



Form Based Codes

What are Form Based Codes?

Form Based Codes offer a method of regulating land development as an alternative to conventional zoning. Since the inception of zoning in the early 20th Century, zoning has been the primary method of regulating the use of land by city and town governments of Massachusetts.

However, conventional zoning has limitations. Whereas the goal of conventional zoning is the separation of all differing land uses, form-based codes focus on the physical form of the buildings and public spaces, recognizing that areas with differing land uses can make attractive, unique, human-scaled, and sustainable places. These are the places where people wish to live, work and visit. Rather than focusing regulation on the underlying land use through zoning, Form Based Codes focus on forming desirable built environments.

Zoning and Form Based Codes

When zoning ordinances were adopted across the country during the 20th Century, they were largely responding to public health threats from heavy industrial uses within residential areas. In response, communities adopted what is often referred to as "Euclidean" zoning, which is the practice of separating residential, commercial, and industrial uses.

While there are many valid reasons to separate noxious or loud industrial uses from residential areas, the separation of all differing uses over the decades has resulted in low density residential and commercial sprawl, uniformity of neighborhoods, automobile dependency and disinvestment in downtowns and village centers. The use of Form Based Codes has become more prevalent in the past 20 years, recognizing that mixing a variety of compatible land uses together results in lively, sought after places.

Establishing a Form Based Code:

Zoning is a local regulation established by a town bylaw or city ordinance – form-based codes are typically incorporated into existing zoning regulations, as many communities choose to approach early implementation of form-based codes in a specific section of the city or town, such as a downtown or village center. The establishment of a form-based code is achieved by a supermajority vote at town meeting or city council.

Converting an area regulated by conventional zoning to one regulated by a form-based code is best done through a community-based planning and visioning process that begins well before any town meeting or city council action.

This process will identify community goals and create development standards that will implement the vision for the area.

BRPC PROGRAMS

Community Planning Program
berkshireplanning.org/programs

Benefits of Form Based Zoning

Form Based Codes provide a smart growth approach to development, encouraging investment, rehabilitating historic areas, and creating places that people want to live, work and visit.

Developers are most apt to invest in those areas that offer predictable permitting, clear outcomes, and a suitable return on investment. With its focus on the building forms themselves and very clear guidance through architectural standards, both the community and developer have a clear understanding of what is expected and allowed, resulting in streamlined permitting, building designs that enhance the character of the area, and quicker construction.

Form based codes can create unique, interesting, and vibrant communities that are walkable, bikeable, and close to shopping, dining, entertainment, transit, services, and employment centers.

As modern planning practice has shifted back to encouraging mixed-use development patterns, public sentiment has also shifted to supporting the creation of unique places where people have easy access to all these amenities.

By creating (or recreating) places that are not dependent on individual automobile trips to go from place to place, form-based code districts are environmentally friendly and far more sustainable than low-density residential neighborhoods, additionally offering the public health benefits of an attractive neighborhood designed for walking and biking.

For the municipality, form-based code districts offer financial benefits over conventional low-density residential neighborhoods and automobile-dependent, highway-accessed commercial development.

Denser and mixed-use neighborhoods generate substantially higher tax revenue compared to low-density development. Additionally, the costs of municipal services and capital improvements, such as water, sewer, and roads, are lessened because they are concentrated within a built-up area.

When form-based code districts are created in historic neighborhoods and communities, they can be a catalyst for revitalization, adaptive re-use of rehabilitated historic buildings, new infill construction and additions.

Examples:

Pittsfield

A form-based code was [established by the city of Pittsfield in 2021 for its downtown area](#). The goal of the change from conventional zoning was to remove barriers to the permitting process, reduce the focus on parking requirements, allow the adaptive re-use of buildings, and encourage the construction of appropriately scaled new construction compatible with the built environment. An expansion of the form-based code into the Westside neighborhood is underway.

Littleton

In 2021, Littleton adopted two form based code districts in the [the Village Common](#) and King Street Common areas.

Lowell

An early adopter in Massachusetts, the [Hamilton Canal District Form-Based Code](#) was established by City Council in 2009.

Northampton

Northampton opted for form based code district [for its downtown and Florence center](#).

Somerville

[Form based code was adopted by the Somerville City Council](#) in 2019, following the recommendations of its 2012 Master Plan. Over seven years, the city held hundreds of meetings with community members to reach consensus. The goal of the form-based code is to expand affordable housing, jobs, development, sustainability, and the creative economy in Somerville.