

WOODLAND DISTRICT HYBRID FORM BASED CODE ADOPTED BY THE CITY OF LACEY, WASHINGTON, ON 25 FEBRUARY 2016

Project Description

Introduction

The Woodland Hybrid District Form based Code, adopted in February of this year, will guide the transformation of a suburban district dominated by shopping malls, strip malls, corporate office buildings, and isolated enclaves of residential into the downtown that the city of Lacey has never had.

History

Lacey is a relatively new city with 19th century pioneer roots. Once named Woodland, after settlers Isaac and Catherine Wood, who worked their claim beginning in 1853, the city was renamed Lacey in 1891 when the town was large enough to apply for a post office, but another town on the Columbia River had taken the name Woodland. Primarily a bedroom community for the Capital city of Olympia, Tacoma, and the federal military base Joint Base Lewis–McChord (JBLM), Lacey also became a regional retail destination when the South Sound Center opened in the Woodland District and the city incorporated in 1966.

A new downtown for a growing city

The citizens of Lacey have been promoting the idea of a civic, social and urban center for a long time; in their 2000 vision plan for a new downtown the public set these ambitious goals, "By the year 2020, Downtown Lacey will be a vibrant, alive, whole, prosperous place for all residents and visitors. Lacey's new downtown will invite a rich mix of all people of all ages and ethnicities, especially children, teenagers and seniors." The city followed up on this vision with a 2013 Strategic Plan designed to knit the different areas of the Woodland District together into a cohesive urban downtown neighborhood populated by businesses, employees and residents, and build upon the existing value of the District's buildings, parking, streets, large trees and numerous destinations while transforming –over time – to a more compact, walkable mixed use neighborhood. The Downtown will build on activities already occurring in the district: transit service, the emerging market for housing in the area, vital institutions such as the South Puget Sound Community College (which opened in 2015 and brings 900 people to the district on weekdays) and add more uses of all kinds, providing day and night activities, retail and street-level vibrancy. As an important next step in the establishment of Lacey's downtown, the 2013 Strategic Plan recommended that a hybrid form based code be established.

Process for Developing the Form-based Code

The Urbsworks team applied National Charrette Institute structure and techniques to planning and conducting a multi-day charrette. Built into the Charrette were three complete loops of input and feedback that provided stakeholders with more than a dozen opportunities to engage with the process, make a meaningful contribution, and develop a broadly-supported plan for the Woodland District. The enthusiasm that the community brought to the charrette has already produced results: the Chamber of Commerce is actively planning to relocate their offices into the Woodland District and a beloved local steakhouse has announced plans to move to the very center of the area. One local developer who participated in the design charrette initiated plans for a new residential tower in anticipation of the adoption of the form based code.

Purpose of the Form-based Code

The hybrid form based code provides a regulatory framework for suburban repair that supports the social, cultural, and economic development while maintaining a sensitivity to small sites and small businesses. Regulations were calibrated to the local business community by creating incremental development opportunities. The code is intended to catalyze redevelopment through an approval process that provides greater certainty and predictability, balanced with appropriate flexibility for developers.

Response to FBCI Definition and Checklist

The Woodland District Hybrid Form Based Code focuses primarily on the relationship of buildings to each other, to streets and to open spaces. Adopted in February of this year, the code is called a “hybrid” form based code because it completely coordinated with current administrative review processes and other provisions of the Lacey Municipal Code. The Woodland District Hybrid FBC completely replaced the previous municipal code chapter for the Woodland District (chapter 16.24). It can be accessed on the city’s on-line version of the municipal code. The FBC represents a shift in emphasis in several significant ways:

- It moves from design guidelines and discretionary review to clear and objective development standards.
- A greater number of uses are permitted, in exchange for design requirements.
- It coordinates street design and building design.
- It establishes a street hierarchy consisting of primary and secondary streets and through block connections.
- It requires new connections and blocks and the creation of an urban-scaled infill blocks, even on sites currently occupied by large format retail.
- Regulations emphasize building massing, including minimum and maximum height, setbacks and step backs.
- Regulations emphasize building frontage, orientation, and façade design, including the provision for retail opportunity frontage. Retail opportunity frontage is ground floor space that is designed and constructed to serve as retail space in the future, if retail is not economically viable at the time of construction.

Simplified use list The use list was previously an extensive listing of permitted and conditional uses with an extremely fine degree of categorization (jewelry, books and stationary, fabric stores). The FBC introduced a simplified use list with a focus on what is prohibited. As a consequence, many current businesses that would have been nonconforming are now permitted to occupy the district, as long as they meet the FBC development standards for urban form.

Regulating Plans The FBC introduces three Regulating Plans: one for Subdistricts, one for Street Types and one for Building Heights.

Development Standards All development standards are clear and objective, and replace the previous system of design guidelines which were administered with a high degree of staff judgment. Staff likes the fact that the new regulations provide clear dimensional requirements; developers like the certainty of the clearly stated rules.

Subdistricts define urban form and street and path network The first set of regulations are embodied in the Subdistrict Regulating Plan and Development Standards Table. These regulations govern block size and perimeter, building envelope (setbacks, step backs and height), and required streets and through-block connections.

Street Types define building frontage and façade design The Street Types Regulating Plan defines the location for all street and through block connections—existing, improved and new—and specifies the design of each type. These regulations define a system of primary and secondary streets and the building or landscape frontages that are required to face each one.

New and unique mechanism: Proportional Compliance The Proportional Compliance section allows for incremental improvements for existing developments through a series of thresholds based on percentage of improvement and the underlying value of development. The middle threshold requires the existing development to meet a building or landscape frontage type only. Regulations were calibrated to the local business community with a focus on incremental improvements and appropriate flexibility.

New and unique mechanism: Master Plans The Detailed Master Plan and the Connectivity Master Plan require an applicant to show conceptually how they will meet the development standards for connectivity and street or through block connections over time. They establish the agreements and the physical framework for future development. Depending on the location of the development and the cost of the proposed improvements in relation to the underlying value, applicants must meet one of the two or are exempt.

Lessons Learned

Ways of dealing with incremental urbanism

The FBC team had to grapple with real world problems that occur when the goal is to transition from a suburban sprawl pattern to urban walkable pattern over time, and there are different patterns of land ownership and tenure. Below are a couple of the tools that were developed and lessons learned.

Proportional Compliance Regulations

The subareas acknowledge the property ownership patterns, and likelihood of development over time. In the Pacific Avenue Subdistrict, for example, anticipates development will be carried out by small business owners and will occur more incrementally than in the center of the district. In the Pacific Avenue Subarea, therefore, the requirements permit a gradual compliance over time, “proportional” to the investment made at the time of approval. Having an economic and real estate professional on the team was essential to ensure that the proportional compliance objectives could be met and be translated into regulations that were fair.

Landscape Frontage Types

Landscape perimeter treatments are anticipated to stand in for new buildings for some time to come, so the regulations are aimed at creating an urban edge at the build to line. In addition, visible building entries and inviting pathways to those entries are required even where the building is set back from the street or behind a parking lot. In the Pacific Avenue Subdistrict in particular, the landscape frontage types are particularly important to change the nature of the highway-like environment in the near future.

Hybrid Form Based Codes

Creating a hybrid FBC that is fully integrated into a city’s code is more complicated than creating a stand alone FBC. Advantages of a hybrid can be that the adoption process is more speedy and certain, and the requirements go immediately into effect. The team started on day one of the project to compare the proposed hybrid FBC framework with the city’s existing regulatory framework in order to make a smooth transition. One lesson learned however, is that the staff’s then-current review procedure was not compared with the proposed administrative and site plan review procedures closely enough. An earlier development of current and proposed decision trees would have been useful. A decision tree was prepared, but it was prepared late in the project, after the FBC was largely drafted.