



## **FORM-BASED CODES FOR BIG-BOX RETAIL**

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### **MUNICIPAL IMPLEMENTATION TOOL #13**

**OCTOBER 2007**



**Delaware Valley  
Regional Planning  
Commission**

## What Are Form-Based Codes and Big-Box Retail?

Form-based codes are a method of regulating development to achieve specific physical design standards. While traditional zoning controls land uses, form-based codes regulate development characteristics, such as building facades, site integration, and architectural context.

Big-box retail stores are typically one-story, stand-alone buildings ranging from 50,000 to 250,000 square feet. Similar to warehouses, they have large rectangular footprints, little architectural detail, vast parking lots, and few bicycle or pedestrian connections to surrounding areas. Because of these characteristics, traditionally designed big-box stores rarely integrate well with nearby uses. Form-based codes offer a solution to this challenge.



*Big-box stores can incorporate good design features, as shown by this Target in Redondo Beach, CA. Source: MBH Architects*

## Why Does DVRPC Care About Regulating Big-Box Retail?

This brochure is part of a series of implementation tools that introduce local officials and citizens to planning techniques that can benefit their communities. The tools support the goals presented in *Destination 2030*, the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission's (DVRPC) adopted long-range regional land use and transportation plan. These goals include, but are not limited to, creating and maintaining downtowns and local centers, identifying appropriate areas for future growth, and promoting transportation and land use linkages.

Left unregulated, big-box retail promotes sprawling, automobile-oriented development that lacks bicycle, pedestrian, or transit accommodations. As big-box retail becomes increasingly common, this issue must be addressed. Creating better designs can revitalize older communities and provide new areas with a stronger sense of place. Form-based codes can assist in this process and help to preserve the diverse and unique character of all communities in the Delaware Valley.

There are many benefits to creating and implementing form-based codes to regulate big-box retail design. These include:

- Integrating development with the surrounding urban environment through enhanced pedestrian connections and architecture that complements the style of existing buildings.
- Informing local residents about the benefits of denser development by including graphics in the code that illustrate how a well-designed project can improve their community.
- Reducing traffic congestion and the number of necessary parking spaces by providing opportunities for walking and using transit.
- Improving aesthetics and quality-of-life standards, as well as fostering economic and community revitalization.
- Increasing tax revenues as a result of higher community desirability, housing demand, and escalating property values.
- Enhancing awareness among citizens about their own goals and desires for their community by engaging them in the process of creating form-based codes.
- Increasing sustainability through denser and more efficient land use, and reducing stormwater run-off by creating additional green space.



*The Pier 1 Imports in Exton, PA incorporates several form-based code design elements, including a brick facade, large windows, awnings, and a welcoming, pedestrian-friendly entrance. Source: DVRPC*

**Structural and facade design** helps big-box retail to blend in aesthetically with surrounding development. Creating stores that relate architecturally to nearby buildings can improve an area's appearance and desirability.

Exterior Walls	Projections and recesses
Store Size	Square footage and building footprint caps
Design Features	Architectural features and patterns
Roofs	Pitched rooflines and detailed roofing materials
Materials	Stone, wood, brick, glass, and metal
Entryways	Well-marked and engaging
Windows	Large and numerous
Signs	Modestly sized and lit
Multiple Stories	Single or multiple uses on several floors
Sustainability	Solar energy, geothermal heating and cooling, and reinforced turf for overflow parking

**Site design** helps achieve a more fundamental, in-depth integration of a project with the rest of the built environment. While architectural features are important, site design determines how people relate to a project over the long term.

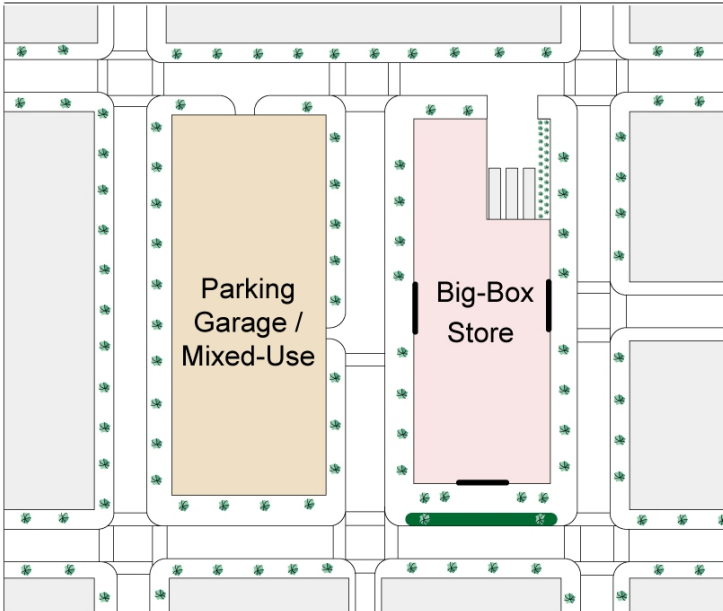
Entrances	Connections to primary street and parking
Access	Wide sidewalks, pedestrian entrances, and connectivity to other areas
Parking	Sub-surface parking, parking garages, and shared parking
Rear and Sides	Landscaping to limit visibility of storage areas
Community Space	Lighting, street furniture, and green spaces
Mixed-Use	Mixture of residential, office, and other retail
Frontage	Limiting front setback to maintain street wall
Landscaping	Grass, trees, and other vegetation
Location	Downtown area or major commercial corridor

## Structural and Facade Design



*Illustration shows how design features will potentially look and is easy to create using software such as Sketchup. Source: DVRPC*

## Site Design



*A big-box store located on a city block next to a shared parking garage. Landscaping hides the loading areas and there are three pedestrian-oriented entrances. Source: DVRPC*

**Main Street at Exton**, in West Whiteland Township, Chester County, Pennsylvania, is a 300,000 square foot retail center constructed on a former brownfield site. The development mimics the design of a traditional main street, with buildings incorporating various architectural styles. Pedestrian activity is centered on the main corridor, which has limited vehicular traffic and on-street, parallel parking.

Major tenants include Bed, Bath, & Beyond, Barnes & Noble, and Circuit City. There are also several restaurants, many of which have outdoor seating. Stores have entrances that face both the pedestrian-oriented corridor and the primary parking lots located on either side of



*Main Street at Exton. Source: DVRPC*

the main street. Architectural features similar to those found in form-based codes include awnings, street furniture, lamps, detailed facades, and large window displays.

**The Promenade at Sagemore**, in Evesham Township, Burlington County, New Jersey, is a large regional shopping center developed by Kravco Simon. It features 270,000 square feet of retail space and includes both casual and sit-down restaurants. L.L. Bean is the primary retail anchor. The Promenade is centered on a large, well-landscaped parking lot and is oriented towards automobiles.

While it includes many high-quality design features, such as brick facades, awnings, window displays, benches, and public art, the project is an example of how larger site-design issues must also be addressed in order to create truly improved design.



*The Promenade at Sagemore. Source: DVRPC*

In addition to the previous two examples from the Delaware Valley, big-box retailers occupy a wide variety of innovative buildings throughout the country. Examples include:

### **Northridge, California**

Target renovated an existing store to include underground parking and a modern architectural design as part of its facade.

### **Chicago, Illinois**

Both Best Buy and Home Depot have locations in the Lincoln Park neighborhood of Chicago. Each store is two stories, includes pedestrian entrances, and has brick and glass facades. The Best Buy is shown on the cover of this brochure.



*This Home Depot in Lincoln Park, Chicago fits well with its urban setting. Source: APA / Jonathan Mendel*

### **Atlanta, Georgia**

Wal-Mart's first store within the Atlanta city limits incorporates mostly underground parking, retail located on a second story above the first floor Wal-Mart, and an adjacent 280-unit apartment complex. Though it is located on a major arterial road, the store also has a separate, pedestrian-friendly entrance and a detailed brick facade. An illustration of the development can be found on page 9.

### **University Heights, Ohio**

Converted from a stand-alone department store, this 620,000 square foot development includes several big-box retailers – TJ Maxx, Tops Supermarket, Target, and a Kaufmann's department store – in a multi-story building. Also included are smaller retail uses and restaurants.

### **White Plains, New York**

This Wal-Mart is located in the city's downtown area and occupies the first two floors of an existing nine-story building. Customers are able to access the 180,000 square foot store using a pedestrian entrance or via the six floors of parking located above.

Other issues to consider in regulating big-box retail design include:

**Legality:** Codes must be specific, well defined, and illustrated whenever possible so as to stand up to potential legal challenges. In addition, codes should be reviewed by an attorney, officially adopted, and made accessible to all parties involved. The design review process is usually directed by a governmental body, like the planning commission, which ensures proposed projects are well designed. Form-based codes can improve the consistency of design review by providing a clear and legal framework within which new development can occur.

**Sustainability:** An impervious surface analysis should be performed to ensure proper green space and stormwater management. Reinforced turf can be used as overflow parking, a strategy that has been used by Home Depot. Alternative energy sources, such as solar power or geothermal heating and cooling, are also beneficial. LEED-certified stores are being built by Target and sporting goods retailer REI, while transit accessibility, home delivery, parking garages, and shared parking are methods of both reducing car trips and using land more efficiently.

**Private Sector:** Regardless of whether form-based codes are in place, local governments can require big-box retailers to consider



*This four-story Target in downtown Minneapolis, MN is pedestrian-friendly and designed to match its urban context. Source: APA / Target Corporation*

design standards, streetscape improvements, and building orientation. When a project has the potential to make large profits, its developers are often willing to accept such provisions.

**Meaningful Change:** Codes must fundamentally address site design and context. In addition, codes should be consistent with a community's long-range plan. For example, a newer area that is developing a town center from scratch could incorporate big-box retail into a mixed-use or traditional neighborhood development. An older area, in contrast, might focus on infill redevelopment to preserve existing character.



**Greyfields:** The term “greyfield” describes older shopping malls or big-box stores. Greyfields are often characterized by vacant storefronts and lower sales volumes. Several solutions exist for rehabilitating greyfields. “Demalling” is the process of converting an indoor shopping mall to traditional city-block retail by creating entrances from the outside for each store. The large parking lots that surround big-box retail can be redeveloped as green space or accessory uses. Buildings can also be converted for other purposes, such as call centers, medical facilities, or churches.



*In Daphne, AL a 180,000 square foot Wal-Mart was converted into a medical center. Source: APA / Wal-Mart Realty*

**Other Regulatory Tools:** Many critics believe that big-box retail is unattractive and causes damage to local economies and communities. While form-based codes can effectively improve structural and site design, they cannot directly address these other challenges. Thus, in conjunction with form-based codes, municipalities can use other regulatory strategies:

- *Vacancy restrictions* attempt to limit the ability of big-box stores to relocate and leave behind large vacant properties. A part of zoning, these laws can require retailers to occupy a building for a minimum period of time or assist in finding a replacement occupant.
- *Impact fees* are assessed based on the expenses caused by development. Fees help to pay for improvements to infrastructure systems, such as transportation and stormwater management.
- *Main Street programs and business improvement districts* help to improve downtowns through preservation and streetscape improvements. They allow traditional retail to compete more effectively with big-box retailers.

There are several initial steps municipalities can take to begin the process of regulating big-box stores with form-based codes:

**Be Proactive:** In order to have an effect, form-based codes should exist before big-box stores express interest in opening. Because the process of drafting codes requires time, municipalities should begin the process as soon as possible. An overlay zone applied to a specific corridor might be as effective as modifying existing zoning and require fewer resources.

**Begin Discussion:** Conversation should be initiated with key stakeholders, including elected officials, planners, and local residents. Citizens must provide input about design in order to create desired results. To encourage this input, municipalities have a responsibility to educate the public about the potential benefits of form-based codes.

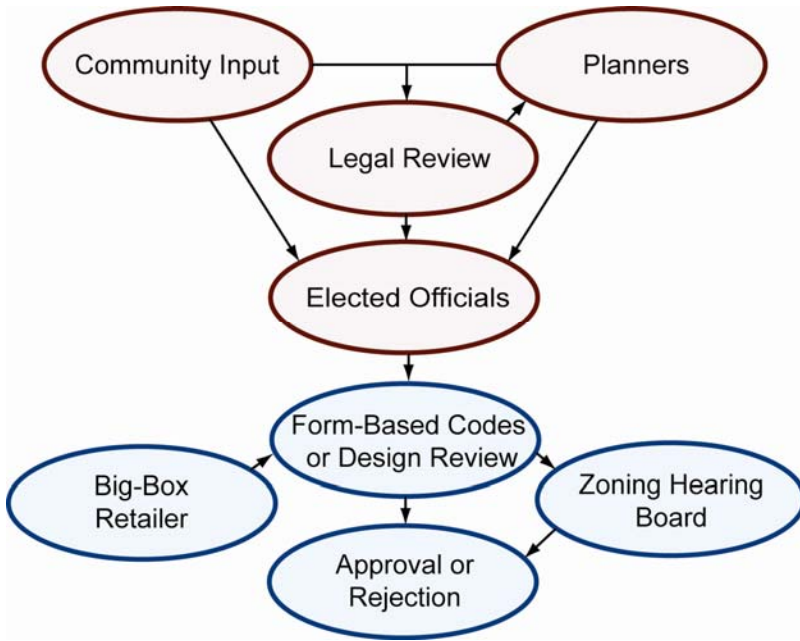
**Have Resolve:** Legal challenges and variance requests can require extensive time and effort on the part of a municipality. It is critical that local government be strongly committed to codes in order to manage opposition.

**Encourage Compromise:** If a big-box retailer already has an interest in opening a store, there may not be time to develop new form-based codes. However, an open conversation between the retailer and local stakeholders may encourage the retailer to implement design improvements. Big-box retailers are frequently willing to compromise when the potential exists for substantial profits, placing local governments in a strong position to require high-quality design.



*An illustration of a completed urban Wal-Mart in Atlanta, GA. The development includes an apartment complex and underground parking. Source: APA / Selig Enterprises*

### Stakeholders in the Big-Box Form-Based Code Process



### Sample Codes and Resources

Form-Based Codes Institute: [www.formbasedcodes.org](http://www.formbasedcodes.org)

Smart Growth Network: [www.smartgrowth.org](http://www.smartgrowth.org)

Congress for New Urbanism: [www.cnu.org](http://www.cnu.org)

Municipal Research and Services Center of Washington: [www.mrsc.org](http://www.mrsc.org)

American Planning Association: [www.planning.org](http://www.planning.org)

Virginia Beach, Virginia, Retail Establishments and Shopping Centers Ordinance and Guidelines: [www.vbgov.com](http://www.vbgov.com)

Toledo, Ohio, Toledo Municipal Code, Section 1109.03, Large Scale Retail Projects: [www.ci.toledo.oh.us](http://www.ci.toledo.oh.us)

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Created in 1965, the **Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission (DVRPC)** is an interstate, intercounty and intercity agency that provides continuing, comprehensive and coordinated planning to shape a vision for the future growth of the Delaware Valley region. The region includes Bucks, Chester, Delaware, and Montgomery counties, as well as the City of Philadelphia, in Pennsylvania; and Burlington, Camden, Gloucester and Mercer counties in New Jersey. DVRPC provides technical assistance and services; conducts high priority studies that respond to the requests and demands of member state and local governments; fosters cooperation among various constituents to forge a consensus on diverse regional issues; determines and meets the needs of the private sector; and practices public outreach efforts to promote two-way communication and public awareness of regional issues and the Commission.

DVRPC fully complies with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and related statutes and regulations in all programs and activities. DVRPC's website may be translated into Spanish, Russian, and Traditional Chinese online by visiting [www.dvrpc.org](http://www.dvrpc.org). Publications and other public documents can be made available in alternative languages or formats, if requested. For more information, please call (215) 238-2871.



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