

## Definition of a Form-Based Code

Draft Date: June 27, 2006

A method of regulating development to achieve a specific urban form. Form-based codes create a predictable public realm by controlling physical form primarily, with a lesser focus on land use, through city or county regulations.

Form-based codes address the relationship between building facades and the public realm, the form and mass of buildings in relation to one another, and the scale and types of streets and blocks. The regulations and standards in form-based codes, presented in both diagrams and words, are keyed to a *regulating plan* that designates the appropriate form and scale (and therefore, character) of development rather than only distinctions in land-use types. This is in contrast to conventional zoning's focus on the segregation of land-use types, permissible property uses, and the control of development intensity through simple numerical parameters (e.g., FAR, dwellings per acre, height limits, setbacks, parking ratios). Not to be confused with design guidelines or general statements of policy, form-based codes are regulatory, not advisory.

Form-based codes are drafted to achieve a community vision based on time-tested forms of urbanism. Ultimately, a form-based code is a tool; the quality of development outcomes is dependent on the quality and objectives of the community plan that a code implements.

Form-based codes commonly include the following elements:

- *Regulating Plan.* A plan or map of the regulated area designating the locations where different building form standards apply, based on clear community intentions regarding the physical character of the area being coded.
- *Building Form Standards.* Regulations controlling the configuration, features, and functions of buildings that define and shape the public realm.
- *Public Space/Street Standards.* Specifications for the elements within the public realm (e.g., sidewalks, travel lanes, street trees, street furniture, etc.).
- *Administration.* A clearly defined application and project review process.
- *Definitions.* A glossary to ensure the precise use of technical terms.

Form-based codes also sometimes include:

- *Architectural Standards.* Regulations controlling external architectural materials and quality.
- *Annotation.* Text and illustrations explaining the intentions of specific code provisions.

### **Eight Advantages to Form-Based Codes**

1. Because they are prescriptive (they state what you want), rather than proscriptive (what you don't want), form-based codes (FBCs) can achieve a more predictable physical result. The elements controlled by FBCs are those that are most important to the shaping of a high quality built environment.
2. FBCs encourage public participation because they allow citizens to see what will happen where—leading to a higher comfort level about greater density, for instance.
3. Because they can regulate development at the scale of an individual building or lot, FBCs encourage independent development by multiple property owners. This obviates the need for large land assemblies and the megaprojects that are frequently proposed for such parcels.
4. The built results of FBCs often reflect a diversity of architecture, materials, uses, and ownership that can only come from the actions of many independent players operating within a communally agreed-upon vision and legal framework.
5. FBCs work well in established communities because they effectively define and codify a neighborhood's existing "DNA." Vernacular building types can be easily replicated, promoting infill that is compatible with surrounding structures.
6. Non-professionals find FBCs easier to use than conventional zoning documents because they are much shorter, more concise, and organized for visual access and readability. This feature makes it easier for nonplanners to determine whether compliance has been achieved.
7. FBCs obviate the need for design guidelines, which are difficult to apply consistently, offer too much room for subjective interpretation, and can be difficult to enforce. They also require less oversight by discretionary review bodies, fostering a less politicized planning process that could deliver huge savings in time and money and reduce the risk of takings challenges.
8. FBCs may prove to be more enforceable than design guidelines. The stated purpose of FBCs is the shaping of a high quality public realm, a presumed public good that promotes healthy civic interaction. For that reason compliance with the codes can be enforced, not on the basis of aesthetics but because a failure to comply would diminish the good that is sought. While enforceability of development regulations has not been a problem in new growth areas controlled by private covenants, such matters can be problematic in already-urbanized areas due to legal conflicts with first amendment rights.

~ Peter Katz, President, Form-Based Codes Institute

Central Petaluma SmartCode, Fisher & Hall Urban Design, Crawford Multari & Clark Associates, Nelson/Nygaard Consulting Associates, Sargent Town Planning, and CharreteCenter.com

City of Azusa Draft Development Code, Crawford Multari & Clark and Moule & Polyzoides Architects

City of Grass Valley Draft Development Code, Opticos Design and Crawford Multari & Clark Associates

The Columbia Pike Special Revitalization District Form Based Code, Arlington, VA

Fort Myers Beach (FL), Dover, Kohl & Partners and Spikowski Planning Associates

The New Pleasant Hill BART Station Property Code,  
Lennertz Coyle and Associates and Geoffrey Ferrell Associates

Main Code Document (580 KB pdf)

Regulating Plan (170 KB pdf)

Architectural Standards (2.7 MB pdf)

The New Urban Code for Woodford County, Kentucky (4.8 MB pdf), Ferrell Rutherford Associates

North St. Lucie County (FL) Towns-Villages-Countryside Code, Dover, Kohl & Partners and Spikowski Planning Associates

Regulating Code for the Central Hercules Plan (4.0 MB pdf), Dover, Kohl & Partners

Sarasota County (FL) Mixed-Use Infill Code, Dover, Kohl & Partners and Spikowski Planning Associates

SmartCode v. 8.0, Duany Plater-Zyberk & Company

Sonoma Development Code (14.4 MB pdf), Crawford Multari & Clark Associates, Moule & Polyzoides, Jacobson & Wack, and Urban Design Studio

Ventura Downtown Specific Plan, Crawford Multari & Clark Associates, Moule & Polyzoides, and Nelson/Nygaard Consulting Associates

#### **FBCI Board Members' Code Sites**

Ferrell Madden Associates

Opticos Design, Inc.

Spikowski Planning Associates