

City of Gilbert, Arizona

INNOVATION

Have you ever picked up a document that outlines government regulations and felt like you were reading a foreign language? In 2010, the Town of Gilbert adopted design guidelines that, while providing an exceptional foundation for architectural character in the Downtown Heritage District (HD), were text heavy and difficult to navigate. Professional developers and private homeowners alike often felt lost in the 50-page document. In 2018, Gilbert's Town Council adopted a new Redevelopment Plan for the HD. To ensure continuity with the plan, the HD Design Guidelines were reimaged with the following requirements in mind:

- Challenge conventional suburban planning via the focus on a human-scale, walkable environment that provides residents the option for an urban lifestyle.
- Utilize axonometric drawings (3-D imagery) and inspirational photography to convey the anticipated development standard and quality.
- Create a tapestry. Not all areas of the 0.3 square mile District should be the same. Designate streets as a certain type, explain the experience of each type and then weave them together with the HD character.
- Make the document easy to use, read and follow. Bullets supersede paragraphs. Define any term that is not recognizable.
- Include public spaces. Most design guidelines focus on commercial and residential spaces. Ensure the public's vision for public spaces are memorialized.
- Tap into 10 years of lessons learned. (e.g. grease bin locations were an afterthought that caused vermin and odor near rear entrances. These are now required to be built into the facility utilizing new technologies.)

OUTCOME

The guidelines benefit those who live, work and play in the HD by:

- Preserving community character;
- Reflecting the community's needs and wishes;
- Encouraging planning and development collaboration.

They succinctly articulate Gilbert's Land Development Code while promoting 360-degree architecture. They foster pedestrian-oriented design while incorporating operational needs (i.e. micro-mobility, rideshare, and loading zones). The guidelines reimagine often underutilized spaces and establish a vision for varied housing options in pursuit of a more equitable downtown.

The public's primary concern of retaining a small-town feel was achieved by:

- Incorporating curbless streets around public spaces;
- Requiring turn-of-the-century architecture on main street;
- Designating spaces for curbside mom -and-pop vendors;
- Incorporating red brick design features into each street type.

Neighbors expressed the need to preserve a 100-year-old single-family neighborhood on the downtown periphery. The guidelines strike a balance between redevelopment and character preservation (e.g. specifying historic architectural vernacular; requiring front porches/courtyards; and limiting lot combinations).

Every department's lessons learned were incorporated (e.g. minimizing curb cuts to limit traffic stacking, requiring consolidated refuse areas in alleyways with designated collection times, and weather control protection over doorways).

The guidelines will remain in place for the next ten years.

Post adoption, the board approved the design for a \$300 million dollar private development. Staff utilized the guidelines to:

- Relocate the hotel to the site's hard corner;
- Vary architectural facades to break up massing;
- Incorporate a north/south pedestrian walkway;
- Add brick accents and cornices to a featureless garage façade.

EXECUTION

Town staff saw development of the design guidelines as an opportunity to roll up their sleeves without relying on external consultants. Two staff members led the effort, reviewing 36 pages of public meeting notes and 4,000 survey responses from the Redevelopment Plan. The citizen feedback provided a baseline to develop guiding principles for desirable commercial, residential and public space development. These staff members were responsible for planning, generating draft text, selecting precedent imagery, and facilitating all public engagement. An architect was retained to develop the axonometric imagery.

Just as a draft of the guidelines was ready for public review, the pandemic hit and outreach plans were temporarily halted. In August 2020, staff held virtual public meetings to review the guidelines and opened a month-long public review period. For members of the public who could not access the documents online, staff made socially distanced deliveries of hard copies to their homes. From August to October 2020, staff incorporated public input and also received feedback from members of the design review board. In November 2020, the adoption process began (including three additional meetings that allowed for substantial public input) and the final guidelines were unanimously adopted by Council in March 2021.

REPRESENTATION

Gilbert does not have a UPMO. However, a steering committee guided the project and included diverse representation such as property managers, merchants, residents, developers, brokers, architects, and land use attorneys. Often, the most fruitful conversations occurred between the developers and residents. What emerged was consensus that residents are prone to become distrustful of developers when they request deviations from established zoning codes or design guidelines. This dialogue between residents and developers led to the development of stronger guidelines that meet the needs of a diverse set of stakeholders.

Staff opened a month-long public review period during which 318 comments were received, and every comment was responded to in detail by staff. Where public comments differed, the steering committee provided recommendations to staff prior to final design review board direction.

The most difficult challenge for staff was adapting the public process to the realities of operating during a pandemic. While the town was not holding in-person public meetings, staff printed hard copies of the guidelines and hand delivered them to the homes of individuals who did not have access to or did not feel comfortable with online options. Staff felt that this created the most equitable environment for seeking feedback.

REPLICATION

In the time since their adoption, Gilbert has had several cities request information related to the development of the design guidelines. We tell them that authenticity is critical and the character woven into the guidelines should tell the story of their community. For example, cities shared that their elected officials wanted an iconic water tower like Gilbert's. However, Gilbert's water tower is still standing today because it was the first purchase by the town to sustain farming operations in the area. Agrarian elements such as this reflect the town's history and are built into all aspects of the HD character (e.g. rights-of-way with hay and cotton patterns, buildings with barn-like elements, agrarian silos).

The process, undertaken by two staff members who also maintained their regular full-time workloads, could be replicated by cities small or large with a modest budget. Where one exists, a UPMO should be present for discussions and incorporated into the process. It is advisable to facilitate a healthy dialogue between business and residents in the community. In addition, municipal plan reviewers, police, fire, environmental services, traffic engineering, and streets teams must all be at the table from the onset of planning.

COMPLEXITY/SIMPLICITY

The complexity of creating a user-friendly set of design guidelines lies in the ability to ensure adherence with municipal code, land development code, engineering standards, and in some cases right of way standards while simultaneously making the guidelines both succinct and broadly applicable. Having subject matter experts from both municipal staff and the private sector at the table during key touch points throughout the project simplified the process.

One way in which town staff built simplicity into the process was by using Mentimeter, an online polling software. Where public comments differed as to the best approach, staff polled both steering committee members and design review board members. For example, the draft guidelines showed a building on a vacant lot adjacent to a neighborhood park. Some of the neighbors were in favor of showing a building, others were not. The online Mentimeter poll asked the steering committee and design review board members "should a building be shown as inspiration for the vacant dirt area adjacent to Gilbert Road in Veterans Park?" In all cases, staff proceeded with the majority poll response. This method created both efficiency for and transparency of final direction.