# Introduction

The Orion Planning + Design team has completed the initial site review, policy and code analysis, and stakeholder input activities outlined in Phase 1 and 2 of the project scope for creating a consolidated downtown zoning code. This addendum summarizes observations and input received from stakeholders and the public during our initial visit to Helena in April, as well as feedback received from the stakeholder survey during the month of May.

# What We Heard

## From Staff

The OPD team sat down with City staff during a staff-specific stakeholder discussion on Tuesday afternoon; staff also attended stakeholder meetings throughout the day on Wednesday to provide additional insight and answer questions raised by the discussion. The following summarizes comments from Community Development, Parks and Recreation, Public Works, City Attorney and Parking Commission staff throughout our initial visit.

* Staff is integral to the process and their input should be considered and valued equally as stakeholders in the code consolidation.
* The consolidated downtown district should be well integrated into the existing code, by paying attention to how the City codifies.
* Ensure the consolidated code aligns with state building code requirements so that recommended design guidelines/standards don’t conflict.
* The sign code is being updated and those updates should be incorporated, as appropriate, into the consolidated code.
* Consider having just one downtown zone rather than B2 and B3.
* Suggestions on administration of the Code would be helpful, if there are better approaches to overall function and process that could be applied to the broader code in general.
* There is a need to rethink/streamline the definitions and use categories.
* Investigate the extent to which graphics could be incorporated in the Sterling Code format currently used by the City.
* There is a need to consider administrative demand – the cost to process a zone change ($420) and a conditional use permit ($435) are nearly identical, but the time and expertise required by staff varies; there is a lack of consistency here.
* Consider the application process for building permit when the use is by right – this process includes building plans, civil site plan review.
* Current stormwater management requirements administered by Public Works:
  + MS4 permit – internal administrative review, approximate 2 week turnaround
  + Applies to ADA components including sidewalks, parking
  + Requirements for development (and redevelopment) to infiltrate 1st half inch of runoff, retaining onsite requirements (adopted in January 2017)
  + Brings up some questions: can you even build 100% coverage – regional water management, consider how to address through impact/development fees
* There is an existing review process currently administered between the community development and public works department - engineering, zoning, building code
  + Parks and Recreations will be involved in this process if landscaping is required in the boulevard or the project is developing a parks property
* Parking within downtown districts, generally – close to capacity now, so question becomes how to subsidize the parking you might lose to redevelopment.
  + 260 coin operated parking meters currently in the district – City will be moving to a smart parking system similar to Missoula.
  + It is important to maintain existing LOS for parking and balancing new development LOS with redevelopment potential.
  + Permit allowed in all parking structures
  + There is a Board of Adjustment variance process for parking requirements - allowed reduction not to exceed 50% total.
* Housing demand in downtown Helena is somewhat unclear; the City has not completed a housing demand study recently, although looking to update soon. There may also be some private studies concerning the market that would provide insight.
  + Need to consider market demand vs. Section 8 and other affordable or low-income housing options.
  + There are some concerns about converting Women’s Park and Hill Park into housing development, based on the downtown plan’s recommendations; this could encourage the park space to become more privatized.
* Performance Square Park and Constitution Park would provide good redevelopment opportunities.
* There is considerable business turnover in the Power Block and along Fuller Street
* Some uses that require consideration in the code consolidation include how overnight accommodations and campgrounds are treated in the B2 district.
* Downtown serves as a gateway between the greater open lands and city parks.
* The City does sign-off on business licenses, including professional services (counselors, engineering, design firms, etc.), and home occupations.
* Summary of the zone change process (ordinance) – Application submitted and sent to other departments for comment, staff report is completed, P&Z hearing for recommendation, City Council vote yes or no. Ordinance.
* CUP process (resolution) – Allows conditions to be applied although currently there are not many conditions placed on them.
  + A new permit form was put together and put in use January 1, 2017.

## From the Commission

The OPD team met with members of the Helena Zoning Commission, Board of Adjustments and Business Improvement District while on site to discuss specific ideas for improving the code for downtown Helena and the public process that would be undertaken. The following summarizes the feedback heard from this key group of stakeholders.

* The current Code is not user friendly. There are too many zoning districts, it’s too complicated, and it puts the BOA in the role of doing too much. A simple, good process is needed. The desire is to develop a code that supports growth, rather than having growth viewed as a burden.
* Need to address traffic concerns, crime, and ability to walk to a grocery store in order to bring in downtown housing. It should be a total community with neighborhood vitality and differences (e.g. arts and entertainment, sports, medical). Bring back the Main Street concept – kids walking around, flow between areas, having a great environment that is a draw, housing availability, multi-use structures. This is the first opportunity to look at zoning within a district and possibly replicate it elsewhere.
* There is a desire to bridge the different districts/areas (Great Northern, Firetower, Last Chance Gulch).
* The consolidated code should focus less on use and more on form; promote physical characteristics in downtown Helena that lets users know they are in a unique and vibrant place.
* There have been very few variances in downtown Helena; this indicates the code as it currently exists is functioning.
* Standards are preferable for the development community; there was also discussion about the site review process.
* The consolidated code needs to incorporate parking specific guidance and standards (i.e. require retail on first floor of parking structures, offer alternatives, set maximums)
* The group collectively preferred one distinct district over 3 separate districts. They felt the separation of the code by district would not be effective in unifying Great Northern with the historic downtown. Concern was raised about how to bring the districts together; Neill Avenue is a divider. Borders around districts may be a problem.
* The commission’s priorities for design elements were as follows:
  + Minimum glazing requirements, reduced setbacks, better articulation of architectural elements
  + Maintenance/landscaping standards for buildings (adjacent to and surrounding), parking, replacement requirements and MS4 permitting overlap potential
  + Wildfire protection standards for the Fire Tower District
  + Auto-oriented, needs better gateways and classy signage
  + Lot coverage restrictions/incentives
  + Design standards assigned to use, potentially sub-districts
  + Transportation elements (bulb-outs, sidewalks, etc.)
* CUPs are being approved with no conditions, which is a sign that they could be processed another way. Greatest impact in CUP review is traffic, and a proposed uses’ increase on amount of traffic and ability to accommodate additional vehicles.
* The group felt there were some types of signage better suited to downtown than others. Flashy, backlit reader boards were not appropriate in the downtown core; signs perpendicular to a building were ok, and recommended incorporating specific design standards into code consolidations (focusing on form and not content).
* The Board of Adjustment is hearing requests for lot line adjustments, and one person noted it would be better to have standards. The perception is that parking is a problem, but it isn’t. General discussion supported the idea of parking structures with retail below and housing above. There have not been a significant number of variance requests in the downtown zoning district.

## From Stakeholders

The OPD team hosted three separate stakeholder meetings while onsite in April, inviting business and property owners to engage in discussion regarding current code functionality and what they would like to see in a new code specific to downtown Helena, and reflective of the neighborhood plan. The comments below summarize the general comments heard during our conversations with key stakeholders.

* Mixed-use is highly desirable in the downtown core. There should be more residential development available in downtown Helena; would like to see housing above store fronts, especially along the walking mall and Last Chance Gulch wherever possible. Consider walkability when establishing mixed-use standards. Consider housing subsidies to encourage residential development.
* Housing opportunity exists along Cruise Avenue and around (not in) Women’s Park. MDT used to hold the deed to the roadway, now it is under City ownership so there is more potential for something to happen along this corridor, as highlighted in the downtown plan. This should be explored further through coding for new development.
* Businesses/activities that should be encourage downtown, to support residents: grocery store, pharmacy, urgent care, and anchor store of some sort (Herbergers, JC Penny, etc.), business incubator (esp. for restaurants).
* Allow restaurants to have patios; the City should establish standards to make things more clear for applicants and business owners wishing to do so.
* Corridor standards needed to be established.
* There needs to be a greater connection between downtown and the park system – primarily Mt. Helena Park and Mt. Ascension trail systems.
* Parking needs to be better managed, but we do not necessarily need more of it:
  + Consider employee parking needs, wants and realities;
  + How can we educate the public to park ‘wiser’;
  + Consider special event parking (Alive @ 5 on Wednesdays, Art Walk);
  + Should try to utilize open lots or redevelop existing buildings before taking over surface parking.
  + Parking needs to be more convenient.
  + Consider ‘zoning out’ surface parking.
  + Parking garages – attractive and accessible:
    - Consider the size/design of parking spaces themselves.
    - Structured parking needs to be safe, designed in a way that encourages people to use them.
  + How do we get parking to pay for itself?
* Downtown Helena needs incentives for renovation of existing buildings. Infill or reuse? It can be difficult to remodel a building, so we need to find a way to stimulate this type of redevelopment:
  + More options/opportunity for redevelopment of open lots, historic buildings;
  + Make the permitting process exciting!
  + Offer incentives for business to stay/relocate downtown.
  + Could include monetary incentives, education/outreach to define obstacles, marketing to bring in developers, focus on business retention.
  + Identify and eliminate disincentives.
* Landscaping standards should incorporate height restrictions so as not to block signage or create maintenance issues.
* Neon signs are not desirable in downtown.
* Good examples of newer architect and desirable design elements include the Methodist Church and Medical Arts building.
* Standards are OK if they are not too onerous. Existing uses should be grandfathered. Keep some options available, including connections to natural areas, outer building appearance, and historic character.
* Do something to prevent solid blank walls at the street level, large unarticulated blocks and require some form of security lighting if possible.
* New code should think about snow removal locations in the design standards.
* There should be considerations in the design standards for façade improvements vs. the total rebuild of a structure.
* Limit pre-fab or limited lifetime buildings in the downtown area.
* More retail is desired along Front Street, to increase connectivity between historic downtown and Great Northern and make it feel more walkable.
* Create a corridor from Women’s Park to Last Chance Gulch.
* More restaurants are needed in the Great Northern Town Center; there is generally a desire to see this are have greater variability in use.
* Permitting needs to be streamlined. Have a lead person on staff to education potential building buyers about permit requirements and how to navigate them.
* Don’t want strip malls or strip clubs permitted in the downtown area.
* Zoning should be as open as possible and regulations need to be streamlined
* Desire for permissive standards for alcohol, beer and wine licensing establishments (although cannot influence or change state regulation and permitting process)
* Don’t eliminate use entirely but could uses be consolidated into categories vs. specific uses, to be more permissive?
* Great Northern Town Center is actively zoned for 134 housing units (apartments); 2008 economic downtown affected construction viability.
* If possible in this code consolidation, consider standards for improvements to public spaces
* Everyone should be required to follow the code, as written, with a few limited exceptions (either do it this way or do it that way, but do it regardless).
* Walking through Great Northern is good – getting from there to downtown is difficult and unsafe. Some suggestions include:
  + Tree-lined space, light, bright and airy – landscaping requirements imposed to soften building fronts.
  + Improvements to Front Street infrastructure are necessary.
  + Lack of shade, lack of defined aesthetic, lack of personality need to be addressed.
  + Uneven sidewalks are a major problem for accessibility.
* There should be greater consistency in building form and how a structure is situated onsite between Great Northern Town Center, Front Street and Last Chance Gulch.
* Have permissive zoning and articulate the reasons for each district. Figure out the consequences of a specific land use on the downtown area.
* Downtown is not well signed, nor is it uniformly lit for safe walking. There is a lack of shade and aesthetics between Great Northern and the 400 block of the Gulch.
* In an ideal world the Federal building would be removed; while the code can’t make this happen, it could think about what redevelopment would look like for this property in the future.
* Urban form as it currently exists feels interrupted by parking and setback requirements.
* Stormwater infiltration will be a consideration for redevelopment – incorporate cash in lieu option or a mechanism for regional stormwater infrastructure (offsite).
* Opportunities for light industry and technology should be explored, so long as form of downtown can accommodate and is respected.
* Create “lifestyle centers” – carrying forward important elements of the downtown, reverse engineering of code
* The homeless shelter is needed but located in an area that is less than desirable, may be inappropriate. Some of the negative impacts ‘may’ be addressed through design standards, but concern still exists regarding it’s presence on the main entry corridor to downtown.

## From the Survey

The OPD team hosted three separate stakeholder meetings while onsite in April, inviting business and property owners to engage in discussion regarding current code functionality and what they would like to see in a new code specific to downtown Helena, and reflective of the neighborhood plan. The comments from stakeholders via survey are summarized in the attached PDF.

## From the Public

The OPD team hosted a public meeting where interested community members could come and learn about the consolidated downtown zoning project and provide input on issues related to the existing code. The following summarizes what we heard from the public during our initial trip to Helena:

* The surface parking lot at the corner of Park Ave. and Lawrence is always full.
* The City should get rid of coin operated parking meters.
* Parking is always a challenge around the Blackfoot.
* The US Bank parking garage is private and therefore unusable by the public, but almost always empty in the evenings – could shared parking options be looked at?
* The parking garage on the pedestrian mall is a bad idea.
* We should remove HUD structures from downtown.
* There need to be buildings fronting Park Ave. from 6th heading south (mixed-use).
* Gateway signage is needed at both ends of 6th Street, as well as along 11th and Benton.
* Upgrade flat, large parking lots along Park, Cruse, Front and Fuller to integrate mixed-uses and build up and encourage development to occupy space above.
* The code should encourage public art in the gateway areas.
* The walking mall is attractive because of the trees, seating areas, water feature, etc.
* Spaces in downtown identified as desirable because of form and function:
  + The historic core;
  + The Windbag remodel and outdoor seating area;
  + Anywhere there is outside seating;
  + The walking mall itself;
  + Power Block area in front of the Hawthorne, Ten Mile, Lucca’s and Big Dipper;
  + Areas where the buildings are especially diverse architecturally.
* Opportunities for improvement in downtown include:
  + Parking along S. Park Ave. in front of the brewery;
  + Paying more attention to use;
  + Encouraging dedicated bike lanes;
  + Improving the bank’s parking garage façade;
  + Increasing ease of parking around downtown;
  + Lighting;
  + Historic façade upkeep;
  + More activities present to encourage visitation at night;
  + Continuity of landscape, landscaping standards;
  + Limit office space on first floor;
  + More foodtrucks in downtown;
  + Underground parking options should be looked at;
  + Design standards for historic structures;
  + Shared signage options;
  + Look at European model of mix of uses, business, housing and people;
  + Public restrooms;
  + Business incubators;
  + Future development potential around Central School;
  + Maintaining open space.