

New resource on form-based codes is a practical guide for all communities

Municipalities with a small or non-existent planning staff will find this form-based code resource helpful for learning the basics and getting a handle on how to request assistance from planning consultants.

Posted on **January 13, 2014** by [Brad Neumann](#), Michigan State University Extension

A new resource by the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) is a practical guide for communities considering preparing a form-based code. The resource [Form-Based Codes: A Step-by-Step Guide for Communities \(pdf\)](#) is intended to be used by communities within the CMAP's regional planning jurisdiction and was prepared as an implementation strategy for the GO TO 2040 comprehensive regional plan. However, this Guide will be useful to communities throughout the nation and is particularly well-suited for smaller communities that might lack professional planning staff.

The resource is not a 'how-to guide' for inexperienced municipal planning staff or consulting planners to prepare a world-class form-based code, but rather an educational document for communities that are considering preparing a request for proposals or request for qualifications to have a form-based code prepared. A section in the Guide titled 'Who Should Use This Handbook' reads: "Municipalities that educate themselves on the typical steps that are necessary will be in a better position to gauge the amount of outside assistance that is needed (and the amount of funding that will be required), write a more precise request for proposals (RFP), and evaluate consulting firms bidding for the project."

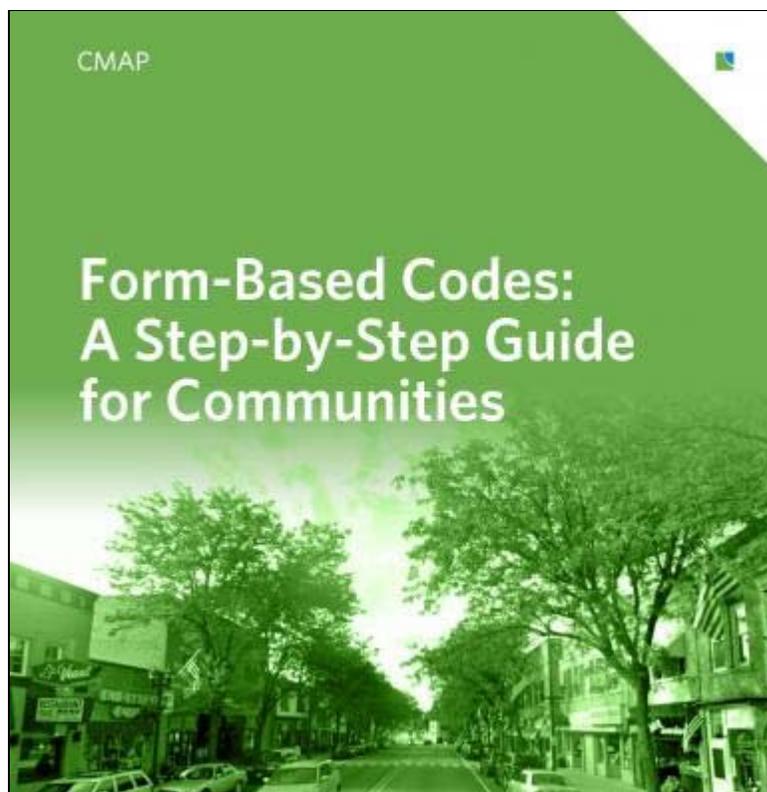




Photo: Form-Based Codes: A Step-by-Step Guide for Communities cover image

As an educational resource, the Guide contrasts form-based codes from conventional zoning and provides some history on the evolution of both. It then asks the reader to consider whether current regulations are sufficient in the community based on whether there is satisfaction with the built environment of the community. If the current state of the community's buildings, streets, and public spaces are satisfactory, likely the existing regulations in place are doing their job to maintain the character that residents appreciate. In this case, a form-based code may not be necessary, unless there is anticipated new development pressure that could compromise the existing community character. If the built environment is not satisfactory, then the current regulations are probably inadequate and a form-based code may be the tool needed to shape the physical form and character of new development.

In a general but very comprehensive way, the guide outlines the steps to preparing a form-based code:

- **Step 1: Scoping** - defines the area of the community to be addressed through the form-based code and the extent to which form-based codes interact with existing regulations.
- **Step 2: Assessing Existing Conditions** - documents and analyzes the community's existing urban form at different scales, providing a basis for the creation of the form-based code.
- **Step 3: Visioning and Creating Regulations** - defines the community's vision for its future and determines the specific regulations and procedures of the form-based code.

The three steps comprise the substantive core of the Guide and provide the lay reader with a foundational set of definitions, description, and examples to understand the basics of form-based codes. Numerous graphics and tables from form-based codes of communities around the country are also plentiful, which give the lay reader necessary visuals for understanding.

The Guide concludes with a listing of additional resources for learning more about form-based codes, including the [Form-Based Codes Institute](http://www.formbasedcodes.org/) (<http://www.formbasedcodes.org/>) and their three educational programs – FBC 101: ABCs of FBCs Online; FBC 201: Preparing a Form-Based Code – Design Considerations; and FBC 301: Completing, Adopting and Administering the Code.

[Michigan State University Extension](#) (/) is another source of training of form-based codes and Placemaking. Visit the [MIplace](http://miplace.org/) (<http://miplace.org/>) partnership website or contact a [MSU Extension land use educator](#) (/program/info/land_use_education_services) to request a local training program.

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