

Roberts: Scottsdale should stand tall and reject blanket high rise request

Laurie Roberts, The Republic | azcentral.com 2:50 p.m. MST February 10, 2016



Once, the skyline in downtown Scottsdale was where the mountains met the sky.

Even the thought of injecting towers into the city's wide-open views was enough to spark a public outcry, enough to topple candidates for public office.

Once, the city's beloved Mayor Herb Drinkwater said that Scottsdale would have high-rises over his dead body. Then he relented just a bit and wound up watching a 101-foot bank tower rise over Camelback and Scottsdale. He later deemed it "a mistake and it isn't very much like we thought it would turn out."

Once, the city was told if you just allow two 155-foot luxury condo towers – more than twice the 72-foot cap -- Scottsdale would be saved.

"In order to attract to downtown that level of income and the positive impacts on downtown merchants and downtown itself, you have to give people a view," zoning attorney John Berry, point man for the project, said at the time.

Or put another way: In order to charge a couple of million bucks for a condo, you have to mar everyone else's view.

But take heart, city leaders said. The Waterfront would be the only high rise that would be approved.

Then they approved a third 135-foot tower at the Waterfront.

Then they approved three yet-to-be built 133-foot apartment towers, just east of Scottsdale Fashion Square.

"If you don't believe that this isn't the first in a tidal wave of tall, dense projects, you just aren't paying attention," then-Scottsdale Councilman Bob Littlefield warned in 2011 as he voted against the apartment project.

Now comes word that the owner of Fashion Square wants blanket permission to build multiple towers up to 150 feet tall at and around the mall.

Macerich is not saying what it wants to build. It's not saying what those buildings would look like or how many there would be. What it is saying: the company wants the height limit raised to 150 feet by spring. It appears the Santa Monica, Calif.-based company is looking to circle the mall with at least five high rises.

Scottsdale Mayor Jim Lane told *The Republic's* Parker Leavitt that the request could be "tough one" for the City Council to support. Of course, Lane has to say that. He's up for re-election this year and he's facing Littlefield.

"Height and density are always a consideration," Lane told Leavitt. "We are sensitive to maintaining a Scottsdale-type image. We don't want to be like any other urban center."

Nice words. Problem is, I've heard them before from Scottsdale leaders – several high rises ago.

Once, Scottsdale had the potential to be another La Jolla or a Santa Fe or Aspen. Something unique. Something special.

Brick by brick, the city is losing what it once was and could be again, if only it had leaders who knew the difference between progress and outright plunder.

Five or 10 years from now, maybe you'll be headed to downtown Scottsdale.

When you get there, you'll look around and suddenly wonder whether you made a wrong turn and wound up in some other one's-about-the-same-as-the-next suburban city.

As you walk around, passing massive buildings perched on the sidewalk and towering overhead, you will wonder what happened to Scottsdale.

When that day comes -- and it will come -- remember when the city's leaders opened the floodgates to developers looking to line their pockets.

When city leaders traded cachet for cash-in.