POLICY PROPOSAL

DOWNTOWN LAS VEGAS VERTICAL GROWTH & PUBLIC BENEFIT PILOT

A time-limited, build-now incentive for high-rise development on dirt lots and surface parking - paired with affordable housing, public space, small-business support, water-smart design, and enforceable construction deadlines.

The decision requested

Direct staff and the City Attorney to prepare a mapped Downtown overlay and companion incentive ordinance within 120 days; open applications for 18 months; and require approved projects to secure financing and commence substantial construction within 24 months of project approval.

Prepared for the Mayor and Las Vegas City Council

Submitted by Gateway to Fremont

September 2026

EXECUTIVE PROPOSAL

Turn Downtown's empty land into residents, customers, jobs, and public space

Downtown Las Vegas cannot support an increasingly expensive small-business district with a low-rise population base. Current Arts District listings average roughly $37 per square foot annually, and several restaurant-sized spaces are advertised at rates that translate to about $15,000 to $19,000 per month before common-area charges and other occupancy costs. A local operator also reported paying $15,000 per month before closing. [2][3] Those numbers do not prove that every business needs a tower next door, but they do establish the policy problem: the district needs a much larger base of year-round customers, not only event traffic and occasional visitors.

Gateway to Fremont's September 2026 analysis found that Downtown's official planning area is only about 4.4 square miles, that roughly 86 percent of its form-code acreage is generally limited to seven stories or less, and that only about 19 acres carry the T6 Urban Core designation permitting up to 20 stories. [1][4] The City is asking scarce central land to deliver housing, jobs, transit ridership, public revenue, cultural activity, and water-efficient growth while limiting most of that land to low- or mid-rise form.

Core recommendation

Adopt a Downtown Vertical Growth and Public Benefit Pilot that legalizes 20-to-30-story capacity by right on mapped vacant and surface-parking sites, allows 40-to-60-story or uncapped local height on selected core sites in return for defined public benefits, and expires approvals that do not move promptly from paper to construction.

What the pilot would do

Problem	Proposed response
High commercial rents; weak daily customer base	Add residents, employees, hotel guests, and active ground-floor uses on nearby underused land.
Low or uncertain height capacity	Create mapped, objective tower envelopes with administrative approval for compliant projects.
Fear of demolition or cultural loss	Limit pilot eligibility to lots that were vacant or surface parking on the adoption date; exclude occupied buildings and historic residential fabric.
Speculative entitlements	Require site control, credible underwriting, firm financing milestones, permit deadlines, and automatic expiration.
Private gain without public return	Make the largest height increases contingent on affordable/attainable housing, permanent public space, Low Line connections, or local-business space.
Airport uncertainty	Keep FAA review project-specific and condition construction on the applicable federal determination.

WHY ACT NOW

$15,000-to-$20,000 monthly commercial space needs an everyday market

The Arts District's success has increased demand for limited storefront inventory. As of September 2026, LoopNet reported an average Arts District asking rent of about $37 per square foot per year and an average available space near 3,880 square feet. Specific listings included 4,400-to-8,800-square-foot space at $45 per square foot annually and restaurant space up to 5,141 square feet at the same asking rate. [2] At $45 per square foot, a 4,000-square-foot restaurant is $15,000 per month in base rent; 5,141 square feet is about $19,279 per month, before triple-net charges, utilities, payroll, food, insurance, and debt service.

This is not an assertion that zoning alone sets commercial rent or that every operator pays asking rent. It is a finding that a large brewery, restaurant, or entertainment venue can face occupancy costs that require substantial and repeatable demand. A city policy that celebrates ground-floor businesses but caps the nearby residential and employment market is incomplete.

Resident foot traffic is economic infrastructure

Visitors and First Friday are valuable, but they do not replace people who live within a short walk and buy coffee, lunch, groceries, drinks, services, and entertainment throughout the week. Brookings notes that adding homes and neighbors can support foot-traffic-dependent businesses such as bakeries and restaurants. [5] The City's own 2050 implementation tools include development bonuses, expedited permitting, fee waivers, grants, and tax-increment financing to achieve desired market outcomes. [19]

Policy finding for the ordinance

Downtown commercial vitality depends on a larger, year-round base of residents, workers, and visitors. On scarce central land, low-rise and mid-rise projects alone may not add enough people quickly enough to support rising occupancy costs and the City's walkable urban-core goals.

A local capacity problem

Current condition	Implication
T3-T5 form-code acreage: generally seven stories or less	Most regulated acreage cannot test true tower economics.
T6 Urban Core: up to 20 stories on only a small pocket	High-rise capacity is geographically scarce.
Conventional or planned districts may lack a simple cap	A nominally flexible zone can still be risky when the approval path, conditions, and schedule are discretionary.
High-rise construction has a cost step	Eight-to-twelve stories can incur concrete, elevator, and life-safety costs without enough additional revenue; a taller option may pencil when a compromise height does not.

PRECEDENT 1

Seattle: height, infrastructure, affordability, and public realm worked together

South Lake Union is the strongest comparison, but its chronology matters. Amazon announced in December 2007 that it would move to a new South Lake Union headquarters of up to 1.6 million square feet, citing access to the new streetcar as an important factor. [8] Seattle had already extended an incentive-zoning arrangement to specific Vulcan projects for the Amazon campus; later headquarters phases used increased height and generated $6.4 million for affordable housing and daycare. [7][9]

In 2013, after the first major Amazon phases were operating, Seattle expanded the district model. The South Lake Union rezone replaced much of an 85-foot base condition with residential tower capacity generally up to 240 feet in the central area and 400 feet along Denny Way, while retaining lower areas and aviation-sensitive locations. [6] The additional capacity was paired with ground-floor retail standards, tower spacing, open-space incentives, landmark preservation, LEED Gold, affordable-housing contributions, and transferable development rights for open space and regional farm and forest preservation. [6][7]

The honest lesson

The 2013 upzone did not cause Amazon's original 2007 decision. The defensible lesson is stronger: targeted earlier height relief, a streetcar, parks, land assembly, and negotiated public benefits helped make the district capable of receiving Amazon; Seattle then expanded height and benefit rules to accommodate the district's next phase of housing and job growth.

What Las Vegas should borrow

- Separate base capacity from bonus capacity: a meaningful tower envelope must exist before a project can finance added public benefits.
- Use objective tower-spacing, podium, active-frontage, and street-level rules rather than protecting empty sky.
- Trade the largest increments of private development value for permanent affordable housing, open space, preservation, or infrastructure.
- Calibrate benefit requirements through feasibility analysis; Seattle itself warned that excessive requirements can cause developers to build less or not use the bonus.
- Treat aviation constraints by subarea and exact project, not as a blanket Downtown low-rise rule.

PRECEDENT 2

Portland's Pearl District: a public-private bargain, not a height change alone

Under Mayor Vera Katz, Portland created the political and public-investment framework that helped transform the Pearl District from rail yards, warehouses, auto shops, and repair-oriented industrial uses into a high-density mixed-use neighborhood. The record does not support reducing that transformation to a single height-limit vote. It was a coordinated package: a 1997 development agreement with Hoyt Street Properties, the 1998 River District Urban Renewal Plan, tax-increment financing, removal of the Lovejoy viaduct, the Portland Streetcar, parks and open spaces, affordable housing, and continued revisions to height and floor-area rules. [10][11][12]

The 1997 agreement raised Hoyt Street Properties' minimum density obligation from 15 dwellings per acre to at least 87, with public improvements capable of increasing the requirement to as much as 131. Early projects reached approximately 141 units per acre. The agreement also targeted 15 percent of units for households up to 50 percent of median family income and 20 percent up to 80 percent, subject to public financial assistance. [11]

The 2001 Pearl District Development Plan explicitly directed Portland to review and revise height and FAR allowances north of Lovejoy and at Terminal One South; use height/FAR transfers and bonuses; require high density near the streetcar and Jamison Square; offer bonuses for wider sidewalks, plazas, outdoor seating, and generous ground floors; and discourage surface parking. [10] That is directly relevant to Downtown Las Vegas.

The population result

Portland's 2001 plan used a year-2000 baseline of about 1,300 Pearl District residents. The City's neighborhood profile reports 11,019 residents in 2020 - an increase of about 9,700, or roughly 10,000 residents over two decades. [10][13] Between 2010 and 2020 alone, the neighborhood added 5,022 residents, an 84 percent increase. [13] The result came with real affordability and displacement concerns, which is why Las Vegas should include anti-demolition, affordable-housing, and small-business provisions at the start of its pilot rather than after land values escalate.

The Pearl lesson for Las Vegas

Make a bargain: the City supplies predictable capacity, infrastructure coordination, faster approvals, and performance-based incentives; developers supply actual construction, housing, public space, active streets, and enforceable deadlines.

ADDITIONAL CITY MODELS

Other cities show the ordinance tools are mainstream

City / program	Mechanism	Las Vegas lesson
Austin - Downtown Density Bonus	Additional height and density in return for high-quality streetscape and community benefits, including affordable housing.	Create a clear public-benefit menu and hold permit release until obligations are secured.
Denver - Expanding Housing Affordability	Height incentives scale with affordable units; examples range from 5-to-7 stories and up to 20-to-30 stories, plus fee reductions.	Publish a tier schedule and protect lower-scale districts with measured setbacks and stepbacks.
Arlington - Rosslyn	Additional density and height up to 10.0 FAR through community benefits in a coordinated redevelopment district.	Use a mapped core district and negotiate only within published standards.
San Diego - Complete Communities	Opt-in FAR bonus near high-frequency transit for affordable housing and public amenities; height is generally governed by FAR, subject to exceptions.	Let FAR and design rules shape form instead of relying only on story caps.
Portland - Pearl / River District	Density obligations, TIF-funded infrastructure, affordable housing, parks, streetcar, and height/FAR revisions.	Tie public investment and private milestones together in recorded agreements.

Sources: official program materials from Austin, Denver, Arlington County, San Diego, Portland, and Seattle. [6][10][14][15][16][17]

What not to copy

- Do not claim that taller zoning alone guarantees construction. Interest rates, rents, material costs, insurance, utilities, and market depth remain decisive.
- Do not give away all capacity only through discretionary negotiations. Uncertainty raises carrying costs and rewards the best-connected applicants.
- Do not set affordability or open-space obligations without a residual-land-value and high-rise feasibility test.
- Do not use a citywide rule beside historic homes. Map receiving sites and use transitions.
- Do not provide cash assistance at entitlement. Reimburse eligible costs after performance or protect the City with enforceable security and clawbacks.

THE PROPOSED ORDINANCE

Downtown Vertical Growth and Public Benefit Pilot

The following is a policy framework for City Attorney and Community Development drafting. It is deliberately specific enough to become a bill, but it is not represented as final legal text.

1. Purpose

Increase Downtown housing, employment, hotel, cultural, medical, and neighborhood-serving capacity on vacant and surface-parking parcels; strengthen the customer base for small businesses; exchange exceptional height for measurable public benefits; protect occupied and historic buildings; accelerate only projects capable of construction; and collect data for a permanent code decision.

2. Pilot geography

Create a mapped overlay within the Downtown Master Plan area focused on commercial corridors and growth-receiving sites in the Arts District, Gateway, Fremont East, Civic and Business, Medical District, Resort and Casino, Symphony Park, and rail/Low Line influence areas. The map must exclude mapped historic residential fabric, including John S. Park, Beverly Green, and culturally significant residential portions of the Historic Westside. Parcels within a transition buffer may receive a lower envelope, stepbacks, or both.

3. Eligible parcel rule

- The site must have been a dirt lot, vacant land, or a surface parking lot on the ordinance adoption date, documented by aerial imagery, assessor records, business-license records, and utility history.
- No occupied residential or commercial building may be demolished, and no active business may be displaced, to create or enlarge an eligible site.
- An existing building may be preserved and integrated into a larger project assembled with an eligible lot; the tower benefit applies only if the occupied building remains or the tenant voluntarily elects a recorded relocation-and-return agreement.
- A structure officially found dangerous or uninhabitable before introduction of the ordinance may be removed, but demolition alone does not create eligibility for the height pilot.
- City-owned land may participate only through a separate public disposition process with affordability, prevailing legal requirements, and public-benefit terms stated in advance.

4. Eligible projects

Mixed-use residential, hotel, office, medical, educational, cultural, civic, and entertainment projects may qualify. Residential or hotel uses should occupy the majority of bonus floor area unless the Council approves a mapped employment anchor district. Every project must provide an active ground floor, screened parking and loading, shade, transparent frontages, and pedestrian connections.

HEIGHT STRUCTURE

Legalize a real tower before bargaining over the bonus

The City's draft should regulate height principally in feet and FAR, with story counts used as public-facing approximations. Floor-to-floor heights vary materially between housing, hotels, offices, hospitals, and ground-floor retail. The ranges below express the intended policy outcome and should be converted to exact mapped standards after airspace and infrastructure screening.

Tier	Local capacity	Required public return
Base tower - qualifying lot	20-30 stories by right, with corridor/core height set on the adopted map	No bonus payment. Must satisfy eligibility, active-frontage, shade, water, tower-spacing, financing, and construction-deadline rules.
Public-benefit tower	Up to roughly 40 stories or the mapped equivalent in feet/FAR	Choose one major benefit: on-site attainable housing; permanent public plaza/park/Low Line connection; or qualifying local-business space. Nonresidential projects may use a calibrated housing/public-realm payment.
Transformational tower	Up to roughly 60 stories, or no local numerical cap on selected core sites	Provide two major benefits, one of which must be attainable housing or an equivalent housing contribution. Require design-excellence review, infrastructure agreement, and early FAA filing.

Why there must be a base tower tier

If every floor above today's cap must purchase a long list of benefits, the program can reproduce the same infeasibility it is intended to solve. Seattle's experience is a warning to calibrate the exchange so that investors still use it. [6][7] The base tier creates a predictable legal envelope; the upper tiers monetize only the additional value created by exceptional height.

Public-benefit menu

Benefit	Recommended minimum standard
Attainable housing	A City-calibrated share, initially tested at 10%-15% of total units at qualifying income tiers, recorded for the longest period permitted by law; units integrated and proportionate in bedroom mix.
Public space	At least 5% of site area and normally not less than 2,500 square feet; permanently accessible by recorded easement; shaded seating, drinking water, trees or desert canopy, maintenance plan, and no commercial purchase requirement.
Low Line / mobility	Recorded public access, bridge, portal, trail, bike facility, or right-of-way identified by the City's adopted mobility plan, with construction and maintenance secured.
Local-business space	At least 2,500 square feet or 20% of ground-floor leasable commercial area, whichever is less, offered to independent local operators at a documented below-market occupancy cost for at least five years.
Historic preservation	Preserve and rehabilitate an eligible building through a recorded covenant or transfer of development rights; no demolition-credit workaround.

Before adoption, a third-party feasibility analysis should test alternative percentages, income tiers, fee levels, construction types, and interest-rate scenarios. The Council should adopt a schedule, not negotiate the price of height project by project.

OBJECTIVE DESIGN

Preserve the street, not an arbitrary ceiling

A tower can sit above a walkable, shaded, human-scaled podium. The pilot should retain and strengthen the form-based code's best street-level requirements while allowing substantially more height above them.

Required standards

- Podium or street wall generally between four and seven stories, calibrated by corridor.
- Tower stepback above the podium; narrow tower floor plates and objective spacing between towers to protect light, views, and skyline variety.
- Minimum ground-floor height suitable for restaurants, retail, galleries, and future reuse.
- Active frontage and frequent entrances; blank walls prohibited on primary streets and public spaces.
- Parking located below grade, wrapped by active uses, or fully screened; no new surface parking as the project's permanent condition.
- Loading, refuse, and ride-hail functions placed away from primary pedestrian frontages where practicable.
- Continuous shade through canopies, arcades, trees, or equivalent structures; heat-safe seating and walking routes.
- Outdoor water budget, no decorative turf, high-efficiency fixtures, efficient cooling, and water-use reporting consistent with City and SNWA rules.

Historic and residential transitions

Use a mapped transition system rather than suppressing entire districts. Immediately adjacent to protected residential fabric, retain the lower local envelope. In the next band, allow moderate height with stepbacks. Beyond the transition band, permit the mapped tower tiers. Height transfer can preserve a historic structure while moving development capacity to a receiving site, following a tool explicitly encouraged in the Pearl District plan. [10]

Design-excellence review

The uppermost tier may be reviewed by a small professional panel for compliance with published criteria: skyline contribution, shade, public-realm quality, material durability, ground-floor usefulness, heat mitigation, and water performance. The panel may require objective design corrections but may not reduce otherwise permitted floor area based on personal taste.

No discretionary trap

A compliant base-tier or public-benefit-tier project should receive administrative approval within a defined period. Public hearings should be reserved for a true variance, map amendment, or extraordinary public agreement - not required merely because a building is tall.

BUILD-NOW GUARDRAILS

Financing proof and deadlines that distinguish builders from paper projects

A time-limited pilot works only if its approvals produce construction. The City should require progressively stronger proof as a project advances, protect legitimate lender confidentiality, and automatically terminate benefits when milestones are missed.

Milestone	Deadline	Required showing
Pilot application	Within 18 months after effective date	Site control; concept and code matrix; project budget; capital stack; lender/equity expression of interest; development schedule; FAA screening request where applicable.
Complete entitlement package	Within 6 months of application	Design package, utility and fire capacity letters, public-benefit election, displacement affidavit, and complete FAA Form 7460-1 filing where required.
Financing commitment	Within 12 months of project approval	Executed commitments or binding term sheets covering substantially all debt and equity, subject only to permits, FAA determination, customary diligence, and closing conditions.
Building permit and substantial construction	Within 24 months of project approval	Issued principal building permit and continuous on-site foundation, excavation, or vertical work beyond demolition, fencing, grading, or utility relocation alone.
Completion	Within 48 months after construction start	Certificate of occupancy for the principal building and completion or bonding of public benefits.

Extensions

Allow one administrative extension of up to 12 months for documented force majeure, utility-provider delay, litigation not caused by the applicant, or delayed federal aviation action despite a timely and complete filing. Financing-market difficulty by itself should not extend the 24-month construction deadline; financing readiness is the purpose of the gate.

Expiration and clawback

- If a deadline is missed, the pilot entitlement and incentives expire automatically; the parcel retains its underlying zoning.
- A successor owner may assume the approval only by proving equal or stronger financing and signing all recorded obligations.
- Fee or tax-increment assistance should be reimbursed after verified performance, not paid merely because an entitlement was granted.
- Affordable units, public-access easements, and local-business covenants must be recorded before building-permit release.
- A performance bond, letter of credit, or equivalent security must cover unfinished public improvements.

FINANCIAL INCENTIVES

Reward construction and public value - not land speculation

The City already identifies tax-increment financing, direct grants, expedited permitting, fee waivers, and development bonuses as implementation tools. Its economic-development resource guide states that the Redevelopment Agency may negotiate tax-increment rebates for high-rise residential, retail, hotel, and mixed-use projects in redevelopment areas. [19][20]

Tool	Recommended pilot use	Safeguard
Priority review	Single project manager; consolidated comments; 30-day completeness check; target 60-day administrative decision after completeness.	Clock pauses only for a written, itemized deficiency list or external agency review.
Fee reimbursement	Up to a Council-set share of eligible City permit/impact fees for projects providing attainable housing or major public benefits.	Fiscal hearing and findings; reimbursement at certificate of occupancy; conform to NRS 278.235.
RDA tax-increment rebate	Negotiate a share of actual new increment for eligible high-rise, hotel, retail, residential, or mixed-use costs.	Separate RDA agreement; pay from realized increment; cap amount and term; clawback for nonperformance.
Public-realm matching funds	Match eligible shade, plaza, Low Line access, streetscape, or utility work that serves the public beyond the project.	Competitive scoring, public procurement rules, and verified public access.
Parking flexibility	No minimum parking ratio where the project provides a transportation-demand plan, shared parking, and mobility access.	No new permanent surface parking; loading and emergency access remain compliant.

Why not promise a blanket property-tax discount

Nevada property taxation and exemptions are heavily governed by state law. The safer, existing Las Vegas mechanism is a negotiated RDA tax-increment rebate based on the new value a completed project actually creates. The proposal therefore recommends that mechanism, plus legally authorized fee reimbursements, rather than promising an across-the-board property-tax abatement that may exceed City authority. [18][20]

Small-business protection beyond density

More residents are necessary but not sufficient. The City should pair the pilot with storefront grants, tenant-improvement financing, and an optional height credit for below-market local-business space. The City's Brewery Row precedent also shows that targeted license-fee relief can be used to support qualifying businesses. [21]

AIRSPACE AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Approve urban height locally; let the FAA evaluate the actual building

The ordinance must not waive federal aviation law. It should state that a local height entitlement is conditioned on the FAA determination applicable to the project's exact latitude, longitude, ground elevation, building height, and crane height. Under 14 CFR Part 77, an aeronautical study can result in a Determination of No Hazard even when a proposed structure exceeds an obstruction standard. [22]

Required airspace workflow

1. City completes a three-dimensional Downtown airspace screening map before the first application deadline. The map is advisory and distinguishes routine notice areas, study areas, and locations where substantial conflict is likely.
2. Applicant files FAA Form 7460-1 at the earliest required stage and submits cranes separately when applicable.
3. City convenes a joint pre-application meeting with airport and regional partners for affected projects.
4. Local land-use approval identifies the full locally permitted envelope but conditions construction on the controlling federal determination and all building/fire requirements.
5. No applicant may count an unresolved aviation waiver as committed financing unless the lender expressly acknowledges the contingency.

Infrastructure capacity

The overlay should be paired with a block-level review of sewer, water, power, fire-flow, emergency access, streets, sidewalks, parks, schools, and mobility. The answer to a capacity gap should normally be a timed improvement plan and fair cost allocation, not a permanent seven-story limit. Nevada law permits infrastructure analysis and master development agreements, and the City's own master plan supports TIF, grants, fee waivers, and development bonuses. [18][19]

Essential distinction

Local zoning answers whether Downtown should allow urban-scale development. FAA review answers whether a particular building can safely occupy a particular volume of airspace. Infrastructure planning answers what must be upgraded and who pays. Those questions should be coordinated, not collapsed into one low-rise ceiling.

DESIGN COMPETITION

Launch a Downtown high-rise competition without turning zoning into a beauty contest

The City and Gateway to Fremont could announce a 'Rise Downtown Design Challenge' when the pilot opens. Portland's Pearl District plan itself recommended an annual awards program to recognize design excellence. [10] The competition can attract national attention and stronger architecture, but it should sit beside the entitlement process, not replace objective approval.

Competition format

- Open only to pilot-eligible sites with owner consent and a qualified development team.
- Require a concept, preliminary cost plan, capital strategy, public-benefit package, water strategy, and realistic construction schedule.
- Use an independent jury of architects, engineers, developers, small-business representatives, historic-preservation voices, and residents; disclose conflicts.
- Publish finalists and hold a public exhibition and advisory vote, while professional jurors score feasibility, design, public benefit, and deliverability.
- Award categories for Best Skyline Contribution, Best Public Space, Best Small-Business Ground Floor, Best Water-Smart Tower, and Most Buildable Project.

Prizes the City can responsibly offer

- Named project manager and first position in the pilot review queue.
- Council-set fee reimbursement after construction milestones are achieved.
- Priority consideration for a separately negotiated RDA tax-increment agreement.
- City-supported design charrette, public exhibition, and national marketing.
- Right to use the official award designation in financing and leasing materials.

Winning must not confer extra density outside the adopted tiers, excuse objective standards, guarantee public funds, or substitute for financing proof. That separation protects fairness and makes the competition credible.

ACTION PLAN

A 120-day path from proposal to introduced bill

Time	Lead	Deliverable
Days 0-15	Mayor / Council sponsor	Place a directing resolution on the agenda; identify Council sponsor; instruct Community Development, City Attorney, EUD/RDA, Public Works, Fire, and Finance to form a pilot team.
Days 15-45	Community Development	Draft eligibility map, transition zones, height/FAR tiers, objective design standards, and administrative review clock. Inventory parcels that were vacant/surface parking at adoption baseline.
Days 15-60	Finance + independent consultant	Run residual-land-value and feasibility tests at 7, 12, 20, 30, 40, and 60 stories; test benefit percentages, fee reimbursements, and interest-rate scenarios.
Days 30-60	Airport/FAA liaison + Public Works	Prepare preliminary 3D airspace screen and infrastructure constraints memo; establish a pre-application protocol.
Days 45-75	Community engagement team	Hold targeted workshops with Arts District businesses, historic neighborhoods, developers/lenders, housing advocates, trades, utilities, and accessibility/disability representatives.
Days 60-90	City Attorney + staff	Finalize Title 19 text amendment, zoning-atlas exhibit, RDA incentive resolution, fiscal note, and staff report with master-plan conformity finding.
Days 90-120	Planning Commission / Council	Provide statutory notice and hearings; Planning Commission recommendation; bill introduction and City Council action.

Nevada process and authority

Nevada law authorizes local zoning districts and amendments and requires notice and a public hearing before a zoning regulation or boundary amendment becomes effective. It also requires the City to find that land-use ordinances conform to the master plan. [18] In addition, current Nevada law requires by-right multifamily or residential mixed-use on qualifying commercially zoned property and an expedited process for attainable-housing projects. The City's 2026 amendments already address these state mandates. [18][23] The pilot should build on that work by adding meaningful Downtown height capacity and a construction-performance gate.

MODEL BILL INSTRUCTIONS

Sections for City Attorney drafting

Section	Required content
1. Title	Downtown Vertical Growth and Public Benefit Pilot Ordinance.
2. Findings	Scarce central land; current height distribution; commercial-rent and foot-traffic risk; master-plan infill goals; water-efficient compact growth; public benefits; FAA distinction.
3. Definitions	Eligible parcel, adoption-date baseline, active business, substantial construction, financing commitment, public space, local business, public benefit, transition area.
4. Overlay map	Attach parcel-level receiving-site and transition maps; exclude protected residential and historic fabric.
5. Eligibility	Vacant/surface parking on baseline date; no occupied-building demolition or business displacement; site control and clean compliance history.
6. Height/FAR tiers	Mapped 20-30-story base; 40-story public-benefit tier; 60-story or uncapped selected-core tier; express local-height/FAA condition.
7. Objective standards	Podium, tower spacing, stepbacks, frontage, shade, loading, parking screening, water budget, public-space standards.
8. Benefit schedule	Fixed options and valuation method; recorded covenants; payment timing; feasibility recalibration procedure.
9. Review	Administrative approval; completeness and decision clocks; consolidated comments; appeal; no political hearing solely because of height.
10. Financing	Required documents at application, approval, and permit stages; confidentiality protocol; qualified successor rules.
11. Deadlines	18-month application window; 24 months from project approval to permit and substantial construction; 48 months after start to completion; narrow extension.
12. Incentives	Fee reimbursement, RDA/TIF pathway, public-realm matching, parking flexibility; separate fiscal approvals and caps.
13. Enforcement	Automatic expiration, bond/security, repayment and clawback, covenant enforcement, false-statement penalties.
14. Reporting	Public dashboard, quarterly staff reports, 12- and 18-month evaluations, post-construction outcomes.
15. Sunset	Application authority sunsets after 18 months unless extended once for six months by Council after a public performance report; vested approvals remain subject to milestones.
16. Severability / effective date	Standard City Attorney language; no impairment of federal aviation, building, fire, utility, or environmental requirements.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Measure whether the pilot produced buildings, not press releases

Metric	Report at	Success signal
Eligible parcels and applications	Quarterly	Geographic reach without historic-neighborhood encroachment.
Complete applications / decision time	Quarterly	Median administrative decision at or below adopted target.
Verified financing	12 months after each approval	Projects advance from concept to committed capital.
Permits and substantial construction	24 months after each approval	Entitlements become active construction sites.
Homes, hotel rooms, jobs, commercial floor area	Permit and completion	Meaningful increase in Downtown daily population and activity.
Attainable units and public-space area	Permit and completion	Public value is delivered and legally secured.
Local-business space and occupancy cost	Annually	Below-market space reaches independent operators and remains occupied.
Surface/dirt lots converted	Annually	Underused land declines without displacement.
Water budget and actual use	Design and annually after occupancy	Compact projects meet City/SNWA performance standards.
Tax increment and City assistance	Annually	Public support remains proportional to realized new value.

Decision points

1. At month 12, adjust administrative procedures only; do not reduce vested approvals.
2. At month 18, decide whether to allow the single six-month application extension based on financing, applications, and public-benefit commitments.
3. At month 36, decide whether to make the overlay permanent, modify tiers, or allow it to expire for new projects.
4. After the first three completions, publish an independent evaluation of rents, foot traffic, water use, tax increment, public space, and displacement outcomes.

Recommended Council motion

Motion

I move to direct the City Manager, Community Development Department, City Attorney, Economic and Urban Development Department, Redevelopment Agency staff, Public Works, Fire and Rescue, and Finance to return within 120 days with a Downtown Vertical Growth and Public Benefit Pilot ordinance, parcel map, fiscal note, airspace protocol, and incentive resolution substantially consistent with this policy proposal.

PUBLIC CASE

A concise argument city leaders can use

Downtown Las Vegas is running out of room while much of its most valuable central land remains dirt or surface parking. At the same time, Arts District businesses are confronting restaurant- and brewery-sized spaces that can approach $15,000 to $20,000 per month. Those businesses need more than special-event crowds. They need thousands of nearby residents, workers, and guests who create daily foot traffic.

The answer is not to demolish the neighborhood that made Downtown interesting. The answer is to put the next generation of growth on the empty land. For 18 months, Las Vegas should invite serious, financed high-rise proposals on mapped dirt lots and surface parking. Qualifying sites should receive a predictable 20-to-30-story base envelope; projects that provide attainable housing, public parks and plazas, Low Line connections, historic preservation, or below-market local-business space should be able to rise higher.

Seattle used height, public benefits, parks, transit, and development capacity to turn South Lake Union into a major employment and residential district. Portland, under Mayor Vera Katz, paired the Pearl District's density and height changes with a streetcar, parks, affordable housing, infrastructure, and enforceable developer obligations. The Pearl grew from roughly 1,300 residents in 2000 to more than 11,000 in 2020. Las Vegas can learn from both cities without copying either one blindly.

The pilot would not waive airport safety, building codes, fire codes, water rules, or historic protections. It would stop using a generalized ceiling where objective design, site-specific FAA review, infrastructure agreements, and financing milestones can do a better job.

Bottom line

Give builders a short window and a clear bargain: preserve existing businesses and historic neighborhoods, prove the financing, build on the empty land, deliver public value, and start construction within 24 months - or lose the height and the incentives.

SOURCES AND FACTUAL NOTES

Primary and supporting sources

[1] Gateway to Fremont, Downtown Las Vegas: Height Limits Are Holding Back Growth (Sept. 5, 2026), supplied policy analysis.
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Important drafting notes

- Commercial asking rents change and are not the same as executed lease rents. Before adopting findings, staff should obtain broker data, executed-lease ranges where available, and direct testimony from operators.
- The Pearl District population comparison uses a 2000 planning baseline and a 2020 City profile. Boundary and methodology differences should be confirmed if used in formal legislative findings.
- The proposed percentages, height bands, deadlines, and incentive caps are policy starting points. City Attorney, Finance, fire/building officials, utilities, airport partners, and a third-party feasibility consultant should test and convert them into final standards.
- Nothing in this proposal guarantees FAA clearance, financing, utility capacity, a tax-increment rebate, or a building permit for any specific parcel.