Revise the Purpose statement to support mixed-use.
	Revise and update permitted uses to reflect goal of 2005 Master Plan and the current economic conditions.
	Update the signage standards to permit all historic sign types.
	Revise parking requirements to reflect market demand.
	Require street trees.
	Add setback/build-to requirements for the general CBD.
Revise Main Street Plaza overlay J.4. for glazing percentages and transparency.	
Revise Main Street Plaza overlay J.6. materials to remove concrete block.	



Add awning standards. The illustrations are not written with regulatory language.

Include parking location standards.

Change height in feet to number of stories.

Add performance standards to permit brewpubs.



REFERENCES

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