

# Beach Dumping Zoning Rules for Growth

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On 17th Street a jumble of vacant and deteriorating buildings sits, just two blocks from the beach.

Efforts to redevelop this strip have foundered over the years, but Virginia Beach officials say they hope they finally have a way to spur a renaissance on 17th Street and other older corridors at the Oceanfront. They want to overhaul the city's zoning codes.

Beach officials have launched an effort to ditch the city's more arcane rules. The current zoning rules, which most communities follow, segregate homes, offices and restaurants and specify how much parking that developers must provide and how many people can live on a plot.

Planners are instead trying to develop more flexible, form-based zoning codes for certain parts of the Oceanfront. If the code change is successful there, city officials plan to take it into other areas targeted for high growth and redevelopment, including Pembroke and Newtown Road.

Current zoning rules "are not realistic for redevelopment," said Councilman John Uhrin, who represents the Oceanfront.

Work on 17th Street has been hampered in part by zoning rules that require developers to assemble large parcels for a condominium project, Uhrin said.

For a developer to persuade several property owners to sell "is an impossibility," Uhrin said.

Form-based zoning codes wouldn't require a certain lot size for a specific use. The city would provide guidelines to developers on the basic look for a neighborhood. The developers could mix offices, restaurants and homes into the building.

The changes are an attempt to create more pedestrian-friendly, urban centers, said Stephen White, a city planner.

"It's a change in everything," said White, who along with other Beach planners is reading the form-based code textbook as homework.

Form-based codes have gained a following across the country and were introduced last year in Portsmouth.

They do come with challenges, especially in a suburban community such as Virginia Beach. Parking is the main concern of planners and developers.

"We understand that parking is a huge issue," said Barry Frankenfield, the Beach's strategic growth areas manager. "We have to develop a strategy."

Under current rules developers have to build every store, restaurant and housing community with a generous number of parking spots.

Under proposed form-based rules, the city would cut back on its parking-space requirements to encourage more walk-friendly communities.

A draft of the proposed guidelines will be completed by March, and public hearings on the issue are planned for the summer, White said.

Developer F. Andrew Heatwole, with Ripley Heatwole Co., said form-based codes can be successful. But the city needs to address the parking issue and allow developers some freedom.

"I'm hopeful that it's user-friendly," Heatwole said. "How user-friendly is going to determine how well it's received."