

HOUSING SUPPLY SOLUTIONS FOR CITY LEADERS LAND USE AND REGULATIONS

Form-Based Codes

The acute housing supply shortage of almost [4 million](#) units in the United States demands urgent action. Barriers to increasing housing supply exist across multiple sectors, including finance, construction, land use and regulations, infrastructure and workforce. In this series of fact sheets, NLC offers context, solutions and case studies for city leaders seeking to address these barriers and create more housing more efficiently and at lower costs. This Housing Supply Accelerator Fact Sheet series explores solutions in three critical areas: construction and development; land use and regulations; and finance.

Key Takeaways

- ◆ Form-based codes can help cities create walkable, mixed-use neighborhoods by regulating the form and placement of buildings rather than just land use.
- ◆ These codes enable more diverse and attainable housing options through clearer standards and streamlined approvals.
- ◆ Cities that adopt form-based codes can help meet market demand for more vibrant, connected communities.

Background

For many communities, addressing local housing shortages will require revisiting zoning ordinances, building codes, and permitting processes to increase the permissibility of diverse housing types.

Form-based codes are an alternative or complementary approach to land development regulation that emphasize the physical character of development — its form — and how it relates to the public realm, rather than focusing primarily on land use. Unlike conventional zoning, which tends to separate land uses and regulate density, form-based codes are designed to shape the built environment to create predictable and desirable outcomes for streetscapes, neighborhoods and public spaces.

Form-based codes are [legally binding regulations](#) that provide municipalities with a powerful tool for guiding development. [A typical form-based code includes](#) a regulating plan, building form standards, public space standards, a glossary of technical terms and a clearly defined project review process. Some codes also incorporate standards for environmental resources, signage, architecture and landscaping standards.

The form-based code model was developed in the late 20th century as an alternative to traditional zoning regulations that led to sprawling patterns of development. Form-based codes foster more mixed-use, walkable and human-scale communities. By focusing on building form and the public realm, form-based codes allow cities to bring their community vision to life, guiding housing growth in a way that reflects local priorities.

The Benefits for Cities and Their Residents

More Certainty for Cities.

Form-based codes provide communities with more certainty about what gets built and how it fits into the fabric of the neighborhood. By prioritizing the physical form of buildings and their relationship to streets and public spaces rather than focusing narrowly on land use, form-based codes promote the development of vibrant, mixed-use and pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods. Cities also can use form-based codes to prioritize the types of housing they want to see, such as neighborhood-scale options like duplexes, townhomes, accessory dwelling units and small multifamily units.

More Walkable, Livable Neighborhoods.

Form-based codes support holistic, neighborhood-by-neighborhood planning, considering housing diversity, walkability, transit access and economic potential together. Instead of concentrating new housing in a few designated zones, this approach enables [infill development](#) and residential renovation across the city. This creates more opportunities for housing that fits the local context, whether it's a duplex on a residential block, an accessory dwelling unit in a backyard, or small multifamily buildings near transit.



Predictability for Developers.

Form-based codes provide [greater predictability for developers](#). With clearly defined standards and review processes, cities can reduce the risk for developers and create a clearer path to project approvals. Form-based codes also can help lower development costs and increase housing attainability for a broader range of residents.

Support for Diverse Housing Types.

While zoning reform alone won't solve the housing crisis, it is a necessary foundation. Expanding the number and variety of homes is essential for restoring balance and affordability to the housing market. [Form-based codes support this goal](#) by encouraging compact, connected development patterns and assuring that housing is integrated with the amenities, services and public spaces that make neighborhoods thrive. This type of development not only benefits residents but also supports local businesses by generating the customer base they need to succeed.

Did You Know?

Cities with diverse housing options and strong public spaces are better positioned to meet growing market demand. Form-based code development aligns with [today's housing preferences](#) for walkable neighborhoods, vibrant public spaces, and a mix of housing types sought by both renters and homebuyers.

According to a 2023 [National Association of Realtors \(NAR\) survey](#), 79% of Americans said being within an easy walk of shops, parks and other places is very or somewhat important. Additionally, 53% said they would prefer an attached home in a walkable neighborhood over a single-family home in a less walkable area.

Form-based codes help cities deliver on this demand by enabling housing that's integrated with amenities, transit and vibrant public spaces, creating places where people want to live.

Cities can pair form-based codes with pre-approved building plans to streamline approvals and ensure high-quality design of neighborhood-scale housing types.



Case Studies

Iowa City, Iowa (Population: 75,678)

The Iowa City Council unanimously approved amending the city's zoning code and the city's [South District Comprehensive Plan](#) to implement a "form-based code" for 900 acres. The goal of this code is to enhance diversity in the South District's housing supply by encouraging the development of more house-scale rental units and fewer single-family homes.

One anticipated result of adopting the code is that Iowa City may see an increase in "neighborhood-scale" or "missing-middle" housing.* The code considers the character and visual streetscape of the neighborhood and focuses on how elements will contribute or detract from it. Form-based zoning distinctively focuses on the development's physical form and its relationship to the street and public realm, shifting away from a primary focus on land use and development type.

The city wants to use this new code to focus on creating neighborhoods that are pedestrian friendly, preserving environmental resources, allowing a variety of housing types and allowing for the adoption of these regulations in other areas of the city.

Kingston, New York (Population: 24,069)

The City of Kingston adopted a citywide zoning code, called [Kingston Forward](#), to replace its existing zoning code. Kingston Forward is a form-based code that regulates the location, design, alteration, occupancy, land use and structures in relation to the existing neighborhood. The new code is intended to encourage more diverse types of housing while being mindful of the visual characteristics of the neighborhood. The city believes this code will encourage diverse housing types, mixed-use developments, and neighborhood walkability while still preserving historic building patterns and open spaces. The code was developed during a three-year period with consulting firm Dover, Kohl & Partners and community input organized by the Kingston Code Reform Advocates.

The code supports multifamily and infill developments, such as duplexes, townhouses, "live-work" housing types, and accessory dwelling units. These changes reduce barriers to the creation of housing at every income level. The code will also end minimum parking requirements, streamline the development approval process, create flexible development standards, contribute to the city's walkability, and allow for many types of mixed-use developments.

* "Neighborhood-scale housing" refers to housing that is appropriately sized and designed to fit within the scale and character of existing single-family residential neighborhoods. This term is often used interchangeably with "missing middle housing" and includes building types such as accessory dwelling units (ADUs), duplexes, triplexes, fourplexes, cottage courts, and small-lot homes.

Next Steps for Your City

Neighborhoods thrive when housing is connected to other amenities and services. Cities interested in adopting form-based codes should approach housing growth holistically, focusing on neighborhood character and long-term resilience. Consider the following next steps for your city:

1. Assess and align your city's code with a community vision.

Engage with residents and other stakeholders to identify shared priorities for neighborhood form, housing diversity, walkability and public spaces.

2. Pilot your form-based code in priority areas.

Start with a pilot district such as a transit corridor, downtown or underutilized area where you see public support and development interest.

3. Update zoning and related regulations.

Replace or revise outdated zoning districts with form-based standards that permit a range of housing types and mixed-use development.

4. Develop clear standards.

Create user-friendly documents that include regulating plans, building form standards, streetscape requirements and public space guidelines.

5. Monitor and iterate.

Track development outcomes, community feedback and housing production to assess how the code is working, and revise as needed.

By taking these steps, cities can implement form-based codes that foster inclusive, walkable and economically vibrant neighborhoods, while delivering housing that meets the needs of both current and future residents.

