Form-Based Code

In a Nutshell

Form Based Codes (FBCs) or zoning is a method of regulating development to achieve a specific urban form. Form Based Zoning regulates the design of buildings and other aspects of urban development. Its application regulates development to address challenges and achieve specific community goals.

The “How To”

Form-based code (FBC) differentiates from zoning in that form-based codes focus on the design and look of buildings rather than land use. FBC specifies such things as physical layout of the building, building design, and a building’s relationship to other buildings and to the sidewalk and streets. Communities can use FBC to regulate what buildings in specified areas look like. The Form Based Codes Institute is an organization dedicated to advancing the understanding and use of FBCs. They provide code resources (sample RFQ, news, articles, and books), courses and webinars, and sample codes.

The City of Cincinnati in Ohio offers the presentation A Tool For Shaping Community Form & Smarter Growth . That presentation shows how FBC facilitates smarter development because it makes better use of land.

Planning & Zoning

There are many examples of form-based codes (FBC). The City of St. Louis has form-based districts, and the requirements for the districts are spelled out in their ordinances. The Central West End and Midtown neighborhoods of St. Louis are developing FBC for their neighborhoods. The City of Buffalo adopted an FBC approach, called the Buffalo Green Code, because of its unique capacity to realize the community's vision for walkable, mixed-use neighborhoods.

The Form-Based Codes Insitute has several examples of FBC. This institute was established by some of the pioneers of FBC. While FBC had been around for a while, it was the founders of this institute that coined the term and defined the other terms used in FBC. Examples from this webpage include Denver, Fort Worth and Flagstaff.

Dollars & Cents

One of the benefits of FBCs is that they create economic value in your city by increasing property values. For example, two projects in Duncanville, TX, increased property values fifteen-fold. Retail rents have risen from $6 per square foot to $16 per square foot. Market rate rents are $1.20 per square foot where there was no market rate rent. (Home Builders Association of St. Louis and Eastern Missouri, PowerPoint, slide 8).

It is difficult to generalize the budget for FBCs. The Sacramento Area Council of Governments state that the original cost of FBCs might be higher than conventional codes, however administrative costs should not be significantly different. It should be noted that costs could be higher if a municipality decides to use a consultant during this undertaking.

Measuring Success

According to the Sacramento Area Council of Governments, once the draft code provisions are completed, they should be tested using anticipated development applications to determine how well the draft addresses real world development and design issues. Also, all staff involved in the new code should pay attention to the following questions:

- Does the code yield development outcomes that are consistent with the community vision?
- Are there any city ordinance requirements or standards that are inconsistent or that conflict?
- Do the application submittal requirements provide sufficient information and detail to evaluate the application according to the FBC and other ordinance criteria?
- Are the FBC and other ordinance standards clear, objective, and interpreted, yielding predictable results that support the vision?

Discover More

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Case Studies

Ferguson Downtown Form-Based Zoning Districts

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Description

In April, 2013 Ferguson City Council approved form-based codes for its downtown district. One of the goals for the downtown area was to “create a physical environment that is attractive, inviting, walkable, and supports a variety of uses downtown.” Form-based coding helped the city achieve this goal.

Ferguson applied and was awarded a Missouri Foundation for Health (MFH) grant to help in the development and implementation of the code. An advisory committee of community stakeholders and Farr Associates guided the process from ordinance drafting to implementation. At the beginning of the process, the city hosted

a public forum to identify what types of buildings and land uses best represented the community's vision for downtown. Farr Associates prepared the first draft of the form-based code, and took it to the Community Advisory Committee for review. Eventually, the committee and Farr Associates produced a final draft. The draft was sent to the City Council for review and approval.

The adoption of the Downtown Form Based Code changed the zoning map by creating four new zoning districts. The new code regulates development to ensure high-quality public spaces. These public spaces are defined by a variety of building types and uses, including housing, retail, entertainment and office space. The code incorporates a regulating plan, building form standard, street standards, use regulations, descriptive building types and other elements needed to implement the principles of functional and vital urbanism and practical growth management. Since the code replaced previous code regulations, several current buildings and sizes are non-conforming. These buildings will need to become conforming after a major addition involving more than 60% of the existing structure, or new construction.

The City of Ferguson prepared this document which explains their form-based zoning in greater depth. It includes detailed descriptions of building types and site development standards.

Cost $35

Lessons Learned

A key component of creating the vision for downtown Ferguson was the image preference survey and community participation. Public engagement gave the Community Advisory Committee and Farr Associates a clear vision of how the community wanted the area to look.

The width of streets affects many form-based code decisions. Therefore, traffic analysis should coincide with efforts of developing a form-based code, especially in high traffic areas.

The Central West End Form Base District- CIty of St. Louis Form Based Code Ordinance

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Description

The City of St. Louis Ordinance 69199 created a new zoning overlay district in the Zoning Code called Form-Based Districts. This means individual neighborhoods and development areas can adopt overlay districts that regulate urban form and development to promote and preserve community character. Shortly after, the planning commission passed an Ordinance establishing the Central West End as a form based district with its own code modifications.

The St. Louis Ordinance

Central West End Form Based Distirct Ordinance

Cost

City of St. Louis staff time, no additional costs.

Lessons Learned

As the overlay district’s code is implemented, lessons learned will be tracked and updated.