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## Downtown needs some new tools: Two zones offer us an alternative

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by David van den Berg

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### Community perspective

With the Borough Assembly scheduled to vote on the Vision Fairbanks-inspired additions to the borough's zoning code sometime after 7 p.m. Thursday, it's a good time — the last time — to survey the benefits of creating new zone types, as well as what could go wrong should the borough adopt Ordinance 2010-09.

For years, there has been concern that downtown Fairbanks lacks tools to compete for investment and attention against cheap land and suburban sprawl. That concern finds a partial remedy in Ordinance 2010-09, which contains economic development tools to help downtown compete for investment.

Ordinance 2010-09 contains two new zone types that vividly describe a downtown of mixed uses — retail and commercial establishments, residents and pedestrians — and provides a means to get there by protecting investment and value in downtown properties. The zone types also contain three simple, achievable building standards to support the mixed uses of downtown. Ordinance 2010-09 only creates two new zone types; applying the zone types through a so-called rezone would be a later process.

This is the first and perhaps only piece of business to come before the Borough Assembly from downtown's revitalization plan. It would make sense, then, that the assembly consider this ordinance through the lens of economic development.

A member of the general public might perceive, in the adoption of these new zone types, that the assembly did what was in its power to promote economic development downtown.

A property owner downtown might likewise feel that Fairbanks is sustaining some small momentum to revitalize downtown. The new zone types can become a tool of economic self-determination to help downtown compete for investment. Downtown needs tools — something needs to change and improve — and maybe a new zoning tool will help protect and encourage investment downtown. Anyway, the tool is there when and if you need it.

Retailers might shrug and say new zone types are not among downtown's top five needs right now. Not even top 10. You know these new zones types are not the only way to revitalize downtown and won't by themselves revitalize downtown. You know that more storefronts with more tenants complimenting your business would be good for your business. It hasn't happened yet; maybe new zone types will help.

What could go wrong with creating new zone types? The new zones types might never be used for one reason or another.

Some say that's unlikely. Some say that, like the nuclear bomb, once created the new zone types will be used. Downtown will be forcibly rezoned. While this could happen, forcible rezones are rare in the Fairbanks North Star Borough. Moreover, it would take a mayor hell-bent on a rezone to bring it to the assembly. And the assembly would need to approve the rezone.

The zone types or the development standards may discourage investment downtown. True. But they might encourage investment. That's what they're intended to do, after all.

Something could go wrong pursuing potential economic reward. But the alternative of taking no risk — of not creating the new zone types — leaves downtown without any new tools and discounts the probability that Fairbanks is ready for some new tools to revive economic activity downtown.

David van den Berg is the executive director of the Downtown Association of Fairbanks, an association of downtown professionals and retailers that partners with the city of Fairbanks and the Fairbanks North Star Borough in economic development downtown.

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