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Group Considers New Architectural Regulation for East Lansing, But Many Questions Remain ^[1]

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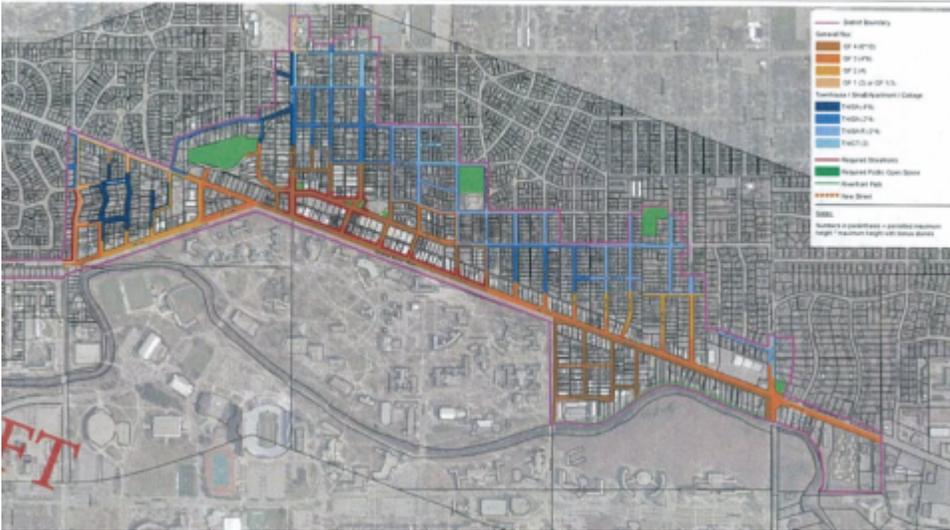
By:

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A team of three members of East Lansing's Planning Commission are continuing to work on a draft "form-based code" which, if approved by a majority of City Council, would create a new zoning code with architectural standards for thousands of properties in East Lansing.

The "Shaping the Avenue Committee" is considering a potentially revolutionary new approach to zoning for an area centered on Grand River and Michigan Avenues, including areas in or bordering the Chesterfield Hills, Oakwood Historic, Bailey, and Brookfield Heritage neighborhoods.



For a larger version of this map, [click here](#) [2].)

The committee includes Planning Commission Chair and architect Dan Bollman along with Chris Wolf and Cynthia Williams. The three have been meeting steadily with City Planning staff members David Haywood and Darcy Schmitt, painstakingly revising a draft document produced by consultants [2], to figure out what might work best for East Lansing.

The group is considering such things as the type of building materials that would be permitted, how much of a building's front would have to be covered in doors or windows, how parking would work, whether balconies would be allowed on the sides of apartment buildings facing single-family homes, the permissible slope of roofs, and more for the new construction of structures that are located in a form-based plan area.

Whether the new rules would also apply to renovated buildings would have to be decided by a majority of Council, if a form-based code is adopted.

The team has been working off a document that generally favors a pre-World War II style of architecture. (To see a staff handout from last week's meeting, [click here](#) [3].)

Below: Chris Wolf, Dan Bollman, and Cynthia Williams at last week's meeting.



Form-based code is an urban planning concept that seeks to simplify the redevelopment process by telling property owners what buildings should look like and how they should function in relation to public spaces, reducing restrictions on uses and then streamlining the approval process.

The City of Marquette, for example, has used form-based code ^[4] to try to create a specific pedestrian-welcoming feel for their waterfront, as that waterfront is redeveloped.

The impetus for this work in East Lansing dates back to when CATA was working on the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) ^[5] idea. The concept then was to create a planning corridor, from the State Capitol to the Meridian Mall, that would support the BRT and smart urban redevelopment.

The City of East Lansing is also interested in pursuing form-based code because the Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC) thinks such codes can help spur redevelopment and economic investment in Michigan cities.

East Lansing government leaders want the City to be declared a "Redevelopment Ready Community" ^[6] by the MEDC to make East Lansing eligible for certain state-level incentives. MEDC doesn't require a form-based code for that designation, but rather encourages municipalities to seriously consider form-based codes.

East Lansing is said by developers to have a particularly onerous zoning code and approval process. A form-based code, if adopted, could reduce the number of steps and shorten the timeframe of the approval process.

A simplified approach would likely be welcomed by developers, and it could accelerate the pace of redevelopment, as MEDC hopes.

But in the draft being considered by the East Lansing committee, while some relatively simple projects located in the form-based code district could be approved administratively by Planning staff, others would be approved by the Planning Commission after a staff review, while the most complex projects would go directly from staff to City Council.

So, whether a streamlined approval process would be adopted is really an open question. For East Lansing's first form-based district, the East Village [7], the approval process for projects has remained the traditional one in East Lansing. This is one reason advocates of form-based code say the East Village is not a "true" example of form-based code.

In urban planners' original conception of form-based code, developers would be subject to specific and sometimes fairly strict architectural and design standards in exchange for being allowed to develop for any use. The code would say what the building would look like, and how it would interface with public spaces, but it would not restrict how the building could be used inside.

If East Lansing took the most hard-core approach to form-based code, the new form-based code could replace all sorts of existing East Lansing zoning regulations for the designated area. Right now, East Lansing zoning in the area under consideration includes detailed regulation of such things as signage, the distance between marijuana provisioning centers, how much parking and bike racks a new building must have, how many bedrooms apartment units can have, whether buildings have residential or commercial space on the first floor, and more.

But would City Council really opt to replace all existing regulations with a new form-based code? or will architectural standards be laid on top of some or all of those? That remains to be seen.

The plan is for the Shaping the Avenue Committee to bring forward a revised draft to the whole Planning Commission soon. City Planning staff is working with the hired consultants to produce material for as-yet-unscheduled public meetings about the plan.

Michigan's Zoning Enabling Act requires that zoning regulation be based on a plan. Most communities use their master plans. East Lansing's Shaping the Avenue Committee has been paying attention to East Lansing's master plan in their work.

But a majority of City Council has voted recently for building heights exceeding [8] those indicated in the recently-accepted Master Plan for East Lansing, suggesting at least that a majority of Council may not feel the need to hew very closely to the Master Plan when considering a new form-based code.

At last week's meeting, Planning Commission Chair Bollman said that on the issue of building height, more input is needed from the public. Bollman has been making a list of many items that the committee want to be sure to specifically discuss with the Planning Commission and/or the public at engagement sessions.

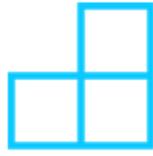
Chris Root contributed to this report.

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