

TCRPC

Planning Toolkit Fact Sheet



Form Based Codes

INTRODUCTION

Form-Based Codes (FBC) are an alternative to traditional use-based zoning, focusing on the physical form of the corridor or community as the regulating principle instead of use. Form-Based Codes regulate the placement and form of buildings to shape public spaces and encourage human-scale, more walkable/bikeable/transit-friendly development.

There are five main elements of an FBC, according to the Form-Based Codes Institute:

1. regulating plan, which designates the character of an area;
2. public standards, specifications for sidewalks, streets and parks;
3. building standards, specifications for frontage and broad use requirements;
4. administration, application and project review process; and definitions.

A main purpose of the FBC is to create an appropriate form and scale for a corridor, neighborhood or entire municipality. FBCs are presented in both words and images which can help facilitate understanding for the developer, community members and reviewing staff.

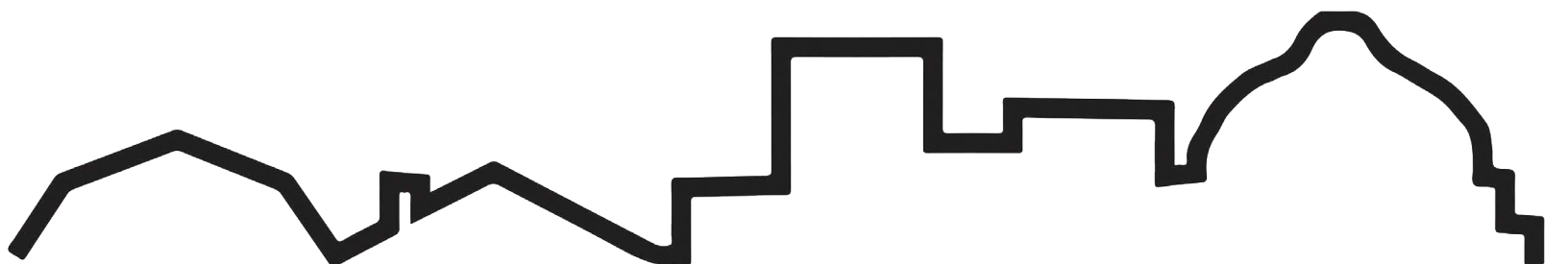
The regulating plan is the organizing feature of the FBC. Generally using the Urban-Rural Transect theory, developed by Andres Duany, the FBC regulates by starting with the most densely populated areas and continues outward to the most rural. Using the Transect allows the FBC to create different regulations for different types of development. Instead of following traditional zoning which regulates use, this FBC focuses on what the development will look like.

The process of creating an FBC requires a considerable amount of public participation. It is not uncommon to use a local storefront to encourage walk-in opinions as well as scheduled events. The advantage of public participation during the development of an FBC is increased levels of comfort with modified densities or building styles.

The integration of the FBC into a traditional zoning ordinance is possible. If the Code is to be used in a district or specific corridor, the regulations can be spliced into a larger zoning ordinance. This allows for a municipality to adopt an FBC without a complete rewrite of their zoning regulations. Flexibility in the application of the FBC allows it to be a dynamic tool. Generally, FBCs work best in more urban areas that are currently under-used, have development pressure, have a distinct character or history and where there is disinvestment. The wide range of locations where FBCs can be used is a product of how successful and adaptable the FBC is. The idea that “form follows function” has so far defined the built environment; FBCs flip this theory on its head by contending that “function follows form.”

BENEFITS

- Actively solicits significant public opinion and participation throughout the Code development process
- Creates pedestrian-scale communities, promotes mixed-use development
- Can protect the historic character of a community without making development impossible
- Uses easy to follow visual regulations instead of complicated ordinance language



DRAWBACKS

- Significant upfront costs including the drafting of the code and holding public charrettes and other meetings
- Gaining the buy-in from the community and developers is key to the success of a FBC and can be difficult if the Code does not represent the interests of the community
- Accepting that the predetermined form will not necessarily prevent development from occurring

PRACTICAL TIPS

- Define a clear area that could benefit from a Form-Based Code
- Use the resources available to promote to the community the idea and benefits of a Form-Based Code
- Contact a consulting firm that specializes in the development of Form-Based Codes



RESOURCES

Examples

- **Buffalo Green Code (Buffalo, NY)**
- **Canton Village Districts Form-Based Design Code (Canton, CT)**
- **Narbeth Borough Form-Based Code (Narbeth, PA)**
- **Cranberry Township, PA**
- **Lower Merion, PA**

Local Examples

- **Susquehanna Township, PA**
- **Millersburg Borough, PA**

Supporting Documents

- **Form-Based Codes Defined (Form-Based Codes Institute)**
- **A Step-by-Step Guide to Form-Based Codes (Form-Based Codes Institute)**
- **Standards of Practice for Form-Based Codes (Form-Based Codes Institute)**
- **6 Reasons Your City Needs a Form-Based Code (Strong Towns)**

RELATED TOOLKIT FACT SHEETS

- **Off-Street Parking Management**
- **Transit-Oriented Development**