

Using Codes to Create a Community

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Trinity, North Carolina

Urban codes that regulate the design of buildings and streets have been in existence since the architect Vitruvius transcribed them in ancient Rome. Later, these practices were adopted by Renaissance Italy when architects such as Palladio published their handbooks of building form and design. The first recorded use of public design guidelines was in Siena, Italy, in the 13th century, when elected officials sat in judgment upon buildings that were to line that city's streets and great public piazza.



In North America, our development regulations date to the Law of the Indies set forth by King Felipe II of Spain on July 13, 1573. Their purpose was set forth as follows:

"That in order that the discoveries and new settlements and pacification of the land and provinces that are to be discovered, settled, and pacified in the Indies be done with greater facility and in accordance with the service to God Our Lord, and for the welfare of the natives, among other things, we have prepared the following ordinances."

The regulations for new settlements and towns included specific criteria for the placement and design of the central plaza or square, the location of civic buildings, the size of urban, the dedication of public open space, and the segregation of noxious uses.



Today, our principal tools of regulating the growth of our communities are Zoning and Subdivision Ordinances. Trinity is certainly no exception. Prior to the adoption of the City's Zoning Ordinance our community was under the jurisdiction of the Randolph County Zoning Ordinance. These tools, with their unyielding reliance on the strict segregation of uses and excessive parking standards, are highly inferior to our ancient codes in the creation of beautiful communities. In truth, most of our really great cities were built in the absence of the convention zoning ordinances.

Fortunately, within the past two decades, progress is slowly emerging in this field. Beginning with "Performance Zoning" in the early 1980's, Zoning Ordinances are becoming more sophisticated in the requirements for new construction.

Most recently, a new model has emerged known as "Form-Based Codes." Modern form-based codes seek to prescribe the physical design of buildings and infrastructure while permitting a greater flexibility in the use and activity. These codes recognize that many of our most cherished neighborhoods and downtowns were constructed during a period before zoning. As such, these areas have been much more adaptable to changes in demographics, retail trends, and technology (i.e. telecommuting) than new suburban subdivisions with rigid setbacks, narrow use requirements, and overbearing restrictive covenants that typically promote monotony and predictability.

The key to the successful implementation of form-based codes is that expectations are clear and reasonable - and that the path to get a permit is streamlined and predictable. In general, developers are much more willing to abide by design guidelines if they know that compliance will assure a permit. Well written guidelines ensure a sense of predictability for both developers and the public.



When combined with an expedited permit process, form-based codes will also incentivize developers to spend more money on important elements such as the building facade rather than on a prolonged public process, loan interest or excessive parking requirements.

But a good code is only as good as the plan on which it is based. Our Center City Plan will establish a coherent vision and clear expectations of how we want this critical part of our community to “grow up.” Trinity stands at a crossroads. Install public sewer and then let development wash over us or plan for growth and ensure a predictable future. Trinity has chosen the latter.