

Cultivating the Pearl: Commission to consider replacing zoning with form-based codes in Tulsa district

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The Village at Central Park brownstone subdivision in the Pearl District just east of downtown Tulsa. (Rip Stell)

TULSA – With a 10-year marathon nearing its end, real estate developer Jamie Jamieson may finally see if form-based codes truly aid the long-term revitalization of north Tulsa’s Pearl District.

Beginning 1:30 p.m. Feb. 16, the [Tulsa Metropolitan Area Planning Commission](#) will consider replacing traditional zoning with [form-based codes](#) in a small section of that district, an estimated 350-acre portion of Tulsa immediately east of downtown and south of Interstate 244.

Jamieson, developer of that region’s Village at Central Park brownstone subdivision and a founding member of the Pearl District Association, expects the commission and the Tulsa City Council to adopt both this proposal and a second one later this winter to involve the rest of the district.

“At the end of the day it’s the City Council’s decision,” said Duane Cuthbertson, a senior planner with the commission. “For whichever area, be it the entire Pearl or some portion of the Pearl District, it sets the tone for new development going forward. It fundamentally changes the future outcomes of the built environment.”

Even though limited to a small portion of Tulsa – the Pearl District covers less than a quarter of 1 percent of the city’s whole area, by Jamieson’s estimate – this initiative offers hope for developers frustrated by perceived difficulties getting projects through Tulsa’s existing zoning and permitting processes.

“To the degree that this code can get very specific, I think some would view it as more desirable,” said Cuthbertson.

In essence, form-based codes allow the city and neighborhood districts to create a regulatory plan for desired residential and commercial development in specific regions. The adopted form-based codes would enable and streamline that plan, in theory making it easier and faster to complete a project along those guidelines than under today’s existing zoning/permitting system.

“It’s much more flexible in terms of commercial usage, for a start,” said Jamieson, a longtime proponent who first called for form-based codes in 2001 with his Village development. “The code has much less to do with what people do within the walls of their buildings and cares much more with how the building sits on the street and where it is in relation to the street.”

With its illustrated pictures, Jamieson said the code also proves more motivating and easier to understand.

“It provides much more predictability for everybody,” he said. “You know what the neighborhood is going to look and feel like as the years go by.”

The Pearl District code embraces a very urban lifestyle, with vehicle parking requirements de-emphasized in favor of a higher-density, more walkable environment. Jamieson sees a wide range of market appeal to this, from empty-nesters seeking a simpler life to anyone stung by highway congestion and the increasing cost of gasoline.

By reducing parking and curb cut restrictions, Jamieson said the form-based codes should help revive one of Tulsa’s older neighborhoods while attracting and encouraging pedestrians, cyclists and other alternative transportation enthusiasts.

“It’s much more concerned with the character of the place,” he said. “Our code requires no parking whatsoever, which is a huge shift. It’s much less intrusive in the business of the property owner or developer. It allows them to decide how much parking they want to provide.

“We’re essentially wanting to create a real place where people want to be and where they hang out,” Jamieson said. “And where people hang out is where they tend to do business.”

In that regard, Cuthbertson said the Pearl form-based codes serve as a marketing tool.

“It sends a signal to the region that if you desire an urban outcome, the Pearl is the place to invest, the Pearl is the place to be,” he said. “As we transition our city from one almost entirely automobile-oriented to one with a little more diversity in terms of how it supports those who

choose not to use a car, I would anticipate the future of the Pearl would have a high degree of traffic. If that area plays out as the code anticipates.”

For those who seek a different property usage than what’s envisioned for that district, form-based codes may prove even more restrictive than the current system.

“I don’t think this code’s apologetic about that,” said Cuthbertson. “If you choose to come into the Pearl District after this form-based code’s in place, you are in fact accepting the view this code envisions. You are accepting a high-density area. You are accepting a future where parking could be very difficult to find.”

With the city’s approval, Cuthbertson said other Tulsa districts could potentially tailor a set of form-based codes to their individual needs.

“The code could be used by any other district that wanted to use it,” said Jamieson. “Indeed, some have taken an interest in it and they’re watching this project with interest.”

Jamieson expects the code changes to help spur another long-standing goal for the Pearl District, to finish needed flood plain improvements in a way that encourages economic development – a park system connected by a canal running along Sixth Street.

While that dream took glorious form with the 2006 opening of Centennial Park, it advances slowly due to preparatory requirements and recessionary governmental funding restrictions. Jamieson said the latest moves involve land studies around the next proposed pond, or “pearl,” from which the district pulls its name.

“It is steady progress,” said Theron Warlick, a level-three Tulsa city planner. “That’s one thing you can say about it. But nothing explosive yet.”

With potential efforts to incorporate commercial or residential development proposals with the initial pond planning, Warlick said the timetable for completing the west pearl could take years.

“You need a critical mass of movement to make that work quickly,” he said. “It takes time. We’re trying to find our own way to let that happen here.”

That pace proves discouraging for visionaries like Jamieson.

“It’s been slow and painful, and it really shouldn’t have been this slow,” he said, noting the form-based codes must still win approval from the Planning Commission and City Council. “Tulsa is a city that has been very slow to embrace change and that certainly goes for its government. But I think it’s been given a shot in the arm by the new comprehensive plan.”

The district has attracted a small number of progressive architectural firms and other businesses encouraged by the association’s vision, Jamieson said on reflection.

“All these things are part of the same tapestry and it’s all slowly heading in the right direction, but Tulsa has been losing and continues to lose ground competitively in terms of attracting the kind of people we need to boost our economy aggressively,” he said. “We still need help from the city. We’re doing this for our kids rather than ourselves.”