

Form Based Code “Lite”

Focus on Streets, Blocks and Buildings.

THE IDEA OF A CODE BASED ON THE PHYSICAL FORM OF DEVELOPMENT.

Form based codes [FBCs] are becoming useful tools for cities to enact processes and standards that produce results more in line with the community’s vision than is possible with traditional zoning. Form based codes use an urban design approach to translate their vision into built results.

The Form Based Codes Institute (FBCI) is a non-profit professional organization dedicated to advancing the understanding and use of form-based codes. They provide the definition:

“A form-based code is a land development regulation that fosters predictable built results and a high-quality public realm by using physical form (rather than separation of uses) as the organizing principle for the code. A form-based code is a regulation, not a mere guideline, adopted into city, town, or county law. A form-based code offers a powerful alternative to conventional zoning regulation.”

THE CITY-WIDE LAND USE ENTITLEMENT SYSTEM.

Form based codes are very energetic and specific; they tend to overwhelm the city’s entire land development entitlement process. In fact, form based codes can be integral parts of the city’s regulatory system when designed to be the connection between vision and action.

- **Comprehensive Plan.** The city’s comprehensive plan can be the visionary expression of the city’s goals supported with objectives and policies for land use, infrastructure, open space and environmental resource enhancement. The comprehensive plan provides the policy basis for the city’s land development code.
 - € **City-wide Plans.** Comprehensive plans contain goals, objectives and policies that apply to all properties within the city; i.e., a neighborhood is a neighborhood. As long as the specifications in the plan are general, this works with the details resolved in the zoning process. In city’s with more unique neighborhoods, economic zones or villages, one set of standards may not fit all cases and small area plans are appropriate.
 - € **Small Area Plans.** Special small areas within the city may warrant special plans that are provided as special district plans, small area plans or specific area plans. In each case, the unique nature of the small area is recognized and planned for using this approach. Involve stakeholders to the extreme.
- **Land Development Code.** Traditionally, the LDC contains city-wide zoning, site plan and subdivision regulations that manage the specific use of land within zoning categories. Development standards are usually found in the LDC.

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- € **City-wide Zoning Categories.** Unique circumstances are handled with PD zoning, variances or conditional uses. Since these exceptions are usually approved to a specific land use or development plan, the resulting construction may be what the city expected, or not; depending on the standards applied to the exceptional situations and the design skills of the planning and zoning staff.
 - € **Special Zoning Districts.** Based on a small area plan, a unique set of use and development standards may be constructed for a downtown, a hospital campus or another unique area of the city. In many cases, Planned Development [PD] zoning serves this purpose, but PDs usually fall back on the processes and standards in the city-wide LDC with exceptions as necessary to respond to site conditions or unusual facility needs.
 - **Form Based Codes.** Form based codes provide an alternative to this traditional approach and focus on the built environment, buildings, streets and open spaces, more than on the uses inside the buildings.
 - € By codifying these processes and standards, the number of exceptions to the standard code is reduced along with the numbers of exceptions needed for individual developments.
 - € By focusing standards on the design and development of the streets, blocks and buildings, the city can:
 - produce development able to transition over time as the market evolves and, for example, turns an office site into an apartment site,
 - pay attention to adjacencies, buffers and off-site impacts that can accommodate a wide mix of uses therefore reducing the focus on land use and increasing the focus on the off-site effects of the impending building.
 - spend less time and effort amending codes in response to non-impactful use changes and more time on the prevention of obnoxious intrusions from one site to the next based on building design, location and access.
 - € Development Standards are included in the form base code. The standards for development are requirements. They address access, building locations, setbacks, building height, floor area ratios and residential densities.
 - **Design Guidelines.** By definition, guidelines are not mandatory. They reflect the city’s values and desires, not their demands. In most cases they deal with aesthetics, architectural standards in particular.
 - **FBC Content.** The content of a form based code does not vary much from that of a traditional land development code. The issues are similar. A review of several typical and actual form based codes yields the following generic table of contents:
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TYPICAL CONTENT OF A FORM BASED CODE.

1. Purpose
2. Administration
 - a. Applicability
 - b. Review Process
 - c. Incentives and Bonuses
3. Allowed Land Uses
 - a. Mixed-Uses
 - b. Single Uses
4. Development Standards
 - a. Blocks and Streets
 - Block Dimensions
 - Streets
 - Streetscapes
 - b. Buildings
 - Types
 - Architectural Standards
 - c. Open Spaces and Public Amenities
 - Green Areas
 - Stormwater Areas
 - Public Realm Improvements
 - d. Buffers
 - Inappropriate Adjacent Uses
 - Distance between Buildings, Setbacks regardless of use
 - Obstructions, Landscaping and Walls regardless of use
 - e. Signs
 - f. On-Site Access, Circulation and Parking
 - Vehicular Access
 - Transit Interfaces
 - Loading Areas
 - Pedestrian and Bicycle Accessways
 - Parking, Shared Parking and Off-site Parking
 - g. On-Site Landscaping

OVERALL SYSTEM DESIGN.

The city’s system designer for the city-wide land use entitlement system constructs the system by deciding which elements of the system contain which requirements. The comprehensive plan and the design guidelines are relatively straight forward in their content; the comprehensive plan and the LDC/FBC set goals, policies and standards; the design guidelines express features that are desirable but not required.

Another important strategic decision is whether to apply the form based code to the entire city or only to one or more special districts.

The preferred approach by many cities is to find a susceptible small area of the city and use it as a testing ground for the first form based code.

€ The advantage of this try-it-and-see approach is that the geography is smaller and easier to deal with, the stakeholders are more homogenous and the likelihood of succeeding to get an adopted code is greater.

€ The downside of tackling a small area first is the precedent impact; if weak standards are initially set it is much harder to be more demanding later for the other small areas or for the city-wide code.

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Another decision for the entitlement system designer is to choose which standards and processes are unique and should be applied only to a specific area of town and which are applicable city-wide. As an example, once a great sign ordinance is prepared for a small area of the city, why would it not benefit the city by being applied to the entire city?

Parking, stormwater and other infrastructure improvements may fall into this category with requirements being developed for a special case but proving to be more broadly useful.

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While perceived as an abomination by some purists, many cities are adopting the basic premise of the form based code approach without employing every detail of the program. The idea of form based code “lite” focuses on the need to get the streets, blocks and buildings right at the start with supporting features to follow or be addressed in tandem documents.

Basic infrastructure is a topic for the city or the CRA to address as a capital improvement. In the case of an existing downtown or village center or in the design of a new activity center, three features are critical to get right:

- **The Streets.** The street network in a downtown, activity center or village can be initially designed for ultimate build-out. This eliminates the diminution of sidewalk widths and on-street parking as the downtown grows.

- € A hierarchy of streets is appropriate with the classic “A”, “B” and “C: streets being designed in cross-section, including adequate space for generous sidewalks, street trees, well-located on-street parking zones and a connected network of streets, transit lanes, sidewalks and bikeways.
- € Existing centers and downtowns can design such a system and retro-fit streets to its form over time. One-way streets are to be avoided and eliminated. The life of a city is measured in decades if not centuries. Plans to correct or improve unpleasant conditions do not have to be realized in the next budget cycle.
- € Sometimes, connecting a disjointed street grid takes years for rights to be assembled, buildings to be removed, and piecemeal connections to be made. Steady, persistent and patient progress, over time, towards a planned outcome is the key.
- **The Blocks.** Block sizes and dimensions can be established in the initial design of an activity center or downtown. The purpose of this determination is to have a “universal” block that can be adapted to a wide variety of building types over the decades and centuries of the city’s life. Ideas differ on the correct size of “universal” blocks, but they range in length from 600’ to 900’; and in width from 250’ to 350’. These can be combined as super-blocks as long as the ability is perpetuated in the future to revert the super-block back to the “universal” size.

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- **The Buildings.** Two aspects of buildings can be established at the early stage of downtown and activity center planning: location and height.
 - € **Building location, or siting.** Consider the prospect that the downtown will be successful and building sites will need to be expanded. Placing the building in the center of the site surrounded with surface parking eliminates the possibility of expanding the existing building or adding a second building without demolishing the first building. Plan for success and design the second generation of development, or build-out for large sites, on every site.
 - € **Growth.** The plan for the second generation of development on a site places the initial building on the edge of the property. This creates a street edge and this preserves future building pads on the site which may include a parking deck. If the first building is the only building ever built on the site, no loss. If success happens and expansion or addition is needed, you are ready.
 - € **Building Height.** In most medium and small cities and towns of character, the market or the town insist on two story buildings and resist four story buildings. Visual surveys of traditional main streets in small cities and towns in central Florida, central Kentucky, northeast Alabama and northwest Georgia support this built form. One story main streets appear weak and four-plus story buildings in the 2-3 story setting look odd.
- € **Unifying Design Features.** Building height measured in feet can and should vary. A two-story municipal building may be quite tall to present its grandeur. A variety of heights within the 2-3 story range creates interest. A unifying factor determined in *The Resilient City* is that the standard height of the cornice line can provide coherence to a varied building stock along a street. Eclectic building architecture is a positive feature of a main street when unified by generally consistent sidewalks, on-street parking zones, street trees, lighting, signs, cornice heights and furniture.
- **Supporting Features.** Most form based codes also specify design details for supporting features including landscaping, on-site circulation and parking, signage, street lights and street furniture. This attention to detail emphasizes the importance of the streets and site access. Many codes also address architectural design and building colors. The form based code “lite” approach assigns these details to the future or to a tandem document that may not have the regulatory clout of an ordinance.

Once the physical dimensions and locations of the streets, blocks and buildings are established, these supporting features can be added later, changed out when obsolete, improved when budgets or merchant demand arises.

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Over a century, the supporting details and even the buildings will change in form and use, but if the streets and blocks are properly prepared, the town can grow with a minimum of disruption or expense.

Basic Infrastructure. Requirements for water, sewer, power, lighting and stormwater management can be provided in two ways. Either a specific chapter in the form based code for a specific area of town can be developed, funded and enforced; or the city-wide requirements can be amended to include the requirements for the downtown or activity center. In some cases, the requirements prepared for the specific area may be desirable for application to all properties and facilities in the entire city.

CONCLUSION.

Form based code “Lite” is a viable approach in many communities, specifically in many newly developing mixed-use centers. Getting the streets, blocks and buildings right at the start is the critical factor.

THE ACTION PLAN.

Back to the city-wide land use entitlement system.

- 1. Solidify the Vision for the City.** The entire process is intended to produce the city envisioned by its residents and businesses. Once the vision is articulated fully, widely understood and representative of the community’s consensus, then proceed.
- 2. Design the Complete System.** Design the entire land development entitlement system at the start. Determine the level of detail to be assigned to each element of the system.
- 3. Educate Stakeholders.** Examine and share codes and examples used by other cities.
- 4. Prepare Guiding Principles.** Establish vision-driven principles for each element of the system to distinguish the role of each:
 - a. The Comprehensive Plan has planning principles,
 - b. The Land Development Code and Form Based Code have development principles and
 - c. The Design Guidelines have design principles.
- 5. Be Prepared to Amend any and all Parts of the LDC.** Once the FBC has been drafted, there may be potential conflicts with the comprehensive plan, the city-wide LDC and the design guidelines. Amendments to the package may be necessary to make the several parts of the entitlement system fit tightly together and truly work as an integrated system. There may also be cases when a small area requirement has city-wide applicability, and conversely, some city-wide requirements may be better applied only to a small section of the city.
- 6. Establish a Metric System at the Outset.** When designing the complete system, design the system and standards for evaluating the effectiveness of the product. Then, monitor and course correct as necessary.

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SOURCES OF ADDITIONAL INFORMATION.

- Form-Based Codes: A Step-by-Step Guide for Communities
formbasedcodes.org/content/uploads/.../C-MAP-GuideforCommunities
- Form-Based Codes Institute - Fostering Time-tested Urban ...
formbasedcodes.org/
The Form-Based Codes Institute (FBCI) is a non-profit professional organization dedicated to advancing the understanding and use of form-based codes.
- Form-Based Codes 101 - Online courses taught by experts.
courses.planetizen.com/fbc

CHARACTER TOWN, VISUAL SURVEYS.

- **Central Florida:** Clermont, DeLand, Eustis, Kissimmee, Lake Mary, Mount Dora, Sanford, Tavares, Winter Garden and Winter Park.
- **Central Kentucky:** Paris, Midway, Versailles and Winchester.
- **Northeast Alabama:** Anniston, Fort Payne and Gadsden.
- **Northwest Georgia:** Calhoun, Dahlonega, Elijay, and Jasper.
- **Central Georgia:** Madison, Milledgeville, Statesboro, Tifton and Valdosta.