

**Community Planning and Economic Development Planning Division Report
Zoning Code Text Amendment**

Date: February 17, 2009

Initiator of Amendment: Council Member Goodman

Date of Introduction at City Council: November 7, 2008

Specific Site: Citywide

Ward: Citywide **Neighborhood Organization:** Citywide

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Intent of the Ordinance: To establish development standards for plazas.

Appropriate Section(s) of the Zoning Code: Chapter 535, Regulations of General Applicability; Chapter 525, Administration and Enforcement

Background: The City does not have any development regulations in place currently that apply to the construction of plazas. As such, some previously constructed plazas have resulted in barren, hardscaped areas with few amenities and no seating. The purpose of the amendment is to establish design guidelines and development standards that visually enhance future plaza developments and ensure that they are accessible, constructed with high quality materials, and provide quality amenities. This amendment is not intended to address general open space.

A public hearing was previously held on the draft amendments on January 5, 2009. The amendment was continued at that meeting and then reviewed by the Planning Commission at Committee of the Whole on January 8, 2009. On February 2, 2009 a second public hearing was held by the Planning Commission and the amendment was continued once again. The amendment was then further reviewed by the Planning Commission at Committee of the Whole on February 5, 2009.

Purpose for the Amendment:

What is the reason for the amendment?

What problem is the Amendment designed to solve?

What public purpose will be served by the amendment?

What problems might the amendment create?

The purpose of the amendment is to establish development standards for plazas, which would promote year-round gathering places designed to maximize pedestrian access, interaction and visibility, reinforce public spaces, create community identity, promote public safety, and visually enhance development. Existing ordinances in the zoning code offer limited guidance for the development of plazas, and relate to the downtown districts only. Existing ordinance language in Section 549.220 includes regulations for

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outdoor open spaces in the downtown districts, including plazas, in instances where said open spaces are utilized to obtain floor area ratio premiums. The code does not have any language that specifically addresses plazas throughout the city.

The amendment would require all plazas over 2,000 square feet in area that meet the proposed definition of “plaza” to be approved via an administrative permit subject to all proposed development standards. The proposed design standards establish regulations for access, size, seating, surface materials, and maintenance, among others. The amendment and required application process would require developers to consider and address issues such as visibility, interaction with adjacent public streets, sidewalks, and pathways, seating and design elements that promote year-round use.

The past practice has been to review plazas that come forward as part of other land use applications, such as site plan review, but with no specific standards. The proposed ordinance would provide guidance to developers and property owners and establish minimum standards. These standards are intended to resolve issues that have risen from past plaza developments, such as lack of seating, lack of landscaping and other amenities, and poor access. Establishing standards to promote quality plazas that serve as gathering spaces will provide inviting open spaces for public and private users. Staff also consulted with Public Works on the proposed standards. It is anticipated that most plazas that come forward for an administrative permit would also be required to go through the Preliminary Development Review (PDR) process to review issues such as right-of-way encroachments and stormwater runoff.

Staff does not anticipate that the amendment will create significant problems. The proposed regulations are intended to be flexible enough to accommodate a wide range of situations. In order to account for unique circumstances where compliance with the design standards may be impractical, a new variance would be authorized from the development standards for plazas, subject to the requirements of Chapter 525 of the zoning code.

Timeliness:

Is the amendment timely?

Is the amendment consistent with practices in surrounding areas?

Are there consequences in denying this amendment?

The amendment is timely given that the City expects that plazas will continue to be constructed throughout the city in the future. It is part of the continual process of updating the zoning ordinance as well. Many metropolitan cities have adopted ordinances that address plaza development and design. These ordinances vary significantly from city to city. The City of New York, NY has very extensive plaza standards addressing items such as size, grade, lighting, signage, hours of operation, materials and seating among others. The City of Chicago, IL has plaza standards similar to those proposed as part of this amendment, which only apply in instances where a plaza is used to obtain a floor area bonus. The City of Pittsburgh, PA has plaza standards for its downtown and planned unit development districts only, addressing items such as lighting, seating, landscaping and access. The City of Portland, OR has plaza standards that address size, seating, landscaping and weather protection. These standards only apply to transit-supportive plazas that are provided in lieu of required parking.

If the proposed amendment is denied, plazas may still be constructed throughout the city with little to no regulatory authority to address issues such as design, materials, and access. Future plazas may then result more barren, hardscaped areas with few amenities.

Comprehensive Plan:

How will this amendment implement the Comprehensive Plan?

The following policies of the *Minneapolis Plan* apply:

- 9.18 Minneapolis will establish land use regulations, in order to achieve the highest possible development standards, enhance the environment, promote flexibility in approaches and otherwise carry out the comprehensive plan.

The following general land use policies of the *Minneapolis Plan for Sustainable Growth* apply:

Policy 1.1: Establish land use regulations to achieve the highest possible development standards, enhance the environment, protect public health, support a vital mix of land uses, and promote flexible approaches to carry out the comprehensive plan.

- 1.1.5 Ensure that land use regulations continue to promote development that is compatible with nearby properties, neighborhood character, and natural features; minimizes pedestrian and vehicular conflict; promotes street life and activity; reinforces public spaces; and visually enhances development.

Policy 1.3: Ensure that development plans incorporate appropriate transportation access and facilities, particularly for bicycle, pedestrian, and transit.

- 1.3.1 Require safe, convenient, and direct pedestrian connections between principal building entrances and the public right-of-way in all new development and, where practical, in conjunction with renovation and expansion of existing buildings.

Policy 10.2: Integrate pedestrian scale design features into Downtown site and building designs and infrastructure improvements.

- 10.2.8 Coordinate site designs and public right-of-way improvements to provide adequate sidewalk space for pedestrian movement, street trees, landscaping, street furniture, sidewalk cafes and other elements of active pedestrian areas.

Policy 10.9: Support urban design standards that emphasize traditional urban form with pedestrian scale design features at the street level in mixed-use and transit-oriented development.

- 10.9.4 Coordinate site designs and public right-of-way improvements to provide adequate sidewalk space for pedestrian movement, street trees, landscaping, street furniture, sidewalk cafes and other elements of active pedestrian areas.

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The following policies of the Downtown 2010 plan apply:

12. Encourage the creation of new parks and plazas that are within easy access to the majority of the downtown workforce.

Open space serves as a recreational and visual amenity, and its presence lends identity, value, and focus to an area. Whether designed as quiet places to sit in the sun and enjoy a leisurely cup of coffee, or as monumental places for civic events, open space contributes to the enrichment of the city and enlarges the opportunities for public enjoyment. There is a special affection for parks and plazas among the citizens of Minneapolis.

Recommendation of the Community Planning and Economic Development--Planning Division:

The Community Planning and Economic Development Planning Division recommends that the City Planning Commission and City Council adopt the above findings and **approve** the zoning code text amendment.

Attachments:

1. Ordinance amending Chapter 525 to authorize a variance from the standards of Chapter 535, Plazas
2. Ordinance amending Chapter 535 with the creation of Article XI relating to Plazas