SMART GROWTH RESULTS FOR URBAN, SUBURBAN AND RURAL COMMUNITIES

Over the next 15 years we can make smart growth land use patterns the dominant trend in the United States by changing the rules for private and public development. As it stands now, we can intend to bring about Smart Growth, but intentions are not enough: we must – and can – require it.

Zoning, by its very nature, requires land to be separated into use-zones resulting in automobiles being the dominant mode of transportation. In contrast, Form-Based Coding is being widely used to implement Smart Growth. In urban areas Form-Based Codes can require mixed-use neighborhoods that offer most needs and desired uses within a walking distance. Suburban locations are being repaired to include town centers, more interconnected street patterns, and design requirements that mandate appropriate transitions between different densities. Those in rural areas now have the tools to protect places designated to remain rural while planning nodes of future growth that will be concentrated, mixed-use and walkable when they develop. Such vibrant and diverse places are in high demand and have held or even increased in value in this economic downturn. The Form-Based Codes Institute proposes the following 3-stage roadmap to Smart Growth: (1) Increasing Awareness of the Need for Change (2) Becoming Knowledgeable About Solutions and (3) Implementing the Solutions.

Increasing Awareness of the Need for Change
In August of 2006 Chris Nelson (Arthur C. Nelson, Director Metropolitan Research Center, City & Metropolitan Planning, University of Utah), shared his research during a Form-Based Coding course in Alexandria, Virginia. His findings identified a strong demand for smaller homes in walkable neighborhoods close to transit and mixed-use. Between then and 2040 he projected demand for small-lot attached housing to reach 60.6 million units, nearly double the existing supply. Since 2006 a growing body of evidence indicates young adults want to live near the city center and/or close to transit; empty-nesters share this preference.

Increased demand is reflected in higher values. Christopher Leinberger, in a New York Times opinion piece published 25 May 2012, cited a Brookings Institution study when he wrote “There is a five-step “ladder” of walkability, from least to most walkable. On average, each step up the walkability ladder adds $9 per square foot to annual office rents, $7 per square foot to retail rents, more than $300 per month to apartment rents and nearly $82 per square foot to home values.” While market demand supports the goals of smart growth our current land regulations are skewed to support large lot, detached, suburban style sprawl.

Zoning is a blunt tool that lacks the ability for the fine-tuned planning needed to insure smart growth and good places. A stop-gap has been used for many years by those developers who were able to acquire large parcels of land for major mixed-use projects: the Planned Unit Development. A PUD (or Planned Development – PD) enables the developer and local planning department to negotiate and ultimately agree on the public and private design rules, a somewhat successful way to circumvent the lack of predictability otherwise available under zoning laws. But this approach has drawbacks: (1) it doesn’t address those neighborhoods with multiple property owners, (2) design and rules for the area surrounding the PUD are mostly ignored even though the adjacent area will bear at least some impact from the resulting development—for good or ill; (3) neither the local government nor the developer has assurance going into the project negotiations of the outcome, and (4) the resulting zoning code becomes almost unintelligible because of all the PUD exceptions.
Form-Based Coding addresses the barriers zoning provides in a much better way. A Form-Based Code is prescriptive: it mandates what must be done in order to achieve a shared vision agreed upon for each urban, suburban or rural location. The shared vision then determines the rules for the private and public spaces. Development desired is stipulated for each location on a block-by-block basis, including building placement, height, use (by floor) and elements (i.e. a porch or stoop, roof-line). Public space design is also agreed upon and required, including the location and standards for streets, sidewalks, trees lights and parking. Parks, squares and other public gathering places are designated as well.

Property owners know in advance what will be easily approved, allowing individual projects to move ahead much more quickly. In addition, nearby property owners are assured the project approved will comply with the shared vision and therefore any impact on their own properties will be a positive one. Neighborhood associations and residents do not have to worry about a “bait and switch” where the developer shows drawings of one approach but then ends up deleting promised features that gained neighborhood approval due to budget considerations. This certainty creates a climate that encourages additional investment by property owners.

On a citywide or regional scale, the disposition of streets and other transportation systems is an essential determinant of the level of smart growth possible. In his book Urbanism and Climate Change Peter Calthorpe writes “Traditional urbanism, even without green technology, is better than green sprawl... Compared to a green home in a sprawl location, a townhome in a village will consume 58% less energy while a condo in the city will use 73% less energy.” Thus maintaining or creating short blocks with multiple intersections is important. Further, increased density that will make a location more lively and enable transit makes a major difference.

Being aware of the ingredients that enable smart growth, the barriers presented by conventional zoning tools, and the increased use of Form-Based Coding as a more effective alternative is the first step on this roadmap to Smart Growth.

**Becoming Knowledgeable About Solutions**

Two EPA publications lay out the ingredients needed for Smart Growth: Essential Smart Growth Fixes for Urban and Suburban Zoning Codes (November, 2009) and Essential Smart Growth Fixes for Rural Planning, Zoning ad Development Codes (February 2012). It is the thesis of this paper that the recommendations in these publications can most effectively be implemented through Form-Based Coding rather than zoning.

What is a Form-Based Code and how is it put together? Form-Based Codes foster 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. They are regulations, not mere guidelines. They are adopted into city or county law. Form-Based Codes are an alternative to conventional zoning.

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 micromanagement and segregation of land uses, and the control of development intensity through abstract
and uncoordinated parameters (e.g., FAR, dwellings per acre, setbacks, parking ratios, traffic LOS) to the neglect of an integrated built form. Not to be confused with design guidelines or general statements of policy, Form-Based Codes are regulatory, not advisory.

A Form-Based Code commonly includes a Regulating Plan. This is a plan or map of the regulated area designating the locations where different building form and public space standards apply, based on clear community intentions regarding the physical character of the area being coded.

Approximately 350 Form-Based Codes have been adopted nation-wide. Miami was the first large city to adopt a citywide Form-Based Code in 2010 and since then citywide adoption has become more prevalent. Most cities, however, adopt Form-Based Coding one neighborhood at a time, often beginning with a traditional neighborhood or downtown core to preserve and/or revitalize the existing development patterns. Recent examples include Livermore, California, where the code is used for downtown and older neighborhood revitalization and Peoria, Illinois where the code has been applied to an abandoned manufacturing area adjacent to the downtown core that, with its handsome brick buildings, is ripe for redevelopment as an entertainment and residential loft district.

Suburban FBCs are often adopted to create a town center where none existed before. An early example of such a code (2000) is the Winter Springs, Florida code. Excellent FBCs for rural areas have also been adopted in Florida by St. Lucie County and Lee County to head-off sprawling development nearby. These codes preserve open space and agriculture while providing for compact development pockets.

Codes adopted before the current economic downturn demonstrate the value of Form-Based Coding through the quality of the development results on the ground. A high proportion of codes, however, have yet to see much activity having been adopted during the depressed real estate market. As the market improves and development resumes, the evidence on the ground will increase the demand for the mixed-use, walkable, vibrant places use of Form-Based Coding can insure.

**Implementing Solutions**
How does one successfully develop a vision and its plan, and then the regulations to enforce the plan? Perhaps the most important ingredient is to have or develop the support of community leaders (i.e. the mayor, city council and/or chamber of commerce) for a Form-Based Code. Be aware undertaking a FBC is more time-consuming and financially expensive up-front than zoning but once it is adopted, those costs will be recouped by lower costs in administration.

Once the decision is made to use Form-Based Coding, the first step is to determine the code location. It is best to select a place where a new plan is needed and can make a difference. Are production homebuilders buying up prime farmland, preparing for more sprawling subdivisions? Has disinvestment been occurring because property owners are unsure what is going to happen in the neighborhood as a whole? Have incursions of inappropriate construction eroded the character of an area that was previously loved and cohesive? These are just a few of the circumstances that might make a location a good place for a community’s first Form-Based Code.

The next step is to convene a team of experts, persons in the public and/or private sector who have experience doing Form-Based Coding, the more experienced the better. Read the codes they have done and go see the results on the ground if possible. Ideally find persons with expertise in architecture/urban
design, planning, public participation/charrette training, transportation analysis, economic and market research, and law. The Form-Based Codes Institute website has a template for a Request for Qualifications that can be a helpful reference when selecting team members.

Once the team is established it is time to study the area selected. Document and photograph the area to fully understand all the existing conditions. Obtain maps that show utility locations, topography, blocks, lots, built improvements, historic districts, sensitive environmental locations and more. Involve the city and county departments (planning, economic development, public works, transportation, police and fire) to learn as much as possible from them. Include them in the process moving forward as their support will be needed to adopt and implement the code.

Armed with a thorough understanding of the place to be coded, bring in the public to discuss what people like, what should stay the same, what should be changed. Through a series of public discussions and workshops the expert team can explain constraints, opportunities, and what trade-offs must be considered. For example, if more parking is desired, less walkability and transit will result. Larger lots for single-family residents makes for low density precluding the restaurants and other amenities desired. To insure widespread public participation use the charrette process: a series of meetings over a compressed period of time that usually leads to consensus. The National Charrette Institute (NCI) is the source for more information and training.

Once a consensus has been developed an Illustrative Plan is often used to identify the location of the plan elements. The Form-Based Code and Regulating Plan are based on this Illustrative Plan and are the legal documents to be adopted, requiring the vision to be realized. The Form-Based Code contains the standard and regulation details. The Regulating Plan ties the public and private space regulations and standards to specific locations. Used together the Regulating Plan and the Form-Based Code make it easy to identify the requirements for development at any location. A hallmark of a Form-Based Code is its ease of use. Standards are depicted using graphics and unambiguous language:

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**Graphic and Easy to Understand**

![Building-Form Standards](Benicia Downtown Mixed-Use Master Plan (Opticos Design and Crawford, Multari & Clark))

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**Form-Based Codes | Building-Form Standards**

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Implementing the Solutions
Throughout the code development process local staff needs to be involved sufficiently to thoroughly understand all aspects of the code and to learn how to administer it. In most cases the review process is markedly shorter than it would be under zoning as the rules are clear about what must be done to comply with the code. If code requirements are met, the project is usually approved. The Form-Based Code will specify the degree of authority delegated to planners; in many cases project approval can be granted administratively, without further public hearings.

With Form-Based Coding everyone can win: property owners, citizens and public officials and administrators. Form-Based Code models that implement Smart Growth already exist. By working together we can develop many more examples of how to design and require increasingly sophisticated Smart Growth solutions to urban, suburban and rural locations nationwide.