

FORM-BASED ZONING— AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH

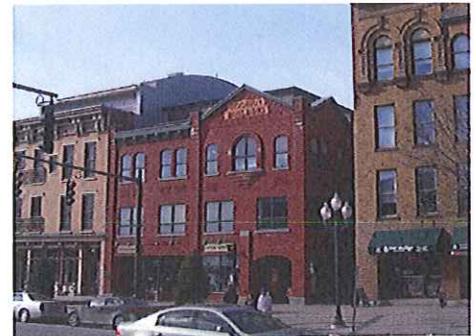
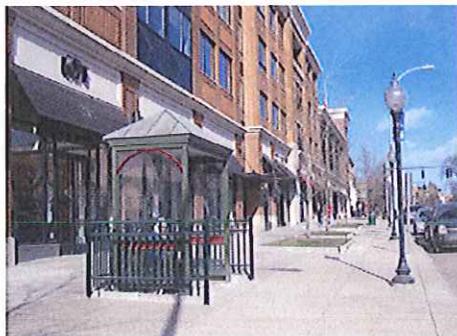
Zoning is the primary way in which communities regulate development. The original rationale for the development of zoning was based upon a need to separate different kinds of land uses (industrial and residential for instance) to protect public health, safety, and welfare. But what was once a solution to dangerous living conditions is now considered to be a major contributing factor to dysfunctional and sprawling development. Low-density sprawl is the most expensive pattern for delivering municipal services, it is unsupportive of public transit and pedestrian infrastructure, and it reinforces reliance on the private auto. Sprawling development patterns reinforce an unsustainable way of life and consumption of resources.

While community development patterns have adapted to changing technology and social factors (i.e. automobile use), the basic approach to zoning has remained static. To deal with new and more complex issues, layers have been added to zoning regulations, making them more complicated but still creating environments that are less than ideal. Many in the field of planning have realized it may be time to move beyond incremental revisions to a more fundamental and integrated approach.

Communities across the country are beginning to turn to form-based zoning codes as one solution. The basic premise is that the regulation of physical form (not land use) is a key to producing a better built environment. While “form” may imply a built urban environment, rural landscapes, farmland, and preserved open space also have distinctive forms and form-based codes can be used in these places, too. Form refers to those features of buildings and landforms that define the shape and influence the function of a landscape (i.e. height, position, massing). Land uses and densities would still be regulated, but they would become subject to the form of the desired outcome.

Initially, form-based codes were developed as a set of instructions for developers to use in developing greenfield (previously undeveloped) sites and planned unit developments. These developments often took place at the edge of the growing suburban fringe in southern states. These codes required that new development and expansion of existing homes be compatible with the largely New Urbanist ideas of specific project developers. More recently, form-based codes have been adopted by existing communities across the United States both in large cities and small towns. These codes have been applied to new development, downtown revitalization, corridor revitalization, etc. It is important to remember that every place has its own unique character to be preserved, celebrated, and where and when appropriate built upon. No matter what the setting, codes can be written to protect or transform a place.

Form-based codes ask the question, “What does the community want to look like?” and then work backwards from there, creating regulations that will produce the desired result. Form-based codes fulfill a specific physical vision for a place, a vision that has been based on broad public consensus. Code development involves identifying “good” streets and public spaces, and then writing rules to get more of what people want and less of what they don’t want. Which neighborhood patterns should be retained and protected? Which should be replaced with something better? What should that “something better” look like? Form-based codes are also contextual—that is, they look to the preferred characteristics of the surrounding environment for guidance in regulating the physical form of new development. These codes focus on describing what’s desirable rather than listing what’s forbidden, and they are nonetheless regulatory rather than advisory in nature. In terms of the design of buildings or sites, current zoning often effectively tells developers, “You can pretty much do whatever you want, as long as you follow these general rules about size, parking, etc. and don’t try to do an X, a Y or a Z”. Form-based codes approach it the other way around. They allow a community to tell developers: “If you want to build here, this is what we want it to end up looking like. Within that range, you can do an A, a B, or a C. We still don’t want you to do an X, a Y or a Z.”



New buildings in downtown Saratoga Springs, New York created under the City’s form-based code.

The predictability of this technique can ensure that as the physical environment develops, it reflects the community’s master plan goals. It allows the regulations to attract certain desirable changes rather than merely controlling whatever development is proposed through the permitting procedures. A large reason for the growing success of form-based coding is its ability to support balanced planning and regulation making. Form-based codes also remove regulatory obstacles to mixed-use development, establish clear and objective standards for design, and can have an improved approval process.

“The desire for community is a constant of human nature.”

-Steven Price