



TUCSON
HISTORIC PRESERVATION
FOUNDATION

**Gaps in Required Historic Review for Portions of the Rio Nuevo and Downtown (RND)
Zone
March 2018**

Executive Summary

This white paper examines significant gaps in required historic and archaeological review within the Rio Nuevo and Downtown (RND) Zone created by [Ordinance No. 9780](#). Although the RND Zone boundary encompasses culturally and historically significant areas, including the Sentinel Avenue corridor and large areas west of Interstate 10, the review procedures established in the ordinance apply only in limited circumstances. As a result, large segments of the RND Zone are not subject to required review by the Tucson–Pima County Historical Commission Plans Review Committee or the Historic Preservation Officer.

Because these areas contain archaeological resources, early settlement landscapes, and historic streetscapes, the absence of a mandatory review process creates a risk of unregulated impacts to Tucson's most sensitive historic environments. This paper outlines the legislative framework, identifies the review gaps, and proposes corrective actions.

Introduction

The Rio Nuevo and Downtown Zone (RND Zone) was created in 2002 to guide downtown redevelopment while protecting significant cultural and historic resources. However, the ordinance establishing the zone did not create comprehensive protections for all historic areas included within the zone boundary. Instead, the mandatory review procedures apply only to projects involving buildings that are listed or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. As a result, large portions of the RND Zone containing archaeological sites, cultural landscapes, and historic community fabric do not receive required preservation review. The purpose of this white paper is to document these gaps and propose improvements consistent with the stated purpose of the RND Zone.

Background

1. Creation of the RND Zone

The ordinance established the intent of the RND Zone as promoting redevelopment that enhances the cultural, architectural, and historic heritage of downtown Tucson. Section 2.8.10.1 states that the overlay zone focuses on culture, economic growth, and the general welfare of the community, including protection of Tucson's historic heritage.



2. Geographic Scope

The RND Zone boundary map, reproduced on page 11 of the ordinance, includes a broad area:

- Downtown Tucson
- West side of the Santa Cruz River
- Sentinel Peak and the Sentinel Avenue corridor
- Large areas west of Interstate 10
- Mission Gardens and the Birthplace of Tucson
- Portions of historic barrios

These areas contain cultural landscapes, archaeological sites, and early settlement layers.

3. Historic Review Procedures in the Ordinance

The ordinance establishes review procedures in Section 23A-50, which include:

- Preapplication review
- Minor development review
- Full development review

Historic review is required only when a project affects:

- A building listed on the National Register, or
- A building eligible for listing on the National Register

Exterior elevation changes to these buildings must be reviewed by the Tucson–Pima County Historical Commission Plans Review Committee.

There is no comparable requirement for:

- Archaeological impacts
- Cultural landscapes
- Traditional cultural properties
- Historic streetscapes
- Unlisted contributing structures
- Ground-disturbing activity in areas of known sensitivity

4. Analysis: Gaps in Required Historic Review

1. Sentinel Avenue Corridor

The Sentinel Avenue corridor sits fully within the RND Zone boundary but does not contain a significant number of individually listed National Register buildings. This means that projects in this area do not trigger historic review under Section 23A-50, despite the presence of:

- Archaeological layers associated with early Tucson settlement
- Historic road alignments

- Proximity to Mission Gardens and the Birthplace cultural landscape

As a result, ground disturbance and new construction may proceed without any review by the Historic Preservation Officer or the Historical Commission.

2. Areas West of Interstate 10

The RND map includes extensive areas west of I-10, including land associated with:

- Early prehistoric habitation
- Spanish Colonial and Mexican-period settlement
- Agricultural fields associated with historic irrigation systems
- Traditional cultural properties connected to generations of Tucson residents

Because these areas contain few standing National Register buildings, the ordinance's review triggers do not apply.

3. . Disconnect Between Boundary Map and Review Mechanisms

The ordinance reflects an internal inconsistency. The boundary map encompasses a wide and historically sensitive area, but the review procedures are narrow and building-focused. The ordinance's intent statement emphasizes cultural and historic preservation, yet the operative sections extend review only to standing National Register buildings. This disconnect limits the preservation framework envisioned for the RND Zone.

4. Consequences of the Gap

1. Archaeological Loss
Development may affect subsurface resources without any required archaeological assessment.
2. Destruction of Cultural Landscapes
Historic spatial relationships, open spaces, and traditional cultural areas may be altered or eliminated.
3. Inconsistent Preservation Oversight
HPZs receive strong regulatory review, while sensitive areas within the RND Zone receive little or none.
4. Legal and Policy Confusion
Applicants, staff, and commissioners may assume that the inclusion of an area in the RND Zone implies preservation protections that do not exist in practice.

Unassessed Historic Resources Within the RND Zone

In addition to the areas lacking required historic review, there are numerous buildings and structures within the Rio Nuevo and Downtown Zone that have never been evaluated for eligibility for the National Register of Historic Places. The ordinance relies on National Register listing or eligibility as the sole trigger for historic review, yet large numbers of buildings within the

RND boundary have not undergone any formal assessment. Many date from periods of documented historical significance, including early twentieth-century commercial development, railroad-related industry, and mid-century urban expansion. Because eligibility status has not been determined, these potentially significant resources receive no protection under the current review framework. This gap further compounds the disconnect between the stated preservation intent of Ordinance No. 9780 and the narrow application of its review requirements.

Policy Implications

The current framework prevents the city from fully realizing the stated purpose of the RND Zone. The ordinance emphasizes protection of the historic heritage of downtown, yet in practice leaves large, historically significant areas without required preservation oversight. This undermines consistency in preservation governance and may result in irreversible loss of historic resources.

Recommendations

1. Administrative Interpretation

Planning and Development Services and the Historic Preservation Officer should issue an interpretation clarifying that the RND Zone's purpose requires review of any proposed development in historically or archaeologically sensitive areas, even when no National Register building is present.

2. UDC Amendment

A text amendment should expand the review triggers to include:

- Ground-disturbing activities
- Projects within defined archaeological sensitivity zones
- Projects affecting cultural landscapes
- Projects that alter historic streetscapes or vernacular contributing structures

This change would align the ordinance with its stated purpose.

3. Creation of a Cultural Resource Overlay Within the RND Zone

Define areas requiring automatic review, including:

- Sentinel Avenue
- Mission Gardens and the Birthplace landscape
- West-of-I-10 historic areas
- Traditional cultural properties

4. Establishment of Early Consultation Procedures

Require applicants to consult with the Historic Preservation Officer during project inception to ensure that cultural resources are identified and considered.

Conclusion

The Rio Nuevo and Downtown Zone was created to support redevelopment that respects Tucson's historic and cultural heritage. However, the ordinance establishing the zone contains significant gaps that leave large portions of the area without required historic review. Properties along Sentinel Avenue and west of Interstate 10, despite their historical and archaeological importance, do not receive mandatory oversight. Addressing these gaps through administrative

interpretation and targeted amendments will align implementation of the RND Zone with its stated goals and ensure protection of Tucson's most significant cultural landscapes.