

# Prague's zoning plan: barriers, brakes, deficits

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Stavební fórum has organized discussions on the capital's new zoning plan almost regularly, which by itself shows how slowly it is being born. And it should be noted that, as the time goes, there is more specific information on what should the plan contain on the one hand, but on the other hand the predictions of when Prague will actually have the new key document on its development are becoming more obscure, and the discussion held at the end of this May showed just that.

## Appealing visions

And there are many things to be looking forward to. The plan will be simpler, will accurately define the city's areas depending on function, not dogmatically, is expected to determine key development areas (for example the Bubny train station and Štěrboholy) and, of course, takes into account Prague's main export - its historical centre. As regards new construction activities, the plan will be (likely) based on several simple principles: preference of construction on built-up areas to greenfields, public transport to cars, and protection of greenery. The new plan will be hopefully more flexible in this regard: if a project brings elements with a smaller burden on the city into a location in which the plan counts on a higher burden (example: an apartment house in an industrial district), the potential approval of the construction will not require a change in the plan, while in opposite cases the change will be required. The new plan should also establish binding rules for the construction of high-risers in the whole capital (defined not by their height, but by the protrusion of two stories above the surrounding development), drafted on the basis of work of the special Haman Commission. And the new zoning plan should offer even more innovation to support healthy urban development. Unfortunately, it is still unclear when such innovation will appear, even after years of preparations.

## Too many needs and interests

Prague's zoning plan has one problem that is unsurprising and surmountable, yet cannot be missed: complexity. In our circumstances, the capital city is a wholly unique territorial unit from all points of view (urban planning, economic, demographic etc.). Its area of under 500 square kilometres provides home to 1.2 million people, and an additional 300 to 400 thousand people commute there every day. Although the share of industrial and other manufacture is declining in the city, it remains a place of unequalled (in our context) concentration of services and at the same time a political, administrative and cultural centre. This all puts extreme demands on the city's everyday running - the complexity of the situation is well documented by the condition and needs of transport infrastructure, which has to cope with the need to transport hundreds of thousands of people and to absorb a million cars in use in Prague. The documentation for the plan was prepared by 80 institutions and the city hall itself prepared tens of additional studies (the individual outputs are available at the webpage of the Prague City Hall's Development Department).

It is a highly difficult task to harmonize all of the city's needs, and do so realistically. The more so that all stakeholders participate in the preparation in one way or another. And someone else - investors, who can formally propose only the construction of a specific project, without entering the preparation stage as such. However, they do so indirectly, of course, at least according to the public that is concerned about the connection between local (but this is an inappropriate word because of Prague's importance for the life of the Czech Republic) politics and billions of crowns in property development. "I hope that through my presence I will improve the reputation of the city council," said Councillor Langmajer at the meeting, pointing in his brief speech at the necessity of public discussions on all aspects of the plan "to clarify any

obscurities and maybe even suspicions.” It is a matter of fact that such “suspicions” are generated almost automatically in a market society, but the already notorious lack of willingness of the city hall to talk publicly on this topic (including the chronic ignorance of the real-estate trade fair MIPIM, where states, regions and municipalities are looking for investors - Brno, Ostrava and Bratislava are always represented by their lord mayors - not Prague). At any rate, there is no doubt that the zoning plan is a matter less of urban development and the civil society and more of politics and economy.

### **Democratic deficits**

“Prague’s zoning plan has been never prepared to democratically,” said Jitka Cvetlerová, of Prague City Hall, at SF’s meeting. However, this sentence, certainly agreeable and true, has a less positive spin - the possibility to contest any major step taken by the authors of the plan (i.e. the city hall) legally, with the court being often the place of last resort, often slows down the preparation of the plan. And as a matter of fact, everyone may participate in the process of its preparation. The new Building Act did not simplify the situation in this respect, and according to city hall officials (and not only them), it is “more complicated and ambiguous” in some regards (to make the thing even worse, Prague is a municipality and a region at the same time!).

The plan has been prepared for years so that many decisions are contested, the complaint travels around the competent authorities within the set terms and, in the end, reaches the court and everything goes back to the beginning, so the preparation is delayed by months. The so-called civil initiatives are highly experienced in these legislative escapades; they often know the laws better than the employees of the institutions whose decisions they contest. And, as mentioned above, the wording of the laws is far from ideal.

Add to it the confrontational atmosphere that pervades almost the whole society, it is no wonder that Prague’s area planning goulash is a meal to be cooked for a long time. That is why, when asked the logical question “when”, those preparing the new plan in the city hall usually answered unwillingly, without any actual conviction: “Maybe in 2011?!?!”

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