



*Bringing a Community's Vision into Focus.*

## RECOMMENDATIONS + NEXT STEPS

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Prepared for the City of Helena By:



## INTRODUCTION

The Orion Planning + Design team completed our initial policy and code analysis, site review and series of stakeholder input activities as outlined in Phase 1 and 2 of the project scope for creating a consolidated downtown zoning code for the City of Helena. A comprehensive summary of our plan and code analysis, as well as all comments received from staff, stakeholders and the public, is available in the attached Analysis and Outreach Summary. This memo summarizes the team's findings for the City Commission's consideration and provides our best professional recommendations on how the consolidated code should be drafted to reflect guidance found in the Downtown Helena Neighborhood Plan as well as input received from stakeholders and the public during our visit to Helena in April.

## CODE RECOMMENDATIONS

The Downtown Helena Neighborhood Plan organizes the project area into three unique districts – the Firetower District, Last Chance Gulch and Great Northern District. This was very effective in the planning stage and provided a good basis upon which to review the existing code for this project. However, in our evaluation of the downtown area, the Firetower and Last Chance Gulch districts are similar in their form, density and historic character. Additionally, feedback from all stakeholder groups indicated a desire to see more connectivity between the Great Northern area and the traditional historic districts. Designing a code that functions as three distinct districts would do nothing to unite these areas, and would continue to separate the 'north' from the 'south' by developing unique massing, dimensional and design requirements for each. Our recommendation is to consolidate the nine existing zoning districts into *no more than three* sub-areas that would comprise the unique "Downtown" zoning code. These sub-areas would consider specific design standards appropriate for street frontage types - i.e. walking mall vs. entrance corridor frontages - but would fall under the purview of all other design standards applied within the consolidated district. It is recommended this new downtown district *generally* follow the boundaries proposed within the neighborhood plan, but may also consider modest expansion or contraction of this general boundary in alignment with potential TIF district formation and the downtown area's influence on adjacent neighborhoods. This district would more fully integrate housing options in the downtown core, facilitate greater mixed use within buildings, provide clear guidance on how the built environment should look and feel through design standards, and be visually appealing and easily understood by all users. We plan to accomplish this by considering the following elements:

### LAND USE

A true form-based code, as recommended by the downtown neighborhood plan, would drastically reduce emphasis on use, making them subordinate to form and focusing on massing, dimensional and design requirements within a district. While this can be very successful in certain applications, it is challenging (and sometimes unsuccessful) for communities to move from traditional Euclidean-based zoning to form-based codification overnight. We feel a better approach for Helena is to adopt a form-based approach in the consolidation of the zoning for downtown, one that fully integrates design standards into the code but does not subordinate use entirely. Instead, we will cluster and consolidate specific uses into broad categories that are appropriate for downtown Helena but allow greater flexibility when interpreting what is and is not allowed.

### DEFINITIONS

As part of the use consolidation process, we will look to refine current definitions applicable to uses in downtown Helena. However, we know that modifying certain definitions will have an impact on other districts retaining the standard zoning language. We will consider these impacts in our suggested changes and, wherever possible,

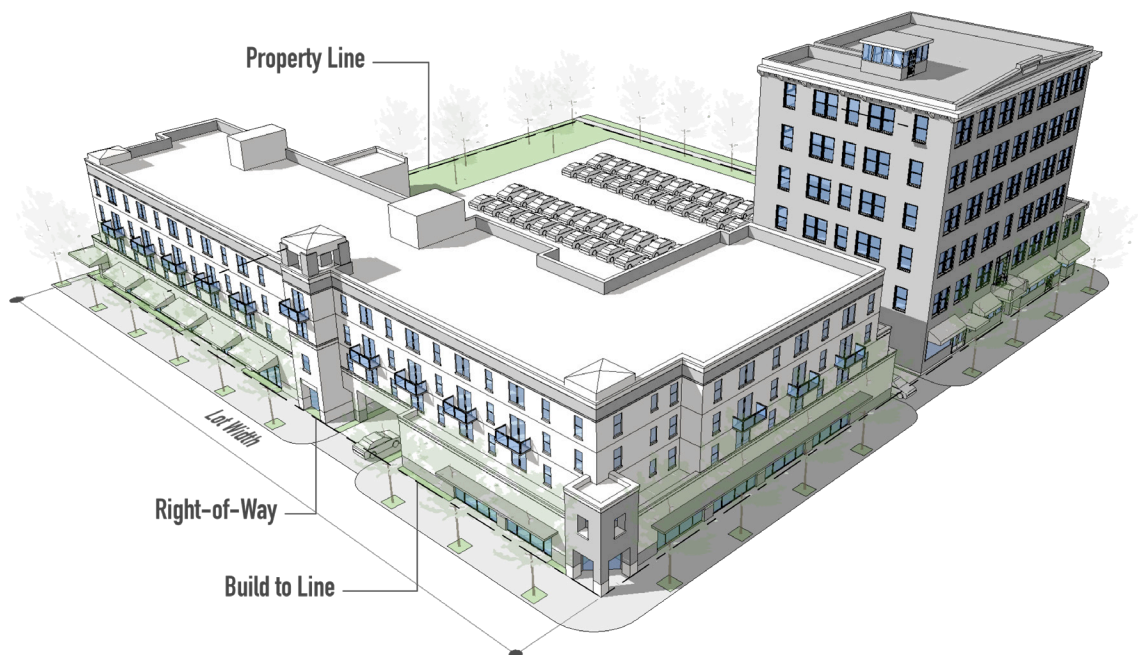


offer suggestions on definitions broadly for staff and Commission consideration. Our goal is for the Downtown District to fit seamlessly within the existing code framework, and where efficiencies and clarity can be added to that framework we will recommend accordingly.

## DESIGN STANDARDS

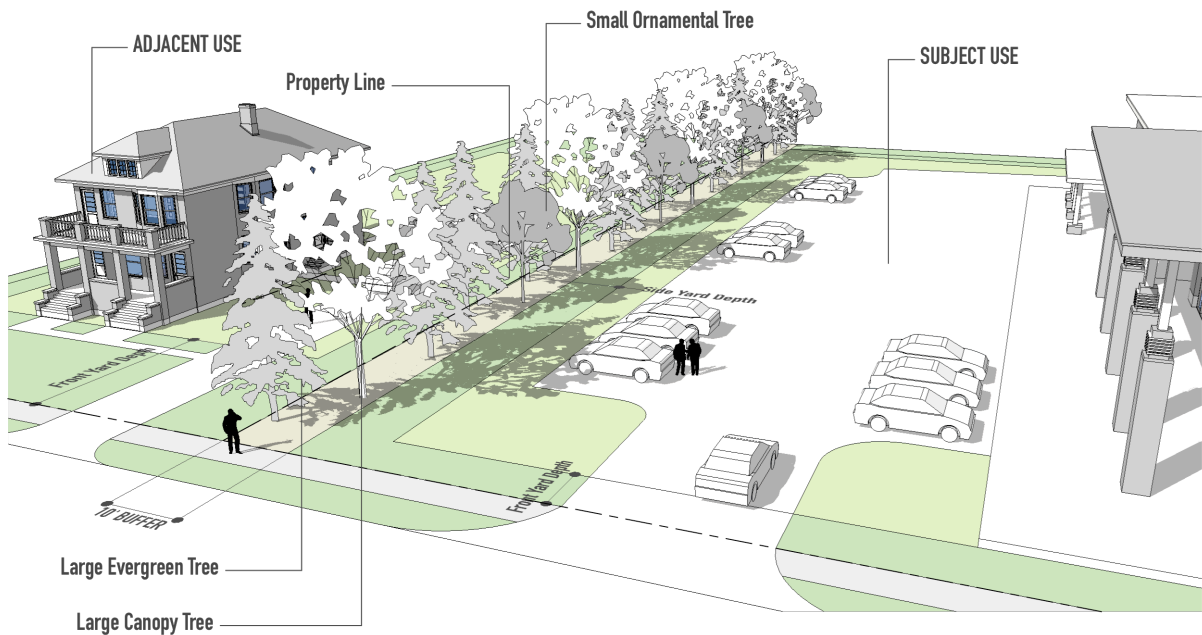
With few exceptions, our conversations with staff, stakeholders and the Zoning Commission concluded that design standards were preferable over guidelines. Guidelines are not enforceable; standards are required. It is our experience that standards are not only clearer but ensure the community's vision is successfully and consistently implemented, therefore we recommend the consolidated code for downtown Helena include design standards that are illustrated through graphic elements and clear, concise tables that are easily interpreted by both applicants and administrators. Design standards will address:

- ▶ **Transparency (glazing)** – The amount/percentage of a building's face that should be comprised of windows, doors or other transparent materials. This will help to activate the public space and draw people in. When asked to identify a favorite space or place in downtown Helena, members of the public repeatedly looked to the stretch of the walking mall where the Big Dipper, Lucca's, The Hawthorne and Ten Mile Brewery were located. This relatively short stretch of pedestrian mall has a great deal of window frontage, allowing the pedestrian to participate in the activities occurring inside and out of each business establishment.
- ▶ **Entrance orientation** – Helena has a unique topography that allows for many buildings in the historic core to have 'double fronts', or multiple entrance points from different streets (think of Bert & Ernie's, the Lions Building, the Pan Handler, etc.). On the opposite end of the spectrum, newer construction along the north end of Last Chance Gulch – with clear building orientation to the street – offers little in the way of pedestrian connectivity for those wishing to enter or exit a building on foot! We will develop orientation standards based on the unique character of the street frontage, considering those buildings where businesses have multiple frontages, or multiple business with multiple frontages (such as the block of buildings between Last Chance Gulch and North Jackson Street). The standards will focus on pedestrian connectivity in addition to vehicular entrance and exit points.
- ▶ **Massing and orientation** – By evaluating traditional height, setback and lot coverage requirements and revising for consistency with the traditional/historic development patterns, the code can promote greater redevelopment potential on parcels in downtown Helena that would be restricted by the current setback and height requirements prescribed in standard commercial and residential districts. In the Downtown



District, we will continue to utilize zero lot line setbacks, incorporate lot coverage minimums instead of maximums, consider height as it relates to viewshed, require buildings be oriented appropriately to their street frontage and simplify density requirements for mixed use type development.

- ▶ **Use restrictions and standards** – Through well-articulated design standards, many uses that cause general concern won't be possible to develop in downtown Helena. However, where a use is wholly inappropriate we may call this out in the code. Additionally, we will identify uses and locations that are most appropriate to implement redevelopment and vitality in downtown. For example, restricting professional office space and residential uses to the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor of mixed use buildings downtown, leaving the first floor open to retail sales and services, restaurants and more active uses is imperative. Requiring similarly activated space on the first floor of future parking structures may also be considered. We will look at square footage by use requirements for mixed-use redevelopment, and may also recommend specific design standards for certain uses that would otherwise be considered in a conditional use permitting process.
- ▶ **Landscaping** - As an element of design, landscaping standards will be integrated in the code using a similar approach to street orientation, massing and dimensional requirements described above. While not recommending exact plant types, the landscaping standards will be more specific than a typical 'buffer' requirement. The size, scale, and location of landscaped elements is nearly as important as building articulation and orientation when creating place and character, and we will integrate regionally-sensitive, low-impact design and low-maintenance practices to support these standards. Landscaping standards will be developed with significant input from the City's Parks and Recreation and Public Works Departments, to ensure consistency with existing ordinances.



- ▶ **Signs** – Although signs are addressed comprehensively in a separate section of the code, it is important that the Downtown District include standards for signage that align with the character of this particular area. Sign standards will be limited to size, placement and number and will not include any limitation on content, pursuant to recent case law.
- ▶ **Gateway-specific design standards** – The gateways into downtown Helena were identified as being singularly important in the downtown neighborhood plan, and we will seek to incorporate specific design standards for development that occurs in the areas along Last Chance Gulch and Benton Avenue that intersect Lyndale Avenue (or are closely located).



## PARKING

There are many perspectives on parking in Helena, presented in policy documents we've reviewed, insight shared by City staff and the Zoning Commission, as well as input received from stakeholder groups and the public. The City's current parking standards are good in that they reduce parking requirements for businesses located near public parking options, and offer reductions for additions like bike parking and landscaping. The case remains that much of Helena's redevelopment potential lies in existing surface parking areas managed by the City, and existing parking options are located in a manner that some go underutilized while others are constantly at or over capacity. The Downtown District consolidated will look at strengthening parking reduction options, consider parking-in-lieu options to manage existing and future development, and recommend limiting the amount of parking allowed onsite and potentially eliminating parking requirements for new development entirely. This last option should be vetted and considered in balance with redevelopment opportunities – it is our understanding that there is openness to redevelopment on some of the City-owned surface lots, but redevelopment of parking will need to consider inherent impacts of removing existing parking while creating more demand for that which remains. As parking standards and incentives are being considered in the code, we will be in direct consultation with Parking Commission staff to ensure these standards align with the Downtown Neighborhood Plan and the Commission's ongoing efforts.

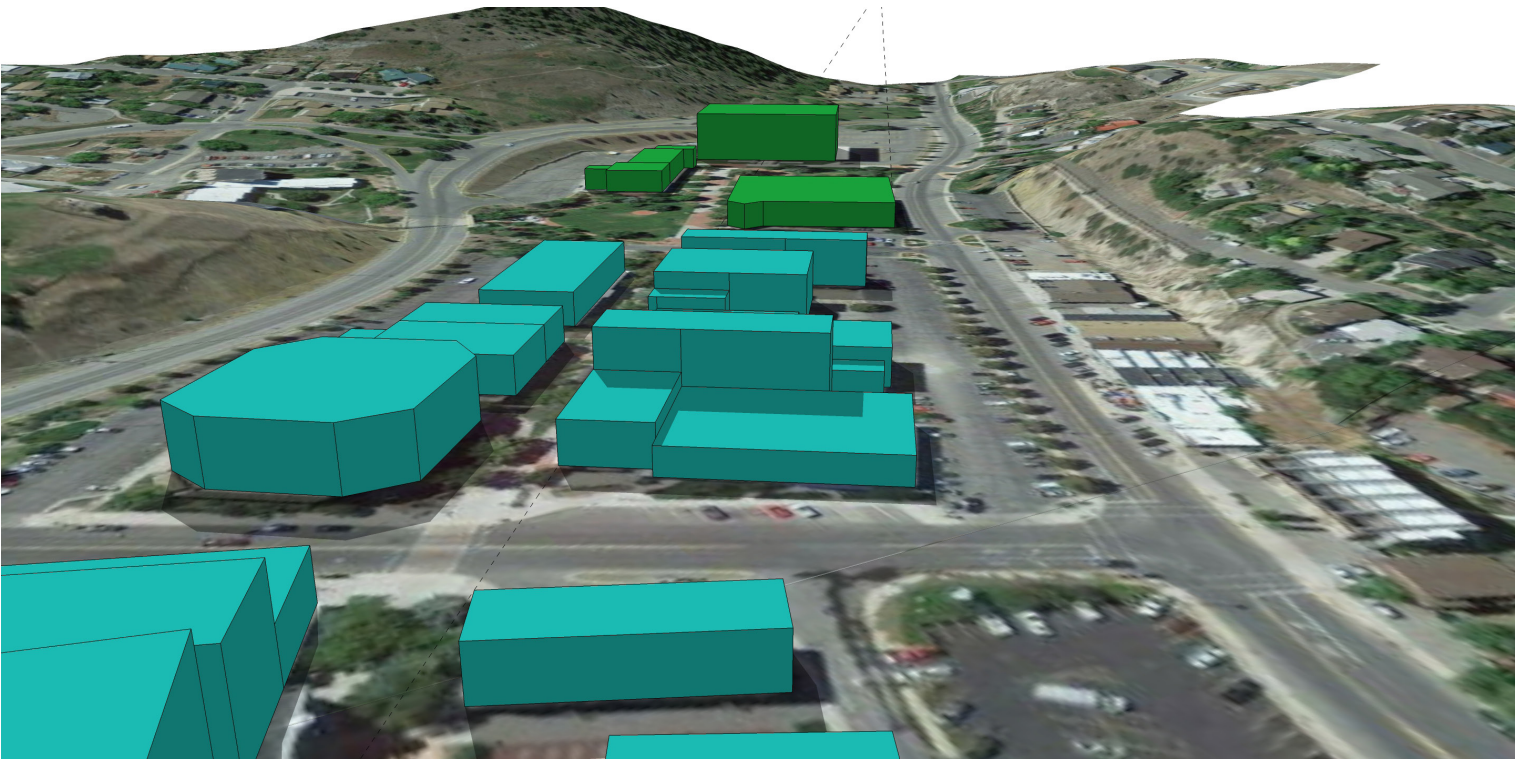
## ADMINISTRATION

In developing a consolidated, design-driven hybrid code for downtown Helena, it is essential the code be as easy to administer for City staff as it is to work within for the applicant. Our desire is to create a code that clearly defines expectations for through illustrations and consolidated text. The consolidated code will streamline the review process by eliminating the current conditional use permit review process within the District. We anticipate all development will be reviewed for consistency with the Downtown District design standards by using the permitting process currently administered jointly between Community Development and Public Works. In a few select instances, review and approval by the zoning commission and City Council would be warranted following staff's plan review. These instances would be limited to significant development proposals with high impact, but still permitted uses within the district. As the code is developed will investigate ways to address these circumstances within the existing processes and procedures administered by the City, so as not to create a separate process for the Downtown District.



## NEXT STEPS

A three-dimensional massing model is being created to analyze the existing building forms and heights as they have developed within the current zoning districts. The model will provide an informative illustration of the downtown urban form as it relates to the current zoning regulations of each district. The model will also be used as a tool to evaluate build-out scenarios and their impacts according to the existing zoning regulations and to identify problematic areas regarding spatial, functional, and land uses. For example, current zoning districts may not consider the topography of the city or adjacent areas when regulating building height limits. Since the project area sits in a 'gulch' surrounded by picturesque mountains and natural landscapes, height regulations need to be context sensitive in maintaining view corridors. The 3D model will accurately depict the topography both within and surrounding the downtown area and will help identify critical areas where views could be in jeopardy. This type of three-dimensional modeling will be invaluable in helping us develop the future code regulations that will preserve these characteristic views, and will also provide key stakeholders and the public with a visual understanding of how the new code will influence the built environment. In short, looking at zoning impacts in three dimensions often reveal a different set of issues or cautions that should be considered in developing zoning regulations for downtown Helena.



Using the modeling as guidance, the Orion team will begin drafting the consolidated code for downtown Helena following the recommendations described above. We anticipate having a 75% draft complete for review by the Helena legal team and Community Development Division staff by late June, in preparation for review and workshoping with the Zoning Commission at their regularly scheduled meeting July 11<sup>th</sup>. Additional drafting and revisions will follow the July workshop, with a final draft code and public workshop anticipated in late August/early September. This provides the team with sufficient time to make requested revisions prior to Community Development staff moving forward with the adoption process. Once adopted, the Orion team will work with staff to develop select outreach and training materials for administration of the new Downtown District.