



DOWNTOWN AND PERKINS STREET CORRIDOR FORM BASED ZONING PROJECT

Form-Based Codes Lay the Foundation for Sustainable Communities

From Arlington, Va., to Ventura, Calif., cities across the nation are replacing conventional zoning regulations with a streamlined, “form-based” approach that, experts say, will help set the stage for community-wide sustainable development.

Cities are realizing that the tried and true method of zoning—where jurisdictions place strict controls on land use and density, but offer little guidance on the physical form of buildings and overall districts—often leads to poorly designed, sprawling communities.

Form-based codes, on the other hand, employ a more holistic and prescriptive approach to town/regional planning based on a city’s long-term conceptual master plan. Emphasis is placed on the physical form of the built environment, rather than the land use, with the goal of producing a specific type of “place.”

“Form-based codes are very direct in asking for what the community wants,” says Geoffrey Ferrell, partner with Ferrell Madden Associates, Washington, D.C. Through the use of simple, straight-forward graphical diagrams and photos, the codes dictate everything from the size and scale of the streets to how buildings are situated on a site to the placement of doors and windows. A typical form-based ordinance may be just several pages, compared to hundreds or even thousands of pages of zoning regulation language with conventional codes.

“With a form-based approach, a picture is quite literally worth a thousand words, or at least a few hundred words,” says Steve Coyle, principal with LCA + Sargent Town Planning, Oakland, Calif., a division of HDR, Omaha, Neb. Coyle says by simplifying the code language with very specific visuals and language, jurisdictions can take much of the “guess work” out of the design review process, making life easier for both the Building Team and the planning review commission.

How do form-based codes promote sustainable design? At the very basic level, form-based codes promote the development of more efficient, dense communities, says Ferrell. “It’s common-sense urbanism, where towns, cities, and villages are consuming less land,” he says. With a smaller ecological footprint, less energy is consumed on transportation and power and water infrastructure. In addition, districts are much more pedestrian-friendly.

Form-based codes also allow cities to handle important environmental issues like parking and storm-water runoff from a holistic approach.

“With conventional codes, every developer must provide their own parking and water detention/retention on site,” says Mary E. Madden, partner with Ferrell Madden Associates. “That’s why every property has a huge parking lot and ponds on site.”

With form-based codes, jurisdictions can establish shared parking venues or an integrated storm-water runoff solution. This approach not only minimizes land use and upfront costs for the developer, but it also results in a more efficient system.

Form-based codes can also encourage or mandate green design, such as the inclusion of vegetated roofs, and can work hand-in-hand with green building programs, like LEED. In fact, the U.S. Green Building Council is working with the urban planning industry to create LEED for Neighborhood Development, which would incorporate the principals of form-based codes.

“There are a lot of buildings that meet the technical green standards, but, by their placement and location, are actually sprawl development,” says Madden. “LEED-ND will look at green design more broadly.”