

How a small Texas city rewrote the rules of development

Bastrop, Texas, found that updating the building code meant getting back on the grid

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A small town outside Austin, Texas, took a big step toward becoming a more sustainable and walkable community. In many ways, it was as simple as getting back on the grid.

Last month, Bastrop, Texas, adopted a new building code, known as Bastrop Building Block, or B3, which radically alters how the city will approach development. Instead of using the one-size-fits-all approach common to land-use policy, the new flexible system was designed to address three interrelated issues hitting municipalities across the county: population growth, aging infrastructure, and outdated development patterns.

While the details of local zoning code may seem technical, Bastrop's change is far from boring. The shift, according to proponents, may help reshape the city at little to no cost to local government, and even serve as a sustainable model for thoughtful development in a state known for a sprawl-centric development culture. It all starts with water.

How flooding washed away old planning rules

Located just 20 minutes east of the booming city of Austin, Bastrop leaders knew that “the growth was coming,” says city manager Lynda Humble. So Bastrop decided to change its policies in the middle of 2018. That May, Humble, who was in the midst of her first year as city manager, told the city council that, under the existing code, new development would exacerbate the city's flooding problems—the town had faced four FEMA-declared floods from the Colorado River and then Hurricane Harvey in just the past few years—and she couldn't do anything about it. Since the city is on the hook to maintain flood infrastructure, it could go broke without enforcing smarter, more sustainable development mandates.

The council decided to rewrite the rules. There had already been meetings and discussions around a forthcoming comprehensive plan for the city, and residents had made it clear they wanted managed growth and fiscal sustainability. The challenge to any change was accomplishing these goals while maintaining the feel of Bastrop, a city founded in the early part of the 19th century.

The new B3 code was built around the idea of getting rid of nuisances, not mandating specific types of buildings. That means, for instance, retail has fewer parking minimums (requirements for a certain number of spaces per store) to reflect the shift to online shopping, and each residential lot can add two accessory-dwelling units. The city was also divided up into a series of character districts, new designations that reflected existing buildings and neighborhoods, such as the museum district or university district, as opposed to more formulaic residential or commercial zones. Within these character districts, new developments needed to be built on gridded streets within Bastrop Blocks, 385-foot-square sections that all have to deal with their own drainage issues, so as to not dump drainage problems onto the city.

Mayor Connie Schroeder had said she wanted to build neighborhoods, not “a sea of faceless subdivisions,” and the code allows more flexibility.

How returning to the grid can save a city

Part of the process included an analysis of the city by consultants from SimpleCity, based in nearby San Marcos, Texas. Matt Lewis, the company's CEO, and his team conducted a detailed examination of downtown Bastrop, a traditional area filled with small, gridded blocks. In addition to discovering that downtown was the only fiscally sustainable area of Bastrop—based on an analysis of revenue per acre and productivity—the consultants found that zoning alone wouldn't create the change the city wanted. Transportation reform also needed to be included, which meant altering parking rules and the layout of new streets in relation to existing roadways.

"Bastrop didn't want to become anywhere America," says Lewis. "Extracting the gridded street network as a key piece of the code was fundamental to going beyond typical zoning and ensuring this effort would be successful for generations to come."

In 1837, when Bastrop was founded, the streets downtown were measured based on the turn of a wagon wheel. Today, at a time when planners are contemplating an era of autonomous vehicles, these antiquated yet walkable streets still manage to foster the kind of economic and social activity that makes street life and commerce thrive. B3 makes grids mandatory.

In keeping with the goal of fiscal sustainability, Mayor Schroeder said that simple math is all that's needed to see that more sprawling development patterns don't add up. In November of 2017, the city council was analyzing the layout of streets in a new subdivision. Based on the length of the winding roads, the number of homes, and the property value, the city found that it would take 16 years for this development to generate the revenue needed to pay for 5 years of road maintenance. Denser, more closely connected streets mean lower construction and maintenance costs.

In postwar America, most cities left the grid and went with a system that allowed arterial roads, which form the curving and disconnected cul-de-sacs of modern suburbia. Bastrop may be one of the first to return to the right angle roadways.

"Another view of success is clarity and simplicity for the community," says Mayor Schroeder, "to know what they can expect neighbors to build and what they can do on their own property."

Humble says that the plan has proven the potential of planning and community engagement. When the full B3 proposal was adopted in November—a move that rezoned more than 4,700 pieces of property—there wasn't a single protestor at the city council meeting. Residents have been able to ask for variances, she says, and recent outreach to developers has helped spread the idea that creative projects that "push the envelope" are welcome.

"It's already gratifying to know development is better based on the conversations we're having today with developers," she says.

Why aren't more cities making similar shifts? Mayor Schroeder says that few are willing to admit they're going broke, and fewer are willing to challenge existing paradigms of development.

"It's unnerving to acknowledge that everything you've been trained on doesn't work," says Humble.