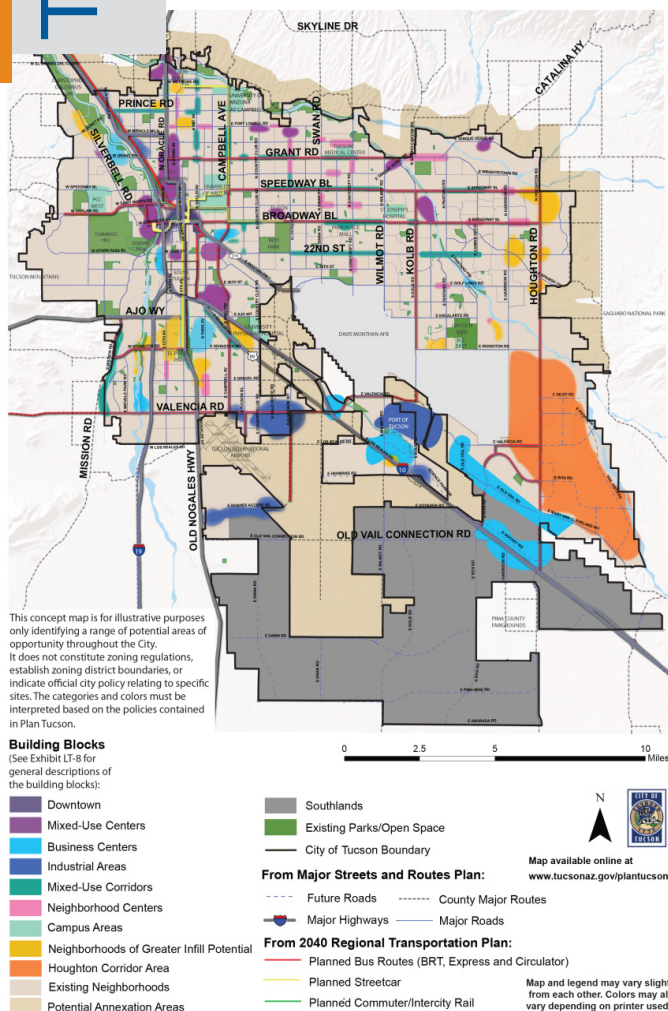


From Policy to Progress: The Competitive Edge Starts with Zoning

» by Keri Lazarus Silvyn ESQ • June 2025



Tucson's Future Growth Scenario Map

In the world of economic development, zoning may not be the first concept that comes to mind—but it should be. As Southern Arizona competes on a national stage to attract business and industry, “time to market” has become a key decision point for site selectors. Speed matters. And zoning, if planned thoughtfully, can either accelerate opportunity—or kill it.

Why Zoning Matters

Every new business must conform to local zoning and land-use regulations. That means not only confirming that the intended use is “permitted,” but also that it meets requirements for building height, setbacks, and other criteria.

If zoning is already in place, confirmation can take as little as 30 days—making the site immediately competitive. If zoning

isn't perfectly aligned but a similar use is allowed, a jurisdiction can often provide an interpretation within 30 to 60 days. These timelines are generally acceptable in the world of business attraction.

But when zoning must be changed, the timeline stretches. A rezoning process typically takes 6–9 months. If the use also conflicts with a jurisdiction's General or Comprehensive Plan, a Major Plan Amendment may be required, pushing the approval timeline to 12–18 months. In some cases, jurisdictions allow Minor Plan Amendments to proceed concurrently with rezoning, but even then, the process can take months. In today's economy, that delay can be a dealbreaker—especially for companies under pressure to get to market fast.

What Can We Do?

Southern Arizona has made great strides in recognizing the role zoning plays in business recruitment. Here are three strategies that jurisdictions and property owners can implement to be more proactive:

1. Align Policy with Future Opportunity

General and Comprehensive Plans are being updated across the region. Now is the time for jurisdictions to work with large landowners and other stakeholders to:

- Identify growth corridors
- Align infrastructure investment
- Define desired industry types
- Draft policies with enough flexibility to accommodate future, and possibly unanticipated, business models

Flexible policies are key to remaining competitive.

2. Use Flexible Zoning Tools

Several zoning mechanisms can help prepare land for future economic development—even before a specific end-user is identified:

- **Planned Area Developments (PADs) or Planned Community Developments (PCDs)** offer use flexibility while still addressing design and site planning.
- **Specific Plans** (in Pima County and the Town of Marana) allow for detailed land-use planning at a sub-area level.
- **Overlay Districts** enable property owners to choose between existing zoning and more business-friendly overlay rules. These are created through a public process in advance, reducing uncertainty for future users.

The key to all these tools? Draft them with flexibility and business growth in mind.



“Site selectors know: if zoning is in place, you’re ahead of the game... Shovel-ready sites are a game-changer for attracting business.”

3. Create Shovel-Ready Sites

When policy and zoning are aligned, jurisdictions and landowners can go a step further by preparing sites for immediate development. This might include:

- Completing plats or block maps
- Establishing grading limits
- Extending utilities and infrastructure

Though it requires upfront investment, it drastically shortens a business’s timeline to build—and can make the difference in a competitive site selection process.

Examples Abound:

- **Port of Tucson** and **Pima County** collaborated for years to establish shovel-ready land near key logistics infrastructure.
- **The City of Tucson** and **Arizona State Land Department** have worked together to set the stage for industrial growth in the Southlands.
- **Bourn Companies** and **Diamond Ventures** have taken similar forward-thinking approaches in partnership with local jurisdictions.

Conclusion

Zoning is not just a land-use issue—it is an economic development tool. Our region has made significant progress in recent years by recognizing this connection. The current wave of General and Comprehensive Plan updates gives us an opportunity to solidify that alignment for the future.

Let’s continue working collaboratively—jurisdictions, landowners, and economic development leaders alike—to ensure zoning never becomes the barrier to business attraction. Let’s plan smart, zone strategically, and be ready.

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