

## Form-Based Code

Molly Donovan, University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension

Form-based code is a regulation of land use and development with a focus on the character and physical form of an area rather than the use of the buildings and separating uses. The code considers the visual impact of buildings, parking and the public space such as sidewalks and streets. Greater emphasis is placed on character, building features and the public spaces rather than traditional zonings emphasis on use of buildings. A form-based code is a regulation, not a mere guideline, adopted into city or town law.

## From Traditional Zoning to Form-based Code

Traditional zoning is characterized by segregation of land uses which are seen as incompatible. Separating uses was an effort to keep people safe and healthy particularly at a time when the impact from industrial uses (smoke, fire) was a real threat to residential uses. With traditional zoning, specific geographic areas are identified in a community and the zoning code stipulates standards and development limitations on the area. The zones are often identified as residential, commercial, industrial and a combination of residential and commercial. Residential uses, particularly single-family homes are often isolated from other types of development. Zoning codes identify permissible property uses within a zone and have limitations or controls on development intensity. Due to the separation of uses, a car is often necessary and this has led to sprawl in some communities. Public spaces and their value are not a focus of traditional zoning. As communities look for a mix of uses, vibrant public spaces, walkability and a sense of community, traditional zoning is seen as a barrier. Form-based codes are gaining popularity with communities who want to limit sprawl and focus on developing or enhancing a sense of place.

*Form-based code focuses on the character of a place not the use of the buildings. It considers the relationship between buildings, public space and the street.*



## Form-based code defined

Form-based code is a new way of thinking about development regulation and has gained support from architects, community planners and urban designers who are looking to concentrate development. It is based on the community's character and is informed by the community goals and needs. It allows for a mix of uses and acknowledges the relationship between a building, adjacent buildings and public space which everyone shares. Form-based code assumes that uses do not need to be segregated and can be compatible. The goal is to positively impact the physical form of a



community and not just control land uses. Form-based codes help places achieve more connected communities that preserves their history, protects its environment, and supports attractive, walkable downtowns abundant with businesses and social gathering places. It is important to note that form-based code is regulatory not advisory.

Focusing on a place in a community – such as a downtown - as a whole space or place where there is local character, walkable streets, inviting buildings, active space for sitting or play is the foundation of form-based code. There is a recognition that public space should be planned and it an important factor in creating a vibrant place. There is a strategic placement and orientation of buildings to maximize the public space and create this vibrant area.

Form-based codes are developed with citizen input in an open, participatory process, in fact, creating a vision is the first step. Both the vision for an area and the form-based code itself are done with citizen input. The visioning process includes consideration of building types, streets, parking, and size of blocks and relationship of buildings to public spaces.

## Components of a Form-based Code

Form-based code is composed of building form standards and public space standards mapped to a regulating plan. Components of Form-based code include:

**Regulation Plan:** The Regulating Plan includes building form standards and public space standards which are assigned to streets and blocks in the designated area. The regulating plan –including a map of area - shows the design regulations governing properties.

**Building Form Standards:** The Building Form Standards regulate distance of building to the sidewalk, building window area, height in relation to the street, front entrances and parking. Consideration is given to the impact of the building on public space and an underlying principal is that buildings should positively impact public spaces.

**Public Space Standards:** The Public Space Standards regulate the form of streets, squares, parks, greens, and sidewalks. Form-based code strives to support, create and enhance these spaces to create attractive community space to walk, bike, drive, sit, shop and learn and ensure that they relate to the buildings.

The Standards are presented as diagrams and written description to illustrate community intentions. Diagrams and illustrations are seen as more easily understood by property owners, developers, business owners, applicants and the public. An administrative section which clearly outlines the application and review process often leads to a quick review process for an applicant and cost savings.



Lancaster, NH

## Lancaster, NH: Form-based code in a Rural Downtown

Lancaster, NH is located in the northern part of NH at the junction of State Routes 2 and 3 and is the gateway to the Great North Woods region of the state. The town is 50 square miles in the Connecticut River Watershed and serves as the county seat for Coos County. Lancaster is a small town with a population just over 3300. It attracts visitors for its varied outdoor recreation opportunities and its attractive downtown Main Street which is defined by the architecturally attractive, older buildings and an interesting variety of shops.

The community values the history, look and feel of downtown and wanted to retain the character while allowing for change. The current, conventional zoning would not have protected the character and did not focus on downtown as a community space. Form-based code seemed to be the way to preserve the existing pattern of development as it focuses on the look and feel of downtown not the use of each building. Following a land use and regulation audit where form-based code was introduced, Lancaster secured a NH Community Planning Grant to begin the process to determine whether form-based code was right for the community and whether they would support the use of it for their downtown area.

Form-based code is generally considered as a tool more suitable for use in urban and large communities but has fit nicely into planning in Lancaster demonstrating its usefulness in large and small scale applications. Here the Form-based code is focused on the three distinct areas of the downtown and it is in place to protect the rural, small scale downtown architecture and sense of place. In a smaller community, the community input needed for developing the form-based code may be easier to gather.

### ***“What do you like about downtown” - Community Input is key to form-based code***

The development of form-based code is based on community input on the vision, components which are valued and characteristics to be preserved. Lancaster set out to talk to and more importantly, hear from the residents in Lancaster. The engagement strategy included a design charrette, public meetings, outreach to the business community, youth and the senior population. The design charrette allowed participants to see what the design of downtown would look like with form-based code. Property owners – many of who bought their building because they loved the property itself – were interviewed and supportive. The town planner met with high school students who said they valued what downtown looked like and were less concerned with the use in each building. The senior population had an opportunity to weigh in at a monthly meeting where they shared their stories of downtown and learned how Form-based code could protect it for future generations. The seniors also talked to their families, namely their adult children and a new group of residents became aware and supportive. All segments of the community wanted the look and feel of downtown to remain and be strengthened. Form-based code would address just this.

Following the many engagement sessions, the proposal to adopt Form-based code was brought to the voters in spring 2014. Voters approved this change as a way to preserve and enhance their downtown. Lancaster is now working to implement Form-based code as changes for downtown are considered.

### *Examples of form-based code in New Hampshire:*

Dover, NH: Dover recently adopted a form-based code to make its downtown more flexible for future development and redevelopment. To start this project, Dover planners interviewed stakeholders, determined base-line characteristics of Dover, held Charrettes, and conducted surveys. Check out some examples of form-based code in New Hampshire

Lancaster	<a href="http://resilienceplanning.net/form-based-code/">http://resilienceplanning.net/form-based-code/</a>
Londonderry	<a href="http://www.nh.gov/oep/resource-library/zoning/documents/londonderry-master-plan.pdf">http://www.nh.gov/oep/resource-library/zoning/documents/londonderry-master-plan.pdf</a>
Dover	<a href="http://www.dover.nh.gov/government/city-operations/planning/special-projects/form-based-code/index.html">http://www.dover.nh.gov/government/city-operations/planning/special-projects/form-based-code/index.html</a>
Portsmouth	<a href="http://planportsmouth.com/formbasedzoning.html">http://planportsmouth.com/formbasedzoning.html</a>

## Resources to learn more about Form-based code:

Form-based code Institute <http://formbasedcodes.org/>

List of Books about Form-Based Code: <http://formbasedcodes.org/books> and webinars  
<http://formbasedcodes.org/courses-webinars>

Advantages of a Form-based code: <http://www.useful-community-development.org/form-based-code.html>. Copyright 2014, Nancy Thompson

Form-Based Codes? You're not alone <http://www.placemakers.com/how-we-teach/codes-study/>

Strategies for project review under a form-based code by George J. Proakis, Better! Cities & Towns. September 2013. <http://bettercities.net/article/strategies-project-review-under-form-based-code-20858>

City of Dover, NH Form-based code: <http://www.dover.nh.gov/government/city-operations/planning/special-projects/form-based-code/index.html>

Place Making with Form-Based Codes by Mary E. Madden and Bill Spikowski and published by Urban Land Institute. September 2006.

<http://www.growsmartri.org/training/Place%20Making%20with%20Form%20Based%20Code%20Article%20-%20Urban%20Land%202006.pdf>

Congress for New Urbanism: Codifying the New Urbanism. [www.cnu.org](http://www.cnu.org)

Form-Based Codes: Implementing Smart Growth. Local Government Commission. [www.lgc.org](http://www.lgc.org)

Nashua Regional Planning Commission: Form-Based Codes 2006.  
[http://www.nashuarpc.org/files/9413/9042/4965/FS3\\_formcodes.pdf](http://www.nashuarpc.org/files/9413/9042/4965/FS3_formcodes.pdf)

### For More Information:

**Molly E. Donovan**  
UNH Cooperative Extension  
Molly.Donovan@unh.edu  
603.862.5046  
[www.extension.unh.edu](http://www.extension.unh.edu)

**George O. Reagan**  
New Hampshire Housing  
greagan@nhhfa.org  
603.310.9253  
[www.nhhfa.org](http://www.nhhfa.org)

For copies of this Information Brief  
or others in the series go to:  
[www.nhcityplanner.org](http://www.nhcityplanner.org)

The University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension is an equal opportunity educator and employer. University of New Hampshire, U.S. Department of Agriculture and N.H. Counties cooperating.

**The production of this Issue Brief was supported by HUD Community Challenge Planning Grant No. FR-5500-N-33.**

The work that provided the basis for this publication was supported by funding under an award with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The substance and findings of the work are dedicated to the public. The author and publisher are solely responsible for the accuracy of the statements and interpretations contained in this publication. Such interpretations do not necessarily reflect the views of the Government.