

Take pity on the modern-day colonists who arrive in the Lowcountry seeking peaceful refuge, only to find themselves at the mercy of a dense jungle of text and tables found in Beaufort County's Zoning and Development Standards Ordinance.



The ZDSO has few fans. Even the people who wrote it don't like it very much, which must really hurt.

One of the reasons the ZDSO is the subject of such derision is that no one can figure it out. Take a look for yourself, and consider this a challenge: visit www.bcgov.net, find the ZDSO, and try to imagine explaining it to a friend who is considering building something in Beaufort County. In addition to a bewildering array of big words, there are monstrous charts that hold the key to your future. These charts contain complicated lists of what you can and cannot do in certain situations.

Once you find the correct chart, you are by no means home free. If you are very, very fortunate, that chart might give you a straightforward yes or no. But in all likelihood there is a host of conditions and special considerations and you'll have to contend with.

What it all boils down to is that there is too much uncertainty. And people really, really dislike uncertainty. Especially right now. It's bad for the economy.

But there is a different way. We can adopt something called a form-based code. There are different versions out there, but what they all have in common is this: the code tells you, in a straightforward way, what you can build by-right, and how you can do it with a minimum of fuss. And because it gives property owners a good deal of flexibility regarding what their parcel of land can be used for, a form-based code makes it easier to do mixed-use development.

I don't know enough to describe form-based codes in all their technical glory. The best I can do, as a writer, is to share my infatuation with them via poetry and song.

A note on the jargon: "Transect" is the most important piece of professional planner-speak in this whole form-based code scheme. A transect presents a continuum of land types, from rural to suburban to urban. Each transect should look different from the other transects. The idea is to not worry so much about what goes on inside the buildings (land use) but to be more attentive to the buildings themselves and the way they shape our public realm (that's the form part).

These verses are dedicated to the City of Beaufort and the Town of Port Royal, in hopes that they will partner with Beaufort County in striving for this most sensible solution to our mutual land-planning problems.

"My Favorite Codes"
(Sung to the tune of "My Favorite Things")

Raingardens, rowhouses, visual guidelines
Easy approval for those with tight deadlines
Clear-cut instructions for buildings and roads
These are a few of my favorite codes

Zoning that's focused on physical outcomes
Inclusionary of those with low incomes
Grand public places at well defined nodes

These are a few of my favorite codes

Our current process is slow as molasses
Let's base approval on forms and their masses
Let's make it easy to build our abodes
These are a few of my favorite codes

No more zoning
No more hassle
No uncertainty

Just look at the context
And turn to the transect
And then you build what you see.

"My County has a Form Based Code"
(Based on "My Love is like a Red, Red Rose)

My county has a form-based code
That's neatly illustrated
It let's you know what you can build
That's sweetly approbated._
As fair art thou, with clarity,
So deep and yet so simple
You show me what can be, my dear,
With the transect as my temple

With the transect as my temple, dear,
And the pictures as my guide
You show me what can be, my dear,
How long, how tall, how wide.

And fare thee well, my lovely code,
May your principles be applied
Yes we will build more smartly now
With an illustrated guide.

"My County Has a Code"
(sung to "My Country Tis of Thee)

My county has a code
In which we all are showed
How things can be
Land lies in transects
Each with its own effects
Showing you in ways not too complex

You can build by right.

My father signed a lease
Now he can build in peace
Because he knew
How things should look and feel
Before he made the deal
He'll have no rulings to appeal
He can build by right.