



East Frederick Rising Interviews Geoffrey Farrell

East Frederick Rising had the opportunity to interview Geoffrey Farrell, of Geoffrey Farrell & Associates based in Washington, D.C., on the City of Frederick's first ever Form-Based Code (FBC).

Geoffrey Ferrell is a seasoned professional in the realm of urban design, town planning, and form-based coding, with a wealth of experience spanning several prestigious institutions. Geoffrey's notable projects speak volumes about his dedication to enhancing communities. From the Downtown Master Plan & Form-Based Code in Cedar Falls, IA, to the Lee Highway Vision Plan & Zoning Analysis in Arlington County, VA, his contributions have received recognition, including awards such as the Benjamin Banneker National Capital APA Planning Award and the CNU Charter Award.

As the East Frederick Form Based Code (FBC) nears approval, we sat down with Mr. Farrell to learn more about how the FBC will shape and guide future development in east Frederick, pressing issues in the city such as affordable housing, and how the FBC could address it.

EFR: Where are we in this process?

Mr. Farrell: 2nd draft of the East Frederick Form-Based Code (FBC) is about to be released to city staff. [Note: the second draft was rewarded for public review on October 22.] They will send it to various departments (legal, city planning, etc.) for review.

EFR: What will the new FBC code regulate?

Mr. Farrell: The Form-Based Code will replace the old LMC (Land Management Code) and will regulate new development in East Frederick. Some areas overlap the Historic District and the code will require new development within 60 feet of a historic building to be no more than ____ feet taller than that historic building.

Example: the new development around the Banner School has new construction that dwarfs the school. The Form Based Code has provisions that protect the historically significant buildings in East Frederick.

EFR: The current Land Management Code/zoning regulates uses of buildings but not the exterior forms of buildings. The result can be the development of oversized buildings with little exterior features that tend to resemble massive boxes. How will Form-Based Code change the look of new developments?

Mr. Farrell: Form-Based Code can't and won't change the size of large developments. But what it will do is break down the scale of larger buildings so they appear to be divided into smaller units - a "human-scale". For exterior features, large box buildings will need balconies on at least 30% of their facade. Balconies create shade/shadow and depth, improve quality of life for residents who enjoy the fresh air and people watching, while increasing neighborhood safety through more "eyes on the street".



EFR: There is some dissatisfaction with the developments produced under the current LMC and connectivity is one issue. New developments tend to stand out and appear isolated from the surrounding areas. How would new development under the Form-Based Code enhance connections between neighborhoods and integrate new development with what currently exists in East Frederick?

Mr. Farrell: One way to provide connectivity is through the street grid. An interconnected grid of streets and blocks is more "democratic" than a development enclave or cul-de-sac in that you can always enter/pass through a network of gridded streets. Another way recent developments lack connectivity is their parking and stormwater management systems.

EFR: Right. It's harder to walk around a stormwater management pit that's usually got a fence around it, and it's less desirable to walk past a giant parking lot than down a street with shops and shade trees and a nice wide sidewalk.

Mr. Farrell: Yes. Form-Based Code regulations put parking lots in the back of buildings and locate buildings in front.

When we wrote the code, we referenced classic streets like Market and Patrick Streets. They are nice streets, but too narrow, and their sidewalks aren't accessible for strollers and wheelchairs. The FBC code is written with Market and Patrick Streets as a reference but with wider sidewalks, and tree lines are wider as well, which extend the life of the trees and make them less susceptible to drought and disease. We also include pervious paving between the trees which allow people to walk between them.

EFR: So new streets in East Frederick will be designed in a street-grid pattern, with a walkable, connected streetscape that models Frederick Streets like Market and Patrick, with wider sidewalks and tree lines. But what about existing streets that don't have those features? How will they be tied in?

Mr. Farrell: In the areas in East Frederick that are being retrofitted there's not enough space to build all that, so new roads joining up to existing roads will match what's already built. I'm thinking down on Wisner Street for example. The roads are tighter there, but I think that's part of the funky charm of East Frederick.

EFR: We do like to keep all that character and historic charm intact.

Mr. Farrell: The "Blue" parts of the regulating plan don't incentivize tearing down/rebuilding at all. The scale of the plan in those areas marked in blue closely matches what's existing. There might be an added story allowed to increase density. That additional story could mean building a bigger single unit or a small apartment, creating "stacked flats".



EFR: Good. So let's talk about affordable housing. There is, what we might call a crisis-level shortage of affordable units in Frederick. New development isn't adding any affordable housing to our stock currently. Developers are supposedly required to build 12% of their new units as affordable housing. But they're allowed to pay a fee in lieu to avoid doing so. So they're paying the fee and the affordable units aren't being built, and we need something like 300 new affordable units a year to keep up with the demand. That's not even close to happening. Does Form-based Code do a better job than the current code to incentivize developers to build affordable housing units?

Mr. Farrell: The affordable housing shortage is the result of many factors, including low supply and high demand raising prices. In addition, in relation to a place like Frederick, you have unique dwellings that are highly desirable driving the prices of those units up and driving people out of high-priced areas.... The question is, do you want your children to be able to live in your town when they grow up?

EFR: Yes, absolutely.

Mr. Farrell: So, we need to build those affordable units. One form of affordable housing that can be generated by a form-based code is within the form of a 3-story row house which is possible to have multiple affordable units, or "stacked flats". It's also allowable to have an Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU), that you could locate above a rear garage, or in a walk out "English basement". These units can make a rowhouse more affordable.

EFR: It makes it possible for a renter to have an affordable living space and helps the homeowner offset the mortgage by having an income-generating rental, or having multi-family living situations, etc.

Mr. Farrell: Yes. Next, the "Urban Neighborhood Form" has a "bonus height Provision" that, let's say, someone's building an apartment building - they get to build an extra story if they include the required 12% of their apartment units as affordable units. Under the current policies, developers are paying the fees. No one's building affordable units.

EFR: So the Form-Based Code incentivizes building affordable units instead of offering a weak penalty/fee which could motivate builders to actually build the units.

Mr. Farrell: And [the possibility to add an extra story] is a reward big enough so that it appeals to developers to build them; and that's an opportunity for every building that gets built. So that's a part of the Urban Neighborhood and Urban Flex areas of the FBC. The city is discussing how to improve [the system to increase the construction of] MPDUs and the FBC is a good part of that.

EFR: That's exciting stuff. We also like the way that affordable housing is mixed in with pricier units.

Mr. Farrell: Yes. In addition to writing in a really powerful incentive to build DPDUs, it removes the stigma of living in an affordable housing unit - they're all combined in one building. A perfect city has all different income levels, and economic, religious, racial, political diversity. A greater/broader issue is, the stuff being built in the suburbs, [one consequence is] people were segregated by income. Everyone in a subdivision might all be within \$10k of each other. A big idea of the Form-Based Code is that when you manage development, you manage change so you can channel it in a positive direction. Downtown [Frederick] is a/the great model for how people can live together and if you don't manage it, by and large, that development will come anyway in a form you don't like.

EFR: That's happening to us now. In East Frederick, a lot of businesses and residents are happy the way things are. But when we see development happening on three sides of our area with these giant residential boxes in a sea of parking lots, we can see the change happening. We know we can either a) let it continue the way it's going, or b) manage it to better serve the community that's already living here - but we can't keep things the same. There's no option C.

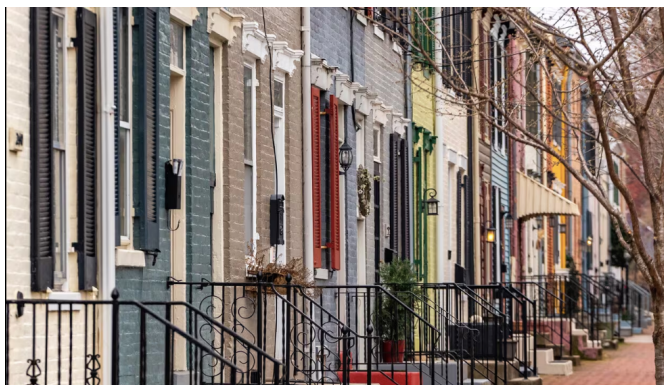
Mr. Farrell: Yes. So areas north of South Street are coded with either the Urban Neighborhood or General Flex form... we've also got areas coded "Tech-work areas", which are coded for areas with existing light industrial businesses that currently exist there. We fit/tailored the code for the East Frederick area and one priority is to protect the light industrial businesses in operation at this time.

EFR: Also, we notice that almost all the tech-work zones are under our high-tension power lines and those areas are restricted anyway. But it's a good point to mention, to talk about our existing light industrial-type businesses. We don't want to force anyone out of the area when we get a new building code.

Mr. Farrell: Nothing in Form-based Code is forcing anyone out...we make it very clear that a lot of those businesses will stay for a long time. And while, eventually, they may CHOOSE to leave (profit-motive - a consequence of a light-industrial business can't compete with an apartment).

EFR: Got it. Another concern people have, is we get worried that the Form-Based Code is going to over regulate every little detail of new buildings and that it's too much. Everyone loves the look and feel of Historic Downtown but some folks have a hard time owning a house in the Historic District because of all the regulations of the HPC.

Mr. Farrell: It can appear like everything is regulated. That's true, but I heard a metaphor once I really liked, comparing a building under a Form-Based Code to clothing. You pick your clothes based on the context. If it's winter for example, you're going to have to wear warm winter clothes. But within that context there's a lot of possibilities. Some people are concerned that the code wouldn't allow funky design but it's just the opposite.



EFR: So since we're in the City, our form is Urban. But we've got flexibility within that urban form.

Mr. Farrell: Yes. Let's look at an example. For bigger buildings, you've got a requirement for balconies on $\frac{1}{3}$ of the facade of that building. It's a trade off. You're building a more efficient building, large-scale, but you have to have that exterior feature.

EFR: Yes, we talked about how balconies add to the streetscape. That public realm we want to create.

Mr. Farrell: Another example is the open space requirement. Your open space requirement is 15-20% of your buildable area has to be private open space. But in an urban context, that space could be a backyard, or on the roof, or even on a balcony.

EFR: Parking is another big difference between what we're seeing built now under the current LMC code. There's a lot of it! And they're private lots, located right in front of the buildings.

Mr. Farrell: Transportation...it could take awhile to build, but Frederick - a lot of places in Frederick - have a "park once environment". Your car is parked once; it might be in your home - then you can walk from there to work, to get food, to worship, go to school etc. When uses are closer together it decreases transportation demand -

EFR: - and parking demand.

Mr. Farrell: and it saves time, and energy. Frederick is a good model of that, that's the good logic of downtown Frederick.

EFR: We covered so much. Thank you Mr. Farrell, for taking the time to speak with us about the new Form-Based Code and demystify some of what's in it.