

Tampa neighborhood tests a new vision for city planning

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TAMPA — All Mike Merino wanted was to open a deli in the neighborhood where he was born and raised.

The property he chose in Seminole Heights had been a furniture store, so he needed a zoning change for his new plans. It took more than six months. He got rejected three times before neighborhood leaders intervened to get the city to waive its rules.

"I wasn't doing Trump Tower," said Merino, who opened his Florida Avenue deli last year. "The hassle drove me crazy."

For nearly a century, zoning has made enemies of property owners like Merino. Born out of Industrial Age excess and class divisions, zoning aimed to separate grungy factories and sooty power plants from schools and homes, slums from upscale retail districts.

But many urban planners consider zoning's mission obsolete in a post-industrial landscape dominated by CVS stores, office parks and malls. Many blame these rules for making a nation dependent on automobiles. How else to travel the sprawling suburbia from home to work to shopping that zoning created?

A growing number of planners believe they have an antidote. In Tampa Bay, Seminole Heights is first to try it.

The proposed cure is a new set of rules that dictates the appearance of buildings, not the way they are used. Called form-based coding, it's an approach intended to make neighborhoods more attractive and walkable.

"With global warming and peak oil, how we formally structure our cities will be a big part of the solution," said Steve Price, a Berkeley, Calif.-based planning consultant and a member of the Form-Based Code Institute. "It's one thing to tell people to bicycle more, but if the streets are scary, you're not going to see more people bicycle."

This year, Tampa will try launching it in Seminole Heights, a historic neighborhood known as much for its charming 1920s Craftsman-style bungalows as for its gritty motels and blighted commercial corridors. Many residents say the

new rules can preserve the area's character while spurring redevelopment. Tampa Heights and 40th Street are lining up to be next if it works.

But if Tampa's experience in introducing the idea is anything like Miami's, it may not be that simple, or even possible.

"I've been surprised by the political opposition," said Marina Khoury, a planner hired by Miami to replace its zoning with the new rules. "It's been grueling."

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At any planning conference these days, chances are the presentations on form-based coding will be the most crowded.

"Standing room only," said Khoury. "Everyone's talking about it."

Khoury works at the firm founded by the creators of the Panhandle resort town of Seaside, arising from what is considered the first modern form-based code. It was meant to be an easy-to-follow guide dictating how buildings looked.

Since then, several communities, such as Sarasota, Arlington, Va., and Philadelphia, have begun or completed plans to eliminate traditional zoning in favor of the new coding. Supporters say the code is easier to understand and can achieve a more predictable physical outcome.

No city has taken more of a risk with the idea than Miami, which announced in 2005 that it would replace regular zoning after residents complained about how the current rules allowed sky-rises to be built next to single-family homes. Just how mismatched this pattern of development is was emphasized last week, when a crane helping build a 46-story condo tower collapsed and killed two, destroying the Mediterranean-style home next door that was featured in the film *There's Something About Mary*.

Yet city commissioners delayed a vote this month on the new rules because of unanswered questions. Residents wondered how their neighborhoods would change. Developers complained it made some properties lose value. Architects said it limited their freedom in building designs.

"On paper it looks good," said Charles Tavares, who owns a mixed-use project in one of the neighborhoods. "But in reality, it doesn't work."

Khoury said it's natural for these groups to have concerns, but their fears are unfounded.

"If it is defeated, that would be unfortunate," Khoury said. "Many other cities are watching Miami closely to see what happens."

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Miami is an extreme case because it's the largest American city to adopt the code for the entire city, Price said.

"My own sense would be to encourage places to do this in small, incremental steps," he said.

St. Petersburg overhauled its zoning last year, but chose to stick with the traditional approach of listing types of allowed uses with few specific rules about how buildings or lots are supposed to look, said Philip Lazzara, the city's zoning official. So, for example, one area might be okay for homes, and another for stores, but not both.

Tampa, by contrast, is using form-based coding, but only in a small dose.

For the past two years, Seminole Heights leaders felt the city's zoning was hampering redevelopment of its two key commercial corridors, N Florida and Nebraska avenues, making it hard for businesses such as Merino's Deli, Cappy's Pizzeria or Cakes Plus bakery to open.

"Current zoning has turned investment away," said Susan Long, president of the Old Seminole Heights Neighborhood Association.

For all the fuss of zoning, N Florida Avenue illustrates that there are virtually zero aesthetic benefits.

No buffer exists to separate a thin ribbon of sidewalk from the street. Billboards hawking the Lotto and laser hair removal sprout from cracked asphalt. Windowless and drab buildings are set back from the road.

Pedestrians who brave the street are wedged between chain-link fences and parked cars on one side, and zooming traffic on the other. Cars traveling at 50 mph pass by so close that a side view mirror could rip the hand off an outstretched arm.

Form-based coding could change much of this. Rather than allow a store to build a parking lot facing the street, form-based coding would require the parking to be tucked in the rear and away from public view. The building would be moved closer to the sidewalk to provide better access by foot, and require features such as signs, awnings, stoops and certain-sized windows. A series of public space requirements could be added that would seek to widen sidewalks and add bike lanes.

Or not. It's all up to what the Seminole Heights neighborhood decides it wants. This will be outlined in workshops in April.

What they come up with will be written into a proposed code that is, for now, scheduled to be voted on by the City Council at the end of the year.

"I don't think the code will transform the whole area in 10 years," Long said. "But I sure as heck hope it will be better, so that Florida and Nebraska have buildings you don't mind driving by and places where you can walk without fearing for your life. Anything is better than what we have now."