Downtown Colorado Springs Form-Based Code Plan

**WHY FORM-BASED CODE?**
A new code for the heart of Downtown Colorado Springs

For more information visit
www.springsgov.com/planning
and click on Downtown Planning Projects

or

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Downtown Colorado Springs

Enhancing the existing Downtown experience was one of the most important planning decisions made by the City of Colorado Springs and its citizens in recent years. Encouraging compact, mixed-use, and pedestrian-friendly revitalization efforts throughout Downtown will create more livable neighborhoods and a healthy vibrant urban place for all to enjoy. As many of the nation’s downtowns suffer, a new approach to zoning is expected to play a key role in helping the City of Colorado Springs plan for progress and maintain its unique sense of place. Downtown’s Form-Based Code Plan is intended to build upon the success of our urban core and expand the mixture and density of uses to improve Downtown’s vibrant pedestrian character. It is a key element in the City’s vision to promote economic vitality, sustainable growth, and a better quality of life for all citizens.

Bridging the Past with the Present

Our current zoning structure was created roughly 100 years ago in response to problems associated with overcrowding in our central cities and intrusion of heavy industrial uses into retail and residential areas. In recent years, many community leaders, professionals and developers have been frustrated by zoning, especially in urban areas. The current zoning regulations make redevelopment of our Downtown difficult by applying standards more suitable for suburban areas. Larger setbacks and excessive parking requirements that now apply to our Downtown make many existing urban buildings and spaces non-conforming. Existing zoning requirements are ineffective at ensuring high-quality and pedestrian-friendly buildings. While zoning alone can not guarantee good design, it is a significant contributor. An increasing number of Downtown communities, such as Albuquerque, Miami, Dallas, and Portland, have looked to different regulations in an effort to improve the design of sites and buildings, ultimately fostering a more vibrant and dynamic urban experience for its citizens and visitors to enjoy.

What are the key next steps?

With the support of downtown property owners and stakeholders, the draft regulations could be adopted by City Council to replace the existing zoning regulations. Before that occurs, City Staff will be conducting a series of public meetings and outreach efforts over the coming months to gather input and support for the draft documents. Public hearings at the City’s Planning Commission and City Council must also occur before these documents can be approved and implemented. For more information, stop by the 3rd floor in the City Administration Building located on 30 S. Nevada Street or visit the website at www.springsgov.com/planning and click on "Downtown Planning Projects."

What is the history of the Downtown Form-Based Code initiative?

The Design-Based Code Plan builds upon and implements the success of the Imagine Downtown Plan. This is also true for its sister project, a new Master Plan for Downtown.

The Imagine Downtown Plan process began just over 3 years ago when residents, downtown property owners, elected officials, developers, local leaders, and City Staff worked together to create a vision for the future of downtown Colorado Springs. After nearly 18 months of effort, with nearly 400 participants, the Imagine Downtown Plan was finalized and adopted by the Downtown Development Authority as their “plan of development.” However, the Imagine Downtown Plan did not qualify as a formal Master Plan leaving the 1992 Downtown Action Plan as the official planning document for Downtown Colorado Springs. In recent months downtown stakeholders have been working with City Staff to modify the Imagine Downtown Plan to include the necessary components to qualify as an official Master Plan and replace the 15 year-old Downtown Action Plan.

To implement many of the policies and objectives of the new Master Plan, City Staff and a group of Downtown stakeholders drafted a series of new development standards, referred to as “form-based standards.” The Downtown Colorado Springs Form-Based Code Plan was created to apply specifically to our urban core in an effort to build a more vibrant, dense, and balanced Downtown experience for all to enjoy.

How are Form-Based Codes structured?
Text, Graphics, and Regulating Plan

The Form-Based Code document itself is much easier to read and understand than the current code. In large part this is due to the heavy graphic component to the Form-Based Code Plan. Drawings and pictures are used to help explain the desired urban form. In addition, the language within the Form-Based Code Plan is designed to be understood without the help of a professional architect or planner.

The form-based code is based upon a regulating plan which functions similarly to a zoning map, except it provides greater amount of specificity to the building placement and envelope, public spaces, and block dimensions. There is also a section that provides incentives for innovative and socially conscious development efforts.

What are the benefits to Colorado Springs?

A form-based code can meet community objectives for better and distinct design within the Downtown, but allow more flexibility for developers to respond to the changing markets for various uses. The code is designed to create a win-win for everyone as it inspires economic and social reinvestment in the heart of our City.

A form-based code supports “good” urban projects by creating a regulating plan that sets forth prescriptive building form requirements. Applications that comply with the community vision outlined in the form-based code can be approved administratively and in less time than the current process. If the proposed development project complies with the requirements within the form-based code, there should be little, if any, room for discretion.

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A New Approach: Form-Based Codes

Form-based codes are the latest innovative technique to re-examine the underlying zoning principle. Instead of focusing on separating uses, form-based codes focus on creating the proper urban form, wherein a mixture of uses can flourish. The Form-Based Codes Institute defines form-based codes as “a method of regulating development to achieve a specific urban form. Form-Based Codes create a predictable public realm primarily by controlling physical form, with a lesser focus on land use, through city or county regulations.” Form-based codes excel beyond traditional zoning by addressing the role that individual buildings serve in shaping the public realm. While form-based codes are still fairly new, over 150 communities across the country have already utilized them to improve local development projects.

Traditional Zoning v. Form-Based Code

Unlike traditional zoning that emphasizes separate land uses, form-based codes focus on building form as it relates to the public streetscape and adjacent properties. Form-based codes rely on design and orientation, instead of strict land use separation, as a way to achieve a mixture of compatible uses within an urban community. Form-based code focuses on more than the use and dimensional requirements of an individual lot. Form-based codes regulates both private and public spaces, such as city municipal buildings, plazas, and the design of the sidewalk areas, as opposed to traditional zoning which is only concerned with the private realm.

Traditional zoning is often reactive since it is intended to prevent development deemed to be inappropriate. As a result traditional zoning has limited ability to effect change. Form-based codes are more prescriptive and do a better job of describing the form desired by the community. Form-based codes create predictability for both the developer and neighboring property owners by utilizing clear, concise, and quantifiable project standards. This increase in predictability can spur revitalization by reducing the amount of risk associated with individual projects. The result is downtown development that encourages pedestrian activity, quality buildings, and local investment.
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