

Columbia Pike

Arlington County, Virginia

Using Form-Based Codes to Improve Design and Land Use Patterns



Redevelopment Strategies

- » Form-based codes (FBCs)
- » Tax increment financing

Results and Lessons Learned

- » Although implementing an FBC is a lengthy process, it can help incentivize developers to redevelop in ways that improve the streetscape, density, and land uses of a corridor.
- » In Arlington County, the use of FBCs has been instrumental both in preserving existing affordable housing and in encouraging new affordable housing.
- » Other critical infrastructure improvements include utilities moved underground; relocated parking, bike, and pedestrian amenities; and enhanced transit services.



LEFT: Before, Columbia Pike had narrow sidewalks and an automobile-oriented streetscape. (Arlington County)

ABOVE: A form-based code has helped transform Columbia Pike into a safer and more pedestrian-friendly arterial. (Arlington County)

Located outside Washington, D.C., in Arlington County, Virginia, Columbia Pike is a thoroughfare stretching more than three miles—from the edge of the Pentagon to the border of Fairfax County. The road was built in 1810 to connect Washington's Long Bridge to the Little River Turnpike and the rest of Virginia. It evolved to become an automobile-oriented arterial—lined with fast-food restaurants, drive-through restaurants and banks, convenience stores, and strip malls—characterized by intense traffic congestion.

Arlington County sought to alleviate the congestion through the Columbia Pike Initiative, a corridor revitalization plan focused on the commercial corridors and adopted in 2002. The initiative was organized around an innovative Commercial Centers Form-Based Code (FBC) and supportive government-led programs, including a partnership with D.C.'s Metrobus. In 2008, the Arlington County Board issued a charge to begin

work on Phase II of the Columbia Pike Initiative, which focused on multifamily residential areas located between the commercial centers. Phase II culminated in the adoption of the Neighborhoods Area Plan in 2012, which outlined the goals and tools that could be used to create the transportation, form, and housing vision for the multifamily areas. In 2013, the Columbia Pike Neighborhoods Form-Based Code (NFBC) was adopted in support of this vision. Together, the plans and the two codes work to create more urban parks and affordable housing, promote a safe biking and walking environment, and improve the corridor's transit options.

The two form-based codes were designed to kick-start development along Columbia Pike. The preapproved standards act as an incentive for developers because they allow for a much faster approval process, saving developers both time and money. Developers who choose to use the FBCs

can get project approvals typically within six to nine months with only one or two public hearings, whereas the conventional process can take nine to 12 months or even longer. Each code includes a process for administrative approval by the zoning administrator for smaller and less complex projects.

Within the FBCs are prescriptions for street planning and standards for building envelopes, streetscapes, and architecture. In the Commercial Centers FBC, buildings are required to have street frontage, first-floor retail space, and built-in bicycle amenities.

Affordable housing development is incentivized through the NFBC, which requires that 20 to 35 percent of net new units in developments be affordable to residents with incomes of up to 60 percent of the area median income for a period of 30 years.

To help meet the ambitious affordable housing goal, the county also employed financial tools. The Transit-Oriented Affordable Housing (TOAH) Fund was adopted by the county in 2013. Affordable housing developers who apply for low-income housing tax credits may put TOAH funds toward infrastructure-related items (such as underground utilities, tree preservation, and streetscape improvements) and county fees (such as a certificate of occupancy, building permits, and utility fees) to help keep project costs under the Virginia Housing and Development Authority total development cost limits and increase competitiveness for tax credits.

The Columbia Pike Tax Increment Financing (TIF) Area was established as a funding mechanism for the TOAH. The Columbia Pike TIF dedicates 25

percent of incremental new tax revenue generated by new development and property appreciation within specifically designated commercial and multifamily residential revitalization districts to affordable housing along the corridor.

Arlington County's commitment to affordable housing has been enhanced through the NFBC. Other tools such as the Affordable Housing Investment Fund (AHIF) and low-income housing tax credits have helped with the preservation and creation of new units. The county has preserved or created 938 affordable units along the Pike since 2012. These units were preserved or created using AHIF, public/private partnerships, or the affordable housing requirements under the NFBC. Of the total 938 affordable units, 499 were preserved in the existing buildings with assistance from AHIF loans or the NFBC affordable housing requirements.

Because of the FBCs and programming planned by Arlington County, Columbia Pike now has elements that make it a healthier and more pedestrian-friendly area. Since the FBC's adoption, the corridor has added more than 1 million square feet of commercial space, a new community center, a weekly farmers market, a supermarket, about 3,000 residential units, and multiple open spaces that complement a nearby 45-mile paved walking, running, and bike trail. The county is building new bike and pedestrian infrastructure, and the FBC mandates that all parking must be behind or underneath buildings to preserve and enhance the streetscape. As a requirement of the code, any redevelopment project must also finance the burial of utilities on that block.

Columbia Pike is now the busiest bus transit corridor in Virginia, with bus lines that have increased ridership and frequency and that connect to the Pentagon Metro station. The corridor also features two walking loops, "bike boulevards" on adjacent streets, bike racks, and six Capital Bikeshare stations.

Form-Based Codes

A form-based code (FBC) is a regulation, not a guideline. As such, it is a means of regulating land development to achieve a specific urban form and to create a destination in an area. Unlike traditional zoning, which is based on separation of uses, FBCs use physical form as the organizing principle of design and development to create a high-quality public realm. An FBC is adopted into city, town, or county law and is a powerful alternative to conventional zoning regulations. Benefits to developers include faster-than-normal approval of their plans, a lower risk of residents opposing the project, and a potential for increasing the density of the project.

LEFT: Before the form-based code, strip malls and other developments along Columbia Pike catered to drivers. (Courtesy of BM Smith).

BELOW: Parking relocated from the front to the back of developments helps create a better environment for pedestrians and bicyclists. (Arlington County)

