

Adult businesses make it harder to revitalize downtown Reno: Mike Kazmierski

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The Reno City Council is considering a new ordinance that would move strip clubs out of downtown and off of East Fourth Street. See maps of where they would be allowed to go. Anjeanette Damon, RGJ

I often hear disparaging remarks about our downtown (Reno) from prospects, people new to the community, visitors and even locals. My first response is to defend what a wonderful place we have in downtown Reno, with our river, restaurants and the increasingly “cool” or “hip” feel. What is hard to defend is the trashy look and in-your-face adult businesses that may have been a part of our past, but don’t really fit in with the “new” Reno we are striving to become.

It should be no surprise that BVK, the marketing agency that did the recent RSCVA marketing campaign, reported that the “Reno travel market suffers from demographic idiosyncrasies not seen in other destinations ... one that attracts significantly more men than women. ... This is an issue since women are the primary decision makers for travel.” That’s why it is so exciting to see the Reno City Council looking at modifying the Adult Business Ordinance to bring it more in line with the welcoming, family friendly, college town we can all enjoy.

Other communities have "Red Light" or adult business districts. Nearly every community I have visited seems to have established their downtown as a welcoming place for the entire community, including women and families. To make most residents and visitors feel comfortable, certain businesses have been prohibited from operating in the downtown and are set up in areas that are nearby, but out of the core of the community. These areas zoned industrial that have a concentration of adult businesses, strip clubs etc. are often referred to as Red Light districts as a comparison to the original Red Light districts in Amsterdam where brothels turned on a red light to signify that a woman was available. Those that do not want to be involved with this type of activity stay away and since these concentrations of adult activities are off the beaten path, in industrial areas, it is easy to avoid them.

New Ordinance is just an enforcement of existing zoning. It is interesting to note that Reno is much like these other communities, including Sparks and Washoe County. The current ordinance requires adult businesses to be in industrial zoned areas, like other activities or businesses that have adverse impacts or secondary effects on the businesses and the people around it. For example, we would not want a meat packing or chicken processing facility in our downtown; they would be expected to operate outside of the core of the community, in industrial zones. The same expectation is there for adult businesses, yet somehow these businesses operate under variances they received over the years or because of a zoning change. The new ordinance just requires them to be conforming, which is also in line with the recent Urban Land Institute Report recommendation provided to the city of Reno for improving the downtown.

Revitalization requires action and change. Most would agree that our downtown needs work, but that this region is on the cusp of greatness. Given that, it may be time to address the future needs of our community – a vibrant, safe and inclusive downtown that can be enjoyed by all our residents. As the economic development lead for the region, EDAWN has made revitalization of the downtown one of our top priorities because it directly impacts on our ability to attract talent and quality companies. So, if you agree that the “new” Reno should have a more inclusive and welcoming feel, please let your council representative or the city staff know. Let’s not let the noisy or litigious few sidetrack our amazing progress on the road to becoming a truly great city.

Mike Kazmierski is president and CEO of the Economic Development Authority of Western Nevada.

