

Quality Growth Case Study

Form-Based Code: *One Tool for Building Better Corridors- Columbia, Tennessee*

A Development Gone Wrong

James Campbell Boulevard in Columbia, Tennessee is a textbook example of traditional development and growth that occurs through poor growth choices. Restaurant chains and big box retail stores anchor this heavily commercial corridor in a sea of deep setbacks and oversized parking lots all leading to access roads guarded by complex traffic light arrangements requiring patient and dexterous driving to clear.

“James Campbell Boulevard is an example of well-intentioned development gone horribly wrong. Not only is development unattractive but it’s dangerous. Its original purpose of serving as a bypass was well intentioned, but it no longer does this.” Said, Norman Wright, Grants and Planning Director for the City of Columbia.



James Campbell Boulevard

Indeed, Wright's observations have been proven to be true and not just in Columbia but in other communities with similar development patterns. Corridors such as James Campbell are no longer used by just the automobile. The many commercial businesses which have gradually developed over the years bring pedestrian

and bicycle traffic creating numerous connectivity problems and dangerous conditions for all involved.

Columbia's traditional zoning codes tend to focus on land use activities, featuring a detailed list of uses that are permitted in specific zoning districts. This type of zoning regulates according to use: commercial, residential, and office space are segregated. Little consideration is given however to the look and feel and the context of the surroundings. And, in many cases, it is the latter that determines how well a new development or redevelopment fits within a community.

Form Based Code Appeal

One tool that Cumberland Region Tomorrow offers in its Quality Growth Workshops and one that Columbia has decided to use to “take back” the boulevard is form-based codes. Form-based codes essentially reverse the traditional approach by focusing on site design, building bulk, design, pedestrian circulation, environment, and the relationship between the developments and surrounding neighborhood character. Form-based code says things should be grouped instead by “character” (with some common sense restrictions of use).

Form-based codes have design guidelines and requirements that are tailored to allow new developments to blend well with their surroundings. This regulatory approach can encourage reinvestment by allowing greater flexibility regarding possible uses and tenants, as well as by requiring sites and building design that is sensitive to surrounding ones.

“Form-based code is basically a way to make it easy for developers to do the right thing,” says Wright.

Approval streamlining will be instituted for developers that play by the rules, making reinvestment easier.

The Maury County comprehensive plan divides Columbia into character areas. The downtown core, the suburban ring, the corridors, and the special use districts (industry, etc.) are mapped out in the plan. In each area, design standards uniquely suited to the area's existing or proposed character are being developed. Standards are drawn up by determining what makes each area what it is.



Columbia's Boulevard 2050 Master Plan

These considerations include:

- Street standards with narrower pavement sections and increased connectivity to balance transportation mobility needs and walkability
- Building envelope standards with height and setback requirements that bring buildings closer to the street and allow for articulation and modulation of building facade
- Reduced parking ratios with parking areas located behind buildings rather than dominating the streetscape
- Streetscape standards featuring intimately scaled civic spaces such as squares

As of fall 2011, the draft of the new code is nearly complete. Three workshops have been completed with the city council and boards. All that remains is a presentation of its conclusions to the city leaders and the community and then the creation of the final document. Residents will also find the coming code document easily accessible.

"It will read more like a comic book than an encyclopedia," says Wright.

Wright stresses that more important than the form-based code itself is the concept that underlies it—livability.

Collaboration for Results and Solutions

The DNA of the area, in short, is carefully measured and recorded. The real, tangible physical attributes of the area are determined. For areas that lack in good design, community input will be solicited in future workshops to decide the way forward. Redevelopment in older, traditional centers can be expedited by revising suburban zoning standards (e.g. setbacks, lot sizes, nonconforming use provisions) to allow infill "by right." Using a form-based code approach provides one good method for addressing concerns about how infill will look and generally fit within the existing community fabric.

"If we can just keep this idea at the forefront of our planning, we will create better places."



Cumberland Region Tomorrow

Cumberland Region Tomorrow is a public-private non-profit organization who supports and encourages growth planning in the ten-county region of Middle Tennessee with an emphasis in land use, transportation and preservation of the rural landscape and distinctive character of our communities we call home.

*Cumberland Region Tomorrow Staff
Dustin Shane and Kasey Talbott, Authors, 2011*