# FISHER INSIGHT

## Insight on a National Trend: Form-Based Codes

It's been over 100 years since zoning codes were officially recognized as a means for communities to regulate development.  While the impetus for these conventional codes was to segregate incompatible land uses, decades of their application has resulted in unintended consequences: automobile dependence, traffic congestion, isolated neighborhoods, environmental degradation, excess land consumption, and demolition of historic building stock.

Communities throughout the country have been seeking alternatives to their conventional zoning codes, and for many, form-based codes represent a new path forward. Form-based codes offer communities numerous benefits



*Image Credit: City of Buffalo*

over conventional codes because they focus on physical form rather than separation of uses.  Form-based codes also help foster predictable built results and a high quality public realm, using contextual cues and mixed uses, while accommodating shifts in market demand.

While form-based codes have been available as a zoning approach for more than 30 years, there are a number of common misconceptions associated with them, including they allow any type of use,  are too generic, are untested, and are too difficult to understand. For communities transitioning from a conventional to a form-based code, these misconceptions should be addressed early in the code rewrite process to avoid any potential pitfalls and delays. This can be overcome through a public engagement and education process to establish a connection between the tools of form-based codes and their ability to realize a community's vision.

Once community buy-in is established, drafting code language often requires a diverse and experienced consultant team which can assist a community in navigating this challenging and time-consuming process. The consultant team typically starts with a detailed assessment of the community's existing built environment including urban forms, building types, architectural details, and street types.  A clear community vision is also needed to define how the built environment should change over time. In some cases, the community's comprehensive plan may already include this assessment and vision.  Once

language is drafted, the consultant team engages the community to explain the purpose and intent of the language and to gather public comment. The final code requires review under the State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQRA) and adoption by the local governing body.

While the code writing process can be challenging, the right team that understands best practices, the code development process, the means to minimize risk, and the tools for successful implementation can be beneficial to the process. Fisher's team of planners and zoning experts have recently worked with the City of Buffalo in the development of its city-wide form-based code widely known as the "Green Code."  The Fisher team worked with the City to develop the land use plan and code language, conduct a build-out analysis and environmental review, and assist with the code implementation process.  Buffalo's new form-based code is having a profound impact on the City, enhancing the quality of the built environment and contributing to the City's renaissance.

If you are interested in knowing more about form-based codes or would like assistance in developing a form-based code for your community, please contact us.

Frank J. Armento, AICP CEP
716.858.1234 | farmento@fisherassoc.com