



Planning & Zoning Report

Date: December 10, 2025

To: Planning and Zoning Board

Through: Marc Heirshberg, Assistant City Manager

From: Nana Appiah, Development Services Director
Mary Kopaskie-Brown, Planning Director
Rachel Phillips, Assistant Planning Director

Subject: Mesa Zoning Ordinance text amendment **(Administrative Review Amendments)**- Proposed amendments to Title 11 Chapters 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11, 12, 14, 20, 21, 22, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 42, 46, 56, 63, 67, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 80, 81, 86, and 87 to the Mesa City Code. **(Citywide)**

Recommendation

Staff recommends that the Planning and Zoning Board recommend that the City Council adopt the proposed Mesa Zoning Ordinance (MZO) Administrative Review text amendments.

Purpose

City Council, the development community, and City staff have engaged in discussions aimed at improving the development review process. These conversations have highlighted several shared priorities: increasing predictability for applicants, reducing redundancies, improving coordination across departments, and ensuring that the review process remains transparent, efficient, and aligned with Mesa's long-term planning and design objectives.

Staff received consistent feedback requesting clearer procedures, more objective standards, and administrative pathways for routine applications - allowing City Council and the City's Boards to focus policy development and community impact. The proposed text amendments, summarized in this report, reflect those discussions and will streamline the City's development review framework while ensuring continued high-quality outcomes.

Recent changes in state law has resulted in a new mandate for administrative approvals. On March 3, 2023, Governor Hobbs signed Senate Bill 1103, authorizing municipalities to administratively review and approve site plans, development plans, land divisions, lot line adjustments, lot ties, preliminary plats, final plats, and plat amendments.

This authority became a requirement on March 31, 2025, when House Bill 2447 was signed into law, amending A.R.S. § 9-500.49 to require every municipality to adopt an ordinance authorizing administrative personnel to approve these actions without a public hearing. House Bill 2447 also required design review approvals to be based on clear, objective standards.

On July 1, 2025, City Council adopted amendments to the Mesa City Code authorizing the administrative approval of Land Division actions such as Preliminary Plats, Final Plats, Minor Plats, Land Splits, etc.

Staff is recommending certain modifications to Chapters 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11, 12, 14, 20, 21, 22, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 42, 46, 56, 63, 66, 67, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 80, 81, 86, and 87 of the MZO. Details of the proposed text amendments are attached in Exhibit 1 – Administrative Review Ordinance, Exhibit 2 – Administrative Review – Replaced Sections and Chapters, Exhibit 3 – Administrative Review – Expiration and Extensions, and Exhibit 4 – Administrative Review – Development Standard Modifications. Specifically, the proposed text amendments:

1. Modify existing development standards to ensure they are objective, and add new development standards that promote consistent, high-quality design outcomes.
2. Retire obsolete zoning designations.
3. Add development standards for the Mixed-Use District.
4. Create Site Planning and Design Standards for the Downtown Districts.
5. Create a consolidated “Development Plan Review” process that combined and replaces the existing Design Review and Site Plan Review procedures.
6. Modify the expiration and extensions provisions for consistency across cases.
7. Modify approval criteria for Alternative Compliance.
8. Reorganize and reword text for clarity, consistency, and to reduce redundancy.
9. Modify and add definitions for new terms or previously undefined terms.

Discussion

1. **Modify existing development standards to ensure they are objective, and add new development standards that promote consistent, high-quality design outcomes.**

The proposed text amendments include revisions to existing development standards to ensure they are objective, clearly written, and consistently applied. Many current standards rely on discretionary terms such as “should” and “may,” or use subjective descriptions of intent rather than specifying measurable requirements. This can result in inconsistent interpretation and unpredictable outcomes for applicants.

The proposed text amendments replace subjective language with objective, quantifiable criteria - such as minimum depths for horizontal wall articulation and minimum percentages of primary building materials to be used on both publicly visible and non-publicly visible facades. New development standards are also proposed to further support high-quality design. Examples include adding landscaping diversity requirements to prevent monoculture conditions that increase vulnerability to disease or extreme weather, and establishing minimum residential amenity standards tied to the number of dwelling units in a project.

The proposed text amendments reinforce the City's commitment to high-quality design, increase predictability for applicants - a key request from the development community - and ensure compliance with the objective-standards requirements of A.R.S. § 9-500.49 as amended by House Bill 2447.

2. Retire obsolete zoning designations.

In 2011, the City completed a major overhaul of the Zoning Ordinance with the adoption of a new Title 11. As part of that update, two Community Character Designators were established to provide character-specific development standards. The Urban (-U) designator was intended to support a more urban development pattern, with buildings placed close to the street and an active, pedestrian-oriented environment. The Auto-Oriented (-A) designator was created to guide development in areas where automobile-oriented uses are prevalent, helping to mitigate their impacts through tailored design standards.

These designators were optional and required a specific request from an applicant, followed by adoption through a City Council zoning action.

Since the 2011 update, the City has received only one rezoning request that included a Community Character Designator, and that designation was later removed in a subsequent zoning case before the property was developed. With limited use over more than a decade and the adoption of more effective zoning tools staff recommends retiring both Community Character Designators.

3. Add development standards for the Mixed-Use District.

As part of 2011 Zoning Ordinance overhaul, the Mixed Use (MX) zoning district was created and land use regulations were established. However, while development standards were adopted for the Mixed Use – Urban (-U) designator, no development standards were adopted for the base MX District itself.

In the years since, staff has relied on the MX-U standards to guide development within the MX District. As part of the proposed text amendment, staff is recommending that the City Council retire the Urban (-U) Community Character Designator and adopt a dedicated set of development standards for the MX base zoning district.

4. Create Site Planning and Design Standards for the Downtown Districts.

While Chapter 8 (Downtown Districts) includes development standards for the Downtown Residential, Downtown Business, and Downtown Core districts, it does not contain the Site Planning and Design Standards that appear in Chapter 5 (Residential Districts), Chapter 6 (Commercial and Mixed-Use Districts), and Chapter 7 (Employment Districts). These standards play a critical role in guiding high-quality development.

To ensure consistency across zoning districts, and to support the continued evolution of Downtown with a well-designed, pedestrian-oriented environment, staff recommends adding Site Planning and Design Standards to Chapter 8 that align with the requirements applied to residential and commercial districts. The proposed text amendments combine the Design Review and Site Plan Review processes to create a new consolidated Development Review process.

5. Create a consolidated “Development Plan Review” process that combines and replaces the existing Design Review and Site Plan Review procedures.

The proposed text amendments establish a consolidated “Development Plan Review” process that replaces the existing Design Review and Site Plan Review procedures. This update is prompted in part by A.R.S. § 9-500.49, as amended by House Bill 2447, which requires design review plans to be approved administratively using objective standards. These statutory changes directly affect the role of the Design Review Board and create an opportunity to improve the development review process by evaluating whether a separate Design Review application remains necessary.

Currently, Design Review and Site Plan Review are processed through two separate processes with different recommending and approving authorities, despite substantial overlap in applicability, submittal requirements, and review criteria. This structure leads to duplicative reviews, repetitive comments, and multiple public hearing steps, resulting in avoidable delays for applicants. The overlap in project elements reviewed by each authority creates confusion for applicants, Board members, and the public regarding the respective roles and authority of the Design Review Board versus the Planning and Zoning Board.

A new consolidated Development Plan Review process streamlines these overlapping functions into a single, efficient review pathway focused on ensuring compliance with objective development standards, adopted design guidelines, and applicable conditions of approval. This restructuring improves predictability for applicants, and aligns the City’s procedures with modern zoning best practices and statutory requirements. By eliminating redundancy and clarifying review authority, the consolidated process creates a more user-friendly, consistent, and transparent framework for evaluating development proposals.

6. Modify the expiration and extensions provisions for consistency across cases.

The Zoning Ordinance includes multiple Planning and Zoning review and entitlement processes designed to address a wide range of development scenarios. These processes - including Council Use Permits, Site Plan Review, Design Review, Variances, and Substantial Conformance Improvement Permits - serve distinct purposes, including authorizing uses with higher potential impacts, evaluating development plans for compliance with standards, and approving limited deviations from those standards.

In many cases, a single development proposal may require several of these processes, each with its own approving authority and timeline. Although each case includes expiration and extension provisions, these provisions currently vary across processes, which can result in one approval expiring while related approvals remain active.

To create consistency, reduce administrative complications, and ensure coordinated project timelines, staff recommends standardizing expiration and extension provisions across all applicable cases.

7. Modify approval criteria for Alternative Compliance.

In 2020, the City Council adopted Mesa’s Quality Development Design Guidelines to promote high-quality development citywide. Concurrently, the City approved a comprehensive Zoning Ordinance text amendment that codified many of these guidelines into objective Site Planning and Design Standards. As part of that effort, the Alternative Compliance process was created

to allow applicants to propose creative, context-sensitive alternatives that still meet the intent of the standards.

In recent years, however, the Alternative Compliance process has not always been used to provide solutions that are equivalent or superior in quality, but rather to deviate from required standards.

To address this, staff recommends revising the requirements and approval criteria to improve clarity, ensure appropriate use, and strengthen design outcomes. The proposed modifications place greater responsibility on the applicant to: (1) clearly identify the specific deviation requested, and (2) demonstrate how the alternative meets the intent of the General Plan, represents the minimum departure necessary, and provides either an equivalent level of design quality or meaningful public benefits (such as enhanced streetscape design, increased shade or canopy, improved open space, or similar community-oriented enhancements).

8. Reorganize and reword text for clarity, consistency, and to reduce redundancy.

The proposed text amendments include a reorganization of several sections of the Zoning Ordinance to group related concepts together, remove duplicative content, and ensure consistent terminology throughout the document. These edits do not change the intent or substance of the existing development standards but improve clarity, readability, and ease of use.

By streamlining and consolidating text, the proposed text amendments make the regulations easier for applicants, staff, and the public to locate, interpret, and apply. This reduces the potential for conflicting interpretations, improves consistency in administration, and supports a more efficient and predictable development review process.

9. Modify and add definitions for new terms or previously undefined terms.

The proposed text amendments add definitions for several terms - such as "Change of Use," "General Plan Amendment," "Good Neighbor Policy," and "Plan of Operation" that are currently used throughout the Zoning Ordinance but have never been formally defined.

The proposed text amendments introduce new definitions and refine existing ones to align with updated standards and procedures proposed elsewhere in the Ordinance.

- A definition for "Development Plan Review" is added to describe the consolidated process that will replace the current Design Review and Site Plan Review procedures.
- A definition for "Kitchen Area" is proposed to clarify the application of development standards related to Accessory Dwelling Units.
- Definitions for "*Setbacks*" are added to reflect terminology updates made throughout the Code, and the definition of "Yard" is revised to ensure consistency with these terms and common industry practice.

Citizen Participation

Open House:

The public was invited to a virtual open house on September 29, 2025, to discuss the proposed Administrative Review and the Middle Housing text amendments.

- 4 people attended the open house
- Attendees did not have any questions on the proposed Administrative Review proposed text amendments.

Implementation

Staff recommends the ordinance approving the proposed text amendments become effective 30 days from the date of City Council approval.

Exhibits

Exhibit 1 – Administrative Review Ordinance

Exhibit 2 – Administrative Review – Replaced Sections and Chapters

Exhibit 3 – Administrative Review – Expiration and Extensions

Exhibit 4 – Administrative Review – Development Standard Modifications