

**Planning Commission**

Ashley Bertussi, Chairperson  
Jeffrey Chan, Vice-Chairperson  
Sergio Lopez, Commissioner  
Andy Alvarez, Commissioner  
Aaron Popejoy, Commissioner  
Armando Muñoz, Commissioner  
Jorge A. Perez, Commissioner



**City Attorney**  
Joanna Hoff

**Commission Secretary**  
Angel Hernandez

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**AGENDA**

**CITY OF EL CENTRO  
PLANNING COMMISSION**

**City Hall  
Council Chambers  
1275 Main Street  
El Centro, CA 92243**

**TUESDAY, MARCH 10, 2026 AT 5:30 PM**

Any member of the public attending in person and wishing to make a comment is asked to complete a speaker slip and follow the "Notice to the Public" instructions below. Alternatively, any member of the public is invited to submit public comments in advance of the meeting to be answered at the meeting. Please email your questions to [ecplanning@cityofelcentro.org](mailto:ecplanning@cityofelcentro.org) or call (760) 337-4545. The public may participate and make public comments via the following Zoom link:

<https://us06web.zoom.us/j/81164635306?pwd=sYM5xv6hN9t9RbLf0SkYcXdwUbvWYR.1>

Optional dial-in number:  
Meeting ID: 811 6463 5306 Passcode: 568811

Public comments via zoom are subject to the same time limits as those in person.

### **NOTICE TO THE PUBLIC**

This is a public meeting. If there is a matter on the agenda on which you wish to be heard, please come forward to the microphone; address yourself to the commission, stating your name and address for the record. Persons wishing to address the Commission are not required to identify themselves (Gov't Code § 54953.3); however, this information assists the Chairperson by ensuring that all persons wishing to address the Commission are recognized and it assists the Commission's Secretary in preparing meeting minutes. The Chairperson reserves the right to place a time limit on each person asking to be heard. If you wish to address the Commission concerning any other matter within the Commission's jurisdiction, you may do so during the public comment portion of the agenda.

**\* Any information provided on the "Speaker Slip" is voluntary and will be public record.**

### **CALL TO ORDER:**

### **ROLL CALL**

### **CONSENT AGENDA**

Consent agenda items are approved by one motion. Commissioners or members of the public may pull consent items to be considered separately at a time determined by the Chairperson.

1. Approval of February 10, 2026, Planning Commission Minutes

### **PUBLIC HEARINGS**

### **NEW BUSINESS**

### **NON-ACTION INFORMATION ITEMS**

2. Community Development Department Report
3. Presentation and discussion regarding residential uses in the Downtown Commercial (CD) Zone

### **PUBLIC COMMENTS**

### **ADJOURNMENT**

Materials related to an item on this Agenda submitted to the Commission after distribution of the agenda packet will be available for public inspection at the Community Development Department-Planning & Zoning Division located at 1275 W. Main Street, El Centro, California during normal business hours.

In compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, if you need special assistance to participate in this meeting, you should contact the Community Development Department-Planning & Zoning Division at (760) 337-4545. Notification of at least 72 hours prior to the meeting will enable the City to make reasonable arrangements to assure accessibility to this meeting.



**PLANNING COMMISSION**  
City Hall  
1275 W. Main Street  
El Centro, CA 92243

**Item: 1.**  
Meeting: 3/10/2026 5:30 PM  
CONSENT AGENDA

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**APPROVAL OF FEBRUARY 10, 2026, PLANNING COMMISSION MINUTES**

**STAFF REPORT - ACTION ITEM:**

**ATTACHMENTS:**

1. 2.10.2026 Minutes

MINUTES OF THE PLANNING COMMISSION  
TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 2026  
5:30 PM

**PLANNING COMMISSION**

ASHLEY BERTUSSI, CHAIRPERSON  
JEFFREY CHAN, VICE-CHAIRPERSON  
SERGIO LOPEZ, COMMISSIONER  
ANDY ALVAREZ, COMMISSIONER  
AARON POPEJOY, COMMISSIONER  
ARMANDO MUÑOZ, COMMISSIONER  
JORGE A. PEREZ, COMMISSIONER

**CALL TO ORDER:**

The El Centro Planning Commission convened in a regular session at City Hall Council Chambers, 1275 W. Main Street, El Centro, California at 5:30 PM.

Chairperson Ashley Bertussi presided over the meeting.

**ROLL CALL**

**PRESENT:**

Chairperson Ashley Bertussi  
Vice-Chairperson Jeffrey Chan  
Commissioner Sergio Lopez  
Commissioner Andy Alvarez  
Commissioner Aaron Popejoy  
Commissioner Armando Muñoz  
Commissioner Jorge A. Perez

**ABSENT: NONE**

**STAFF ATTENDANCE:**

Community Development Director, Angel Hernandez  
Building Official, Frank Soto  
Associate Planner, Andrea Montañó  
Assistant Planner, Valeria Landeros  
Staff Assistant, Poleth Lopez

**CONSENT AGENDA**

Consent agenda items are approved by one motion. Commissioners or members of the public may pull consent items to be considered separately at a time determined by the Chairperson.

## 1. Approval of January 13, 2026, Planning Commission Minutes.

Commissioner Lopez moved to approve, seconded by Commissioner Perez.

*Voting Yes:* Commissioner Alvarez, Commissioner Lopez, Commissioner Perez, Chairperson Bertussi, Commissioner Popejoy, Vice-Chairperson Chan, Commissioner Muñoz

*Voting No:* None

*Abstaining:* None

## PUBLIC HEARINGS

### 2. ZOTA Multi-Family Residential Use Regulations

PUBLIC HEARING TO CONSIDER ISSUING A RECOMMENDATION TO THE CITY COUNCIL REGARDING MULTI-FAMILY RESIDENTIAL PERMITTED USES AND CONDITIONAL USE PERMIT 26-01 FOR OASIS COFFEE HOUSE AT 450 S. WATERMAN AVENUE

**Presentation:** Valeria Landeros, Assistant Planner

**Recommendation:**

*Open the public hearing and, after allowing input from all proponents and opponents of the project, move forward by taking the following actions:*

- 1. Issue a recommendation to the City Council to approve the proposed amendment to the Zoning Code pertaining to multi-family residential permitted uses.*
- 2. Approve Conditional Use Permit 26-01 to allow the operation of Oasis Coffee House within the existing church, subject to the adoption of the zoning ordinance text amendment by City Council.*

Assistant Planner, Valeria Landeros, presented Zoning Ordinance Text Amendment 25-01 to allow Conditional Use Permit 26-01 for Oasis Coffee House at 450 S. Waterman Ave. After her presentation, the Planning Commission had questions regarding the security of the children attending the daycare in the same property. The Planning Commission also had questions about special events the church might have, and how the coffee shop would operate, to this staff assured that the applicant would have to notify the city staff about these special events. The Planning Commission also suggested extending the permitted hours of operation and allow for operation outside of the assigned hours during church events. With these changes to the resolution, the Planning Commission started the vote.

Commissioner Alvarez moved to approve, seconded by Commissioner Lopez.

*Voting Yes:* Commissioner Alvarez, Commissioner Lopez, Commissioner Perez, Chairperson Bertussi, Commissioner Popejoy, Vice-Chairperson Chan, Commissioner Muñoz

*Voting No:* None

*Abstaining:* None

## **NEW BUSINESS**

## **NON-ACTION INFORMATION ITEMS**

### **3. Community Development Department Report**

No questions were asked about the Community Development Report.

## **PUBLIC COMMENTS**

No public comments were obtained.

## **ADJOURNMENT**

The meeting adjourned at 6:25 P.M.



## PLANNING COMMISSION

City Hall  
1275 W. Main Street  
El Centro, CA 92243

## Item: 2.

Meeting: 3/10/2026 5:30 PM  
Category: Presentation  
NON-ACTION INFORMATION ITEMS

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### COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT REPORT

#### **STAFF REPORT - INFORMATION ITEM:**

**Civic Center and Downtown Master Plan** – Proposals were due on February 27, 2026 and a total of six proposals were received. Staff are evaluating proposals and are planning scheduling interviews the week of March 23 with a selective consultant agreement being brought before the City Council in April 21 meeting.

**Safety, Open Space/Conservation, Noise Element Update** – The contract was awarded to Harris and Associates on December 16, 2025. A kick-off meeting is scheduled for March 9, 2026. Consultant staff are also preparing a cost and proposal for updating the City's Economic Development Element for the City Council's consideration for additional funding.

**Downtown Fee Waiver Program** – Program was approved by the City Council on March 3, 2026. Staff are working on preparing public outreach and advertising materials and training staff on review processes prior to program start on April 1, 2026.

#### **ATTACHMENTS:**

1. February 2026 Planning Project Report

Planning and Zoning Projects

Owner	Project name	Status Summary	Project Type	Status	Description	MyGov ID
Andrea Montaño	Chelsea Apartments at NEC 6th Street and Spear Avenue	Staff received TSM Completeness Check comments from the Engineering Division and provided them to the Applicant on October 2, 2023. As of February 18, 2026 applicant is still considering next steps.	CEQA COZ GPA TSM	Paused	288 unit apartment complex. Zone Change from CT to R3. Subdivision of 12.9 acre parcel.	22-000001
Andrea Montaño	TSM 22-03, CEQA 22-02, COZ 22-03, GPA 22-02, CUP 22-04 Town Center Single-Family/Industrial Subdivision	This project has been paused by the applicant until further notice.	CEQA COZ CUP GPA TSM	Paused	Planned Unit Development for Single Family Residential and Light Industrial Development.	22-000002
Angel Hernandez	Countryside South Subdivision Map Amendment	Staff is meeting monthly with the applicant.	TSM	Paused	Modifications of COA for Countryside South TSM	22-000007
Andrea Montaño	TSM Willow Bend Subdivision Map Amendment	Approved by City Council on February 4, 2025. Annexation approved by LAFCo on 2/27/2028. Annexation recorded on 5/30/2025. The ICE Study was submitted to Caltrans for review on August 11, 2025. Staff received comments from Caltrans on December 2, 2025. The consultant is preparing the updates to the ICE Study.	TSM	In Progress	Amendment to Conditions of Approval of the Willowbend TSM.	22-000008
Angel Hernandez	MND 17-02, GPA 17-02, COZ 17-02, Dogwood and Villa Annexation	Project approved by City Council meeting on 4/4/2023. Annexation approved on 2/27/2024 by LAFCo. Applicant submitted map for review on August 25, 2025.	Annexation CEQA	Paused	Annexation of 320 Acre parcel	23-000006
Andrea Montaño	LLA/LM 23-01 Lot Line Adjustment Dahm 1425 Cypress Drive	Applicant was provided with corrections on 11/20/23. The deed of trust was received on 1/19/2026. Applicant received comments on 2/9/2026.	LLA/LM	Paused	Adjust lots between two residential parcels	23-000009
Andrea Montaño	LLA/LM 23-03 Maruti Cons. Lot Line Adjustmet WS Imperial Avenue b/t I-8 and Danenberg	As of 12/16/24 applicant has resumed project. Staff is waiting for applicant to provide an updated preliminary title report. The project manager informed staff on 10/24/25 that the applicants were actively engaging with title holders to proceed with completions of the lot line. on 2/3/26 staff issued a 30 day inactivity notice.	LLA/LM	Paused	Lot line adjustment of parcels.	23-000021
Andrea Montaño	COZ 23-01, TSM 23-01, SP 23-01 Gale Kennedy Investment Parkview Single Family Subdivision 1526 Clark	The applicant received the comments on February 13, 2025 for the Tentative Subdivision Map, Specific Plan, and Traffic Study. Staff met with the applicants consultant on November 21, 2025 to discuss the anticipated resubmittal. As of February 3, 2025 a resubmittal has not been received.	CEQA COZ TSM Specific Plan	Paused	The Parkview project proposes a Tentative Map, Specific Plan, Pre-Zoning and Annexation to allow for subdividing the approximately 26-acre project into 114 lots for development with single family homes.	23-000028
Andrea Montaño	LLA 24-03 LC Engineering Consultants, INC Hyundai Dealership-2202 Merrill Center Dr.	Documents were approved by consultant surveyor on 4/2/24. Staff is awaiting applicant to prepare documents for recording. Staff provided updated recorded documents on 2/2/26.	LLA/LM	Paused	Merge two properties into one.	24-000006
Andrea Montaño	TSM 24-01 Dubose Design Group, Inc. Courtyard Villas Subdivision	Staff issued the correction letter for the third review on 9/3/2025. Corrected plans were submitted on 10/15/25 and are being reviewed for completeness by the Engineering Division however the previously requested preliminary title report was not received. The preliminary title report was submitted on 12/15/ 2025 which allowed engineering to continue the review. On 12/22/25 Engineering requested an easement that was noted in the title report. On 2/15/26 Engineering completed their review of the tentative map.	TSM	Paused	Vacant property that had an approved tentative map that expired Request re-approval for 50 single family lots in a R-1 zoned parcel. Layout is the same as the previous TM approved, including 2.38 ac. Retention Basin and 10.57ac, Park that will be next to an existing park in Desert Village West #5.	24-000041

Planning and Zoning Projects

Owner	Project name	Status Summary	Project Type	Status	Description	MyGov ID
Andrea Montañó	SPR 24-18 Akbar Zadeh Self Storage 044-220-110	Staff issued a denial notice on 1/22/26 .	SPR	Canceled	Self Storage: 2 buildings: 104 & 375 square feet, 1500 square feet office, 34 parking, and 29 covered RV parking.	24-000071
Angel Hernandez	SPR 25-04 Ivonn Carlos Storage Yard 2099 Fairfield Ave.	Staff reached out to applicant on June 4, 2025. Staff and applicant reviewing building code compliance.	SPR	Paused	Storage Yard	25-000009
Andrea Montañó	LLA 25-01 Lot Merger 3716 S. Dogwood Ave.	Staff sent Letter of Incompleteness to applicant on 4/22/25. On 9/30/25 the second submittal review was provided to the applicant by the Engineering Division. The applicant was provided the Certificate of Merger document, to be signed and notarized, on November 19, 2025. As of 12/30/2025 the applicant is actively obtaining necessary signatures.	LLA/LM	Paused	Merging two parcels together 054-360-056 and 054-360-057	25-000014
Andrea Montañó	CUP 25-01 Ventura Transfer Company Freight Yard 605 N 3rd St.	A site plan correction letter was issued on 04/16/2025. On 12/22/2025, the applicant confirmed they are preparing a resubmittal and submitting fees for the Air Quality Study. Staff provided the applicant with the Biological Site Assessment quote. Staff received previously requested fee's on 2/2/26. Consultants began work on 2/4/26 for an Air Quality Study, Biological Study, and Traffic Studies. Additional requested information is still pending as of 2/19/26.	CUP	Paused	Expansion of freight yard.	25-000023
Andrea Montañó	LLA 25-02 In-N-Out Burgers Lot Merger 2390 S. 4th St.	Project was cancelled due to inactivity on 1/11/26.	LLA/LM	Paused	Merge lot to upgrade existing parking lot, new improvements for the expansion of existing drive-thru lane.	25-000026
Valeria Landeros	LLA 25-04 LC Engineering Lot Merger 290 Solano Ave.	Letter of Incompleteness sent 10/16. Follow up email sent 1/20.	LLA/LM	Paused	Lots are being requested to be merged to become a legal lot.	25-000048
Valeria Landeros	ZOTA 25-01 Shandi Jones Coffee Shop 450 S. Waterman Ave.	Approved by Planning Commission 2/10. Scheduled for City Council Meeting 3/17.	ZOTA	In Progress	Coffee Shop within the existing church building. Fronting onto South Waterman & the Northwest corner of Waterman & Orange Ave.	25-000055
Valeria Landeros	General Plan Amendment COZ 25-01 SPR 25-20 Toma & Saco El Centro Apartment Complex 1438 & 1448 Woodward Ave.	Letter of incompleteness sent 11/26. Corrections received 1/14. Additional corrections letter sent 1/30. Meeting with applicant 2/17.	COZ SPR	In Progress	Construction of 18-unit apartment complex.	25-000056
Andrea Montañó	TPM 25-01 Jorge Pacheco Split Parcel 875 S. Glenwood Dr.	The applicant received the 1st comment letter on 12/15/2025. The applicant communicated with staff on 1/21/26 that corrections were ongoing and asked additional questions.	TPM	In Progress	one parcel to be subdivided into three parcels.	25-000057
Andrea Montañó	TSM 25-01 Venking, LLC New Condominiums Waterman Avenue	The applicant received the 1st Comment Letter on 12/19/2025. This item is being reviewed internally by all departments. Comments are expected back to Planning Staff on 2/26/2026.	TPM	In Progress	49- Condominium Units- parcel map waiver for tentative map.	25-000059
Valeria Landeros	SPR 25-21 Fred Cohen Travel Center Improvements 550 Wake Ave.	Letter of incompleteness sent 12/04. Corrections received 2/18. Additional corrections requested 3/3.	SPR	In Progress	Construction of a new fueling canopy with 6 new dispensers. Interior and exterior of the existing C-Store tenant improvement, new exterior drive-thru lane for quick service food. New parking spaces and addition of landscaping.	25-000061
Valeria Landeros	CUP 25-05 Ernesto Vega Event Hall 1698 Main Street	Letter of incompleteness sent 12/18. Corrections received 1/22. Additional corrections letter sent 1/29.	CUP	In Progress	300-person event hall, new building with 100 total parking spaces.	25-000063
Andrea Montañó	SPR 25-22 Duggins Construction Burlington Store 2430 Cottonwood St.	The comment letter was issued to the applicant on January 6, 2026.	SPR	In Progress	New 30,000 square feet retail store and site improvements	25-000064

Planning and Zoning Projects

Owner	Project name	Status Summary	Project Type	Status	Description	MyGov ID
Valeria Landeros	SPR 25-23 Duggins Construction Metal Structure 105 W. Commercial Ave.	Letter of incompleteness sent 12/12.	SPR	In Progress	New 55,590 sq. ft. metal structure and site improvements for Peri & Sons Packing.	25-000066
Andrea Montaño	GPA 25-01 COZ 25-02 CUP 25-06 Morningside Ventures, LLC Sunset Pointe Subdivision 2003 W. Main St.	Staff issued the project incompleteness notice on January 13, 2026.	GPA CUP COZ TSM	Paused	Proposed gated subdivision/PUD consisting of 37 detached townhomes. Zone Change, General Plan Amendment, CUP and Tentative Subdivision Map.	25-000067
Andrea Montaño	ZVL 25-09 Zoning Verification Letter for 634 Thomas Lane	The letter was completed on January 26, 2026	ZVL	Done	zoning verification letter and associated documents for 634 Thomas Lane.	25-000071
Andrea Montaño	ZVL 25-10 Verification Letter for Vacant lots across Thomas Lane	The letter was completed on January 26, 2027	ZVL	Done	zoning verification letter and associated documents for 053-810-025, 053-810-026 and 053-810-027	25-000072
Andrea Montaño	ZVL 25-11 Verification Letter for 602 Wake Ave.	The letter was completed on January 26, 2028	ZVL	Done	zoning verification letter for 602 wake ave.	25-000073
Andrea Montaño	ZVL 25-12 Verification Letter for 053-810-039 & 053-810-038	The letter was completed on January 26, 2029	ZVL	Done	zoning verification letter and associated documents for vacant land	25-000074
Andrea Montaño	ZVL 25-13 Zoning Verification Letter 664 Thomas Lane	The letter was completed on January 26, 2030	ZVL	Done	zoning verification letter and associated documents.	25-000075
Andrea Montaño	CUP 25-07 John Strong Medical Office 1498 Main St. Suite A	Letter of incompleteness was sent on January 20, 2026.	CUP	Paused	Medical office 8am-8pm	25-000076
Andrea Montaño	MVP 26-01 Rose Celebration Co. Selling Bouquets 719 Main Street	Staff issued permit on January 28, 2026.	Mobile Vendor Permit	Done	Sell Market bouquets and/or you-pickup bouquets.	26-000001
Andrea Montaño	MVP 26-02 Cafesito Bar Mobile Coffee Shop	Staff issued permit on February 2, 2026.	Mobile Vendor Permit	Done	Mobile Coffee Shop	26-000003
Andrea Montaño	SPR 26-01 Trivista ,Inc. New Clinic Space 1501 W. Main St.	Staff sent out memo for comments. Comments are due on 2/17/2026.	SPR	In Progress	Interior improvements for new clinic space in the existing building.	26-000005
Andrea Montaño	TUP 26-03 Aidee Alvarez Festive Arrangements 1290 S. Dogwood Rd.	Staff issued permit on February 12, 2026.	TUP	Done	Valentines Day Sales from February 12-14 and for Mothers Day May 7-10	26-000006
Andrea Montaño	TUP 26-04 Juan Tovar Tacos Alex 1850 S. Imperial Ave.	Staff mailed determination Letter on 02/20/2026	TUP	Done	Taco food truck set up with tables and chairs.	26-000007
Andrea Montaño	MVP 26-03 Juan Tovar Tacos Alex 1850 S. Imperial Ave.	Staff mailed permit on 02/20/2026.	Mobile Vendor Permit	Done	Taco food truck set up with tables and chairs.	26-000008
Valeria Landeros	TUP 26-05 Laura Rodriguez Crazy Tacos 204 W. Main St.	Determination Letter was mailed on February 18, 2026.	TUP	Done	Sell tacos and sodas Monday-Friday from 6am-12pm	26-000009
Valeria Landeros	MVP 26-04 Laura Rodriguez Crazy Tacos 204 W. Main St.	Mobile Vendor Permit was mailed on February 18, 2026.	Mobile Vendor Permit	Done	Sell tacos and sodas Monday-Friday from 6am-12pm	26-000010
Andrea Montaño	GPA 26-01 SPR 26-02 COZ 26-01 Arch Atelirt LLC New Multi FAMily Apartments 1445 W. Pico Ave.	Staff is reviewing the application	SPR GPA COZ	In Progress	Zone Change to R-3 to allow the development of multi-family apartemtns with on-site parking and improvements with GGeneral Plan density standards.	26-000011
Andrea Montaño	TUP 26-06 Pedro Luera Los Cabos food Truck 320 Wake Ave.	Staff is reviewing the application	TUP	In Progress	Food Truck selling tacos, seafood and mexican food.	26-000012
Andrea Montaño	MVP 26-05 Pedro Luera Los Cabos Food Truck	Staff is reviewing the application	Mobile Vendor Permit	In Progress	Food Truck selling tacos, seafood and mexican food.	26-000013
Valeria Landeros	TUP 26-07 Country Fresh Farms Prepackaged Meat Sale 2053 N. Imperial Ave.	Determination Letter was mailed on March 2, 2026.	TUP	Done	Five-day USDA frozen prepackaged meat sale March 4-8, 2026. No cooking or preparing. 26 feet freezer truck and 10x10 pop up canopy in four parking spaces.	26-000014



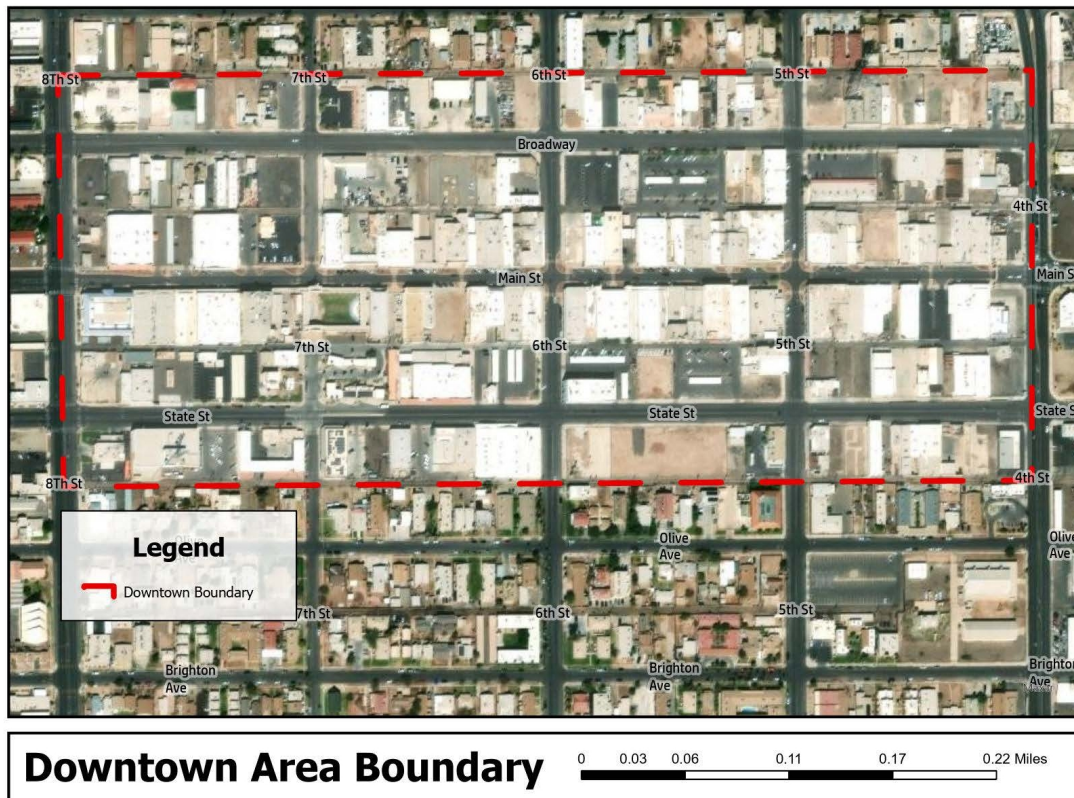
## **Presentation and discussion regarding residential uses in the Downtown Commercial (CD) Zone**

### **PROJECT SUMMARY**

The City of El Centro Downtown Ad Hoc Committee has directed that staff begin studying allowing residential uses in the City's Downtown Commercial (CD) zone. Additionally, work on the Civic Center-Downtown Master Plan will commence in the coming months and the topic of residential uses in the CD-Zone will be one of the main elements of that project.

In order to begin evaluating this topic, staff is requesting exploratory discussions from the Planning Commission on the topic at the March 10, 2026 Planning Commission meeting. At that meeting staff will provide background on past actions related to housing in the area, possible challenges, relevant state laws, and options for discussion. Since this is only an informational item, no action is requested.

### **BACKGROUND**



*Exhibit A – Downtown Boundary Map*

Downtown El Centro consists of approximately 70 acres of land in the center of El Centro encompassing the areas from Broadway, Main Street, and State Street between 4<sup>th</sup> Street and 8<sup>th</sup> Street. It is one of the oldest areas of the city with development beginning in around 1905. Development in the area has consisted mainly of stores, offices, hotels, restaurants, and other service and entertainment uses. Historically, housing was not developed on properties on Main Street, and limited housing has been developed on State Street and Broadway. On those streets it appears that existing housing might have been repurposed from pre-existing hotels or single-family homes, as historically, the establishment of housing in those streets was prohibited.

In 2008, the City Council adopted a zoning ordinance permitting residential uses on the second floors of buildings in the Downtown Commercial zone. The ordinance generated limited development interest in the form of submitted application possibly due to building code requirements, and community concerns emerged over time regarding perceptions of concentrated homelessness, drug use, and crime in the downtown area. Additionally, some property owners and residents objected to State law requirements that obligate cities to permit supportive and transitional housing in any zone where residential uses are allowed. Taken together, these factors led the City Council to prohibit residential uses in the CD zone in 2017.

## **POLICY FRAMEWORK**

### EL CENTRO GENERAL PLAN – LAND USE ELEMENT

When updated in 2021, the General Plan Land Use Element removed goals related to allowing and promoting housing in the Downtown Area. The existing zoning of the area is CD-Downtown Commercial. The zone is intended for retail, office, entertainment, restaurant, and artisanal production. The shift was to facilitate zoning and policies to increase the area’s desirability for small businesses and entrepreneurship, especially in arts and culturally related businesses. If the City were to make changes to allow housing in the area, amendments to the General Plan would be required to ensure consistency.

### HOUSING ELEMENT AND HOUSING GOALS

The City’s Housing Element provides goals and policies to encourage the production of housing citywide in a variety of income categories. When it was last updated in 2021, it was made consistent with the Land Use Element and past zoning decisions that prohibited residential uses in the area. If the City were to allow housing in the downtown area, such areas may be used to help quantify and meet the City’s housing obligations by providing sufficient land and zoning to meet regional housing goals.

### STATE LAW

In recent years, state legislation has served to override many local zoning requirements statewide. Of those pertinent to Downtown El Centro are AB 2011 (2022), SB 6 (2022), and AB 2243 (2024). AB 2011 allows by-right affordable housing on commercially zoned sites; SB 6 similarly allows residential uses on commercially zoned land; and AB 2243 (2024) expanded and extended these provisions. These laws allow by-right development of qualified residential development projects in commercial zones meeting

certain criteria, namely fronting a commercial corridor, maintaining setbacks from industrially zoned areas, being sufficiently surrounded by urban uses, and meeting income and workforce requirements. Such conditions are present in Downtown El Centro, however, state requirements for income restrictions and prevailing wage construction appear to be barriers for local projects.

## **LAND USE REVIEW**

Staff believes the topic of allowing residential uses in the Downtown area warrants renewed discussion. The goal of having additional housing in the area would assist in providing additional population density and overall activity. Furthermore, very limited proposals for commercial or office development have been proposed in the area, indicating that commercial demand, especially for new construction, is severely limited and may not be economically viable on its own. Below are some topics to consider relating to residential development in the Downtown area:

**PARKING** - Prior regulations required that residential uses provide parking at a minimum ratio of 1 space per dwelling unit. While that is substantially lower than other zones and similar development, developers might still face difficulty in meeting those requirements, especially considering that such parking would likely be to the rear of the property and might require alleyway improvements. Also, significantly reducing parking requirements would likely impact on street parking and parking in public parking lots which has been raised as a topic of concern from the downtown business community.

**COMPATIBILITY OF ADJACENT USES** – There are existing legal nonconforming uses that typically pose compatibility issues related to noise, odor, and other impacts. For example, Broadway contains four nonconforming mechanic shops that have been operating in the area for decades and the introduction of residential uses nearby could generate potential complaints or land use conflicts. Other uses which are typically allowed, such as bars and nightclubs, while important to the vibrancy and land use goals of the area, may conflict with residential uses.

**SUPPORTIVE AND ASSISTIVE HOUSING** – State law requires that cities and counties allow supportive and assistive housing in zones where other residential or mixed-use residential is allowed. This is not a requirement that is unique to housing in the downtown, however, it was the subject of public discussion in 2017 when the prohibition on housing was adopted. Public comments at the time cited concerns regarding homelessness, drug use, and crime in the area as being incompatible and not conducive to supportive and assistive housing.

**COMMERCIAL USES ON THE FIRST FLOOR** – The previous ordinance required that residential uses be built above ground-floor commercial space, creating a traditional mixed-use arrangement. This approach supports street-level activity through active storefronts and window displays, and helps buffer upper-floor residents from the noise, foot traffic, and operational impacts typical of a downtown commercial environment.

However, the viability of mandatory ground-floor commercial is increasingly being questioned in cities across the country. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated a decline in brick-and-mortar retail and office demand that was already underway, and many jurisdictions have relaxed or eliminated first-floor commercial requirements in response to chronic ground-floor vacancies.

**REDEVELOPMENT OF EXISTING STRUCTURES** – Reuse of existing two-story buildings in the downtown area has historically faced challenges due to requirements to seismically retrofit buildings, install appropriate fire suppression systems, and install or replace elevator systems that made reusing them for residential economically infeasible. This lends to vacant land or demolition of buildings as the economic choice rather than redevelopment of existing structures.

**DESIGN REQUIREMENTS** – Staff would recommend that the Downtown Design requirements established by Project SHAPE and adopted by the City in 2011 continue to apply. This would require that properties have minimal front yard setbacks, install covered sidewalk/arcade structures, and meet other design elements. Onsite parking would be designed to be located in the rear of properties with the street frontage being primarily oriented for pedestrians.

### **POTENTIAL ZONING CHANGES**

Below is a non-exhaustive list of high-level policy changes that Planning Commission can consider when discussing this issue:

**REESTABLISH 2008 ZONING ORDINANCE** - Perhaps the most straightforward option would be to reverse the 2017 decision to prohibit housing. This would allow housing on the second or higher story, with commercial uses on the first story in a mixed-use fashion. Challenges that might result include that the demand for commercial space might not make such projects feasible if the commercial area remains vacant, unless residential rents are sufficiently high enough to offset costs. Also, many of the existing buildings would face the existing challenges of remodeling them for residential use. In particular, since most of the buildings located on Main Street are single-story, they would not be eligible to convert to residential due to the lack of a second story.

**APPLY A RESIDENTIAL ZONING OVERLAY** - Another option would be to apply a residential overlay to portions of downtown where the City would like to target housing development. Of particular interest is the Broadway segment, where staff identified 13 vacant privately owned parcels. Such an approach would allow for targeted efforts in this part of the Downtown area that would likely benefit from such policies. Additional consideration could be given to applying the overlay to the State Street section, however, it is expected that properties in that area would likely not be in a position to redevelop, as they mostly consist of publicly owned property, public parking lots, and are mostly occupied and developed.

ALLOW STAND-ALONE RESIDENTIAL USES - Development interests might favor allowing 100% residential use, removing the requirement to provide first-floor commercial. This would provide the most flexibility for development. Careful consideration should be given to the potential impacts that ground-floor units might experience without design measures to address noise, odor, and other nuisances from surrounding commercial and entertainment uses.

### **CIVIC CENTER-DOWNTOWN MASTER PLAN**

The City is initiating the Civic Center-Downtown Master Plan, a comprehensive planning effort expected to launch in the coming months. The Master Plan will establish a long-term vision and implementation framework for the downtown area, addressing land use, urban design, circulation, economic development, and public space. The question of residential uses will be one of its central policy topics.

Discussion regarding this item is intended to provide early direction to staff on the residential use question so that the Master Plan's scope of work and community engagement process can be appropriately calibrated. Input from the Planning Commission at this stage will help shape the questions, alternatives, and studies that the Master Plan team will carry forward. A more detailed analysis, including market feasibility, infrastructure capacity, design standards, and community input, will be conducted as part of that process over the next year.

### **PUBLIC AND STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT**

As part of the Civic Center-Downtown Master Plan process, staff intends to engage downtown property owners, business associations, existing residents, housing advocates, and the broader community through workshops, surveys, and targeted outreach. This engagement will be designed to surface both concerns and opportunities, and to ensure that any eventual policy recommendations reflect the values and priorities of the El Centro community.

### **QUESTIONS FOR PLANNING COMMISSION DISCUSSION**

To help focus tonight's discussion and provide useful direction to staff, the following questions are offered for the Commission's consideration. No formal action is required; the Commission's input will be noted and used to shape the scope of work for the Civic Center-Downtown Master Plan.

**1. Ground floor vs. upper floor:** Should residential uses be limited to upper floors only, or should ground-floor residential also be considered in certain locations or circumstances? Are there specific streets or blocks where ground-floor residential would or would not be appropriate?

**2. Geography:** Should any residential allowance apply to the entire CD zone, or should it be targeted to specific segments — such as Broadway, where vacancy is most concentrated? What are the Commission's thoughts on using a residential overlay to focus efforts?

**4. Downtown Area Conditions:** The 2017 prohibition was partly driven by community concerns regarding homelessness, drug use, vagrancy, and health and safety matters. Additionally, discussion regarding allowing supportive and transitional housing alongside market-rate residential. Are these concerns still a primary consideration for the Commission?

**5. Priorities for the Master Plan:** Are there additional issues, conditions, or community concerns that the Commission believes should be prioritized as part of the Civic Center-Downtown Master Plan's analysis of this topic?

### **ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW**

This is an informational workshop item and no project-level action is being taken at this time. Future zoning amendments or specific development projects would be subject to environmental review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). Depending on the scope of any future zoning changes, a categorical exemption or a programmatic environmental analysis may be appropriate.

### **NEXT STEPS**

No action is being requested at this time. Discussion from this item would be used to inform future planning efforts as part of the Civic Center Downtown Master Plan project and other future zoning initiatives in the area. Staff welcomes direction from the Planning Commission on preferred approaches and any additional topics or considerations to be included in the Civic Center Downtown Master Plan scope of work.