

The price of housing

Written by By Holly J. Wagner Sun Correspondent
Friday, 16 September 2022 03:44



Development proposal tests limits of mixed-use zoning designation

Quick! Picture a mixed-use neighborhood. What does it look like?

The future of housing in Gallup may depend on the answer to that question.

The idea of mixed-use neighborhoods – where small businesses are part of residential neighborhoods – has caught on across the country in the last couple of decades. The idea is to create walkable neighborhoods where homeowners can live, work and access basic goods and services without ever starting their cars.

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It's an appealing idea for developers, who get a backstop for their investments if housing doesn't sell. In many parts of the country it also appeals to Millennials and young buyers who want to work from home and reduce their carbon footprints.

"The reason it's so popular is because Millennials like the concept of being able to live in a neighborhood, walk to work and then walk home without ever getting into their vehicle and driving around," realtor Jason Valentine said.

At its Sept. 13 meeting the Gallup City Council will try to thread the needle, balancing housing needs with business uncertainties, as it hears an appeal of the first ground-up build to win the mixed-use neighborhood zoning designation.

At the center of the debate is what "mixed use" will look like in practice. It's common in bigger cities, where neighborhoods are built out and new construction aims to make infill neighborhoods walkable and services more accessible. In Gallup it's relatively new, and not everybody is a fan.

When the city streamlined its Land Standards in 2018, the list of zoning districts was cut from 30 to 15, Planning Director C.B. Strain said. Now the mixed-use zone is the only zone that allows all types of residential construction – homes, townhomes, apartments and more – and it includes a commercial component. At first the zone was applied to existing properties to allow existing uses, so it wasn't an issue.

Enter businessman Eiad Suleiman, who owns the Ashley Furniture Rental store, a hotel and a home in Gallup. He sought the mixed-use zone for about 20 acres of land he owns southeast of the intersection of Philipina Avenue and Strong Drive. The Planning Commission approved his application June 8 and again in a split vote July 28, after the first vote was voided on a parliamentary issue.

Resident Bill Lee appealed the decision, fearing Gallup will become a property use patchwork where anything goes. It's his appeal the council will hear Sept. 13. Their job will be to determine whether the mixed-use zone was correctly applied to the property, based on city regulations.

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“I believe that if this property is allowed to be rezoned, we’ll see a whole host of property owners throughout Gallup do the same thing and our zoning will become a mess,” Lee said. “The city will have no ground to stand on in denying [future applications] for that purpose.”

Zoning is the first step in property development. Owners can’t make plans unless they know what uses will be allowed on the property they are developing.

Suleiman’s property is bare dirt now, but it’s adjacent to homes to the north and east. His plan involves building 100 to 140 single-family homes priced at \$250,000 to \$300,000, starting at the northern part of the property, according to architect and representative Ryan Stearns, who noted, “he’s here 80% of the time” and plans to move into one of the homes he wants to build.

Moving south, future phases could include more homes, townhomes and/or apartments. Mixed-use zoning also allows commercial spaces under 3,000 square feet.

Under the city’s Land Standards, some businesses are automatically permitted in mixed-use zones, subject to rules governing those businesses. Those include convenience stores, utility offices, parks, recreation centers, libraries or museums, community gardens, religious institutions, fraternity or sorority houses, community residential facilities, medical, dental or veterinary clinics, public safety substations, personal service businesses such as barber and beauty shops, creative and tech businesses, small restaurants and mobile vendors.

The mixed-use zone may allow other businesses with conditional use permits that require additional review, such as group homes and halfway houses, day care centers, educational facilities, hospitals or major medical clinics, pet services, a taproom or tasting room, theater, gym, bed and breakfast or boarding house, small car wash, funeral home, offices or artisan manufacturing.

“There are some limitations as to the kind of business that can be put in without approvals, but even then you’re on a slippery slope as far as what the city is going to say. It should be more defined,” Lee said.

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Part of the problem is that nobody knows what to expect. Since mixed-use zones have so far only been applied to older neighborhoods that already had mixed uses, residents picture their neighborhoods suddenly looking like downtown. Some neighbors are nervous that they could eventually get stuck with businesses, and their attendant noise and traffic, springing up willy-nilly among homes.

“There’s a lot of areas in Gallup that look like a hodgepodge. I think they need to leave it as residential. I’m afraid of the commercial,” said Marie Chioda, whose parents are longtime Philipina Avenue residents, citing safety and neighborhood security issues.

“They just talked about businesses mixed in like in California or Phoenix. They didn’t talk about putting the multi-use in one section,” Tim Adcock, who lives on Puerco Drive and owns Ted’s Pawn & Jewelry and is against the new development, said. “I wouldn’t like having a real busy restaurant right next to my house.”

Building has to make economic sense for Suleiman, who was unable to schedule an interview with the *Sun* by press time. The plan going in is for housing, but home sales in the first phase could dictate changes to later phases.

“This is the first phase of a much, much larger Gallup project,” Stearns said. “There’s a lot of things in the works. It depends on how this project goes.”

Mixed-use zone supporters like Valentine say if Gallup wants new housing, mixed-use may be the only option. Valentine acknowledged that other property owners are watching from the sidelines and said mixed-use zoning might encourage new development around the city.

“The simple fact is, if you’re not willing to do mixed-use zoning you’re probably not going to get many developers moving,” Valentine said. “The days of massive subdivisions being built with nothing but single family houses are probably gone.”

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