



Keene, NH | Downtown Zoning Initiative

# Technical Review

## + Approaches Summary

Since the most recent comprehensive update of Keene's development regulations nearly 50 years ago, there have been numerous efforts to accommodate the specific needs of downtown through amendments and multiple overlays reacting to new forms of development and changing market conditions. Over time, this patchwork technique of amendments and overlays has led to overlapping, inconsistent regulation of development in downtown Keene.

Recognizing the important role that downtown occupies within the community and the larger region, as well as the opportunity that the downtown area presents to accommodate increased density and new mixed-use development, the City has undertaken the process of evaluating and enhancing the zoning regulations established for this area using form-based coding techniques.

This document provides a brief synopsis of key issues and approaches to new development regulations for downtown Keene. It identifies

the downtown project area, explains some key concepts, and provides an overview of what we've learned so far. It also outlines a conceptual approach to new regulations dealing with permitted uses, dimensional characteristics, design standards, and site development standards for downtown Keene.

**We want your input!** There will be a series of opportunities for public engagement and feedback (see [keenebuildingbetter.com](http://keenebuildingbetter.com)), through which these approaches will be edited and refined. They will then be expanded into draft code language with further development of dimensional, design, and use standards that address both current development conditions as well as the community's desires for the future of downtown Keene.

There will be numerous opportunities for interested members of the public to review and provide feedback throughout the course of this effort. Further information will be provided as the project progresses.

[keenebuildingbetter.com](http://keenebuildingbetter.com)



## An introduction to form-based coding:

### **What is Form-based Coding?**

In contrast to traditional zoning codes, which prioritize the regulation of uses as a means to mitigate conflicts and ensure compatibility, form-based codes first prioritize the built form of the community, ensuring that new development complements and reinforces the established character of a place. Form-based coding is smart approach for a dynamic area like downtown Keene, where maintaining the character and sense of place is critically important, and a heterogeneous mixing of uses, including retail, restaurants, office, open space, and residential, is desired.

### **Form Does Not Mean Uniform.**

Form-based regulations do not require or promote a particular architectural style, and are not intended to encourage architectural uniformity or monotony. The goal of this work is to ensure that downtown Keene can continue to evolve as a dynamic, exciting regional center that is capable of embracing and adapting to change, while maintaining a physical disposition that respects and reinforces the historic legacy embodied within the its built environment.



## **Form-based Code Elements:**

Form-based codes typically consist of a series of elements that work together to guide new development. For downtown Keene, these may include:

### **Sub-District Map.**

It is anticipated that Downtown Keene will be categorized into different “place types,” or sub-districts, with standards tailored to the varied physical characteristics of each place. In form-based codes, a sub-district map distinguishes the boundaries of these places, and clarifies the extents to which each set of standards may be applicable.

### **Sub-District Purpose Statements.**

Purpose statements are used to elucidate the key characteristics of each place, and how the regulations work to reinforce those characteristics. These statements are accompanied by illustrative graphics that demonstrate the unique form and character of each individual sub-district.

### **Building Form Standards + Illustrations.**

These standards typically address the physical characteristics of buildings, such as their disposition on the lot, their bulk and height, and the manner in which they interact with and contribute to the pedestrian environment. A series of detailed accompanying illustrations ensure both the intent and applicability of the standards is clear.

### **Clear Administrative Procedures.**

A form-based code is a new approach to development regulations in many communities. As such, it is critical to ensure that all administrative procedures related to the application of the form-based regulations are communicated and explained through clear text and accompanying diagrams where needed.

## What We've Learned So Far.

Beginning in June of 2018, the consultant team has undertaken intensive study of existing conditions in Keene's downtown, including multiple tours and detailed surveying of built conditions. Relevant plans and policy documents have also been reviewed, including the City's 2015 Comprehensive Plan, to identify a direction for the downtown zoning update.

In addition to conversations with staff, and gathering and reviewing various data and background documents, the consultants conducted a series of key-person interviews to gain further information on current issues from the perspective of current ordinance users and administrators. These interviews were conducted over a three day period during July of 2018, and included individuals from a variety of organizations and with a variety of interests including architects, entrepreneurs, city officials and board members, and owners of property in downtown Keene.

Through these interviews – conducted as informal conversations, and held one-on-one or in small groups – the consultant team was able to speak to stakeholders about the form-based approach and process, explore their issues with the current regulations, discuss ideas and wishes for the future of downtown, and distill some key themes. **These key themes reinforce the vision established in the City's 2010 Comprehensive Plan, and will serve as valuable guidance for the direction of the form-based code:**

### **Maintain the Unique Character of Downtown Keene.**

Ensure that the unique character of downtown Keene is maintained and strengthened, while continuing to encourage creativity and innovation in new building design.

### **Encourage a mix of residential dwelling types, and walkable mixed-use development downtown.**

Provide more opportunities for people to live downtown in a variety of dwelling types, and allow for the development of amenities that can serve the daily needs of those people.

### **Focus density downtown.**

Implement the vision in the comprehensive plan by encouraging more mixed-use development and intensity downtown, including taller buildings within the range of six to seven stories.

### **Modernize the regulations, and align them with community interests and priorities.**

Align policies and processes across City departments, and ease permitting processes to ensure they reflect a dynamic downtown environment with processes for things like placement of public art, pop-up shops, and other downtown events.

### **Ensure clarity and consistency are prioritized in the new regulations.**

User friendly language and illustrations can help to explain intent, as well as to ensure consistency in application of the regulations, and reduce the need for interpretation by staff.

# A conceptual approach to form-based coding for downtown Keene:

## What Does Keene Need?

A new form-based code for downtown Keene must address the key development issues downtown, as well as the key themes identified through interviews, the Comprehensive Plan, and public outreach, to ensure that new regulations serve to move the City closer to the vision identified in the Comprehensive Plan. As such, the code will need to specifically address the physical, or form, characteristics of development, as well as the uses permitted, and how the regulations are administered.

In order to achieve the City's goals as articulated through the Comprehensive Plan, and discussions with staff and key stakeholders, it is anticipated that the following key areas will be addressed in the new zoning for downtown Keene.

### Permitted Uses

Downtown Keene currently comprises a number of different zoning districts, with a variety of permitted and prohibited uses in each. New zoning should simplify the uses that will be permitted downtown, and ensure that there is flexibility for a wide range of commercial, residential, and other uses that may be appropriate. The intent should not be to micromanage land use, but rather to establish a set of permitted uses for downtown that encourage an environment where people can live, work, and enjoy the lively, walkable center of town day or night.

### Dimensional Characteristics

Keene has done an admirable job of ensuring that the standards for development in the Central Business District, particularly, are geared toward accommodating the City's downtown development pattern. As a new downtown boundary may include areas currently within other zoning districts, however, further evaluation and refinement may be necessary to ensure that specific requirements are tailored toward ensuring that this pattern is not only accommodated, but encouraged as new development, infill development, or redevelopment occurs downtown. These requirements may include:

Lot Area.

Minimum lot area requirements should be evaluated, and adjusted as needed to ensure that existing lotting and development patterns are allowed to continue.

**Dimensional  
Characteristics**  
*(Continued)*

Building Location +  
Required Setbacks.

New standards should be drafted as part of the creation of a downtown form-based code, to acknowledge the existing patterns downtown, and to facilitate new development that compliments those patterns. For certain areas, this standard may largely be a continuation of a required minimum setback, while in other areas it may take the form of a required build-to zone (requiring buildings to locate within a certain distance from a lot line).

Building Height.

Building height standards will need to respect and compliment the established character of downtown Keene, while allowing new or infill development to attain greater heights where they may be appropriate, in accordance with the goals expressed within the City's Comprehensive Plan. Allowing taller building heights and greater densities of development will also necessitate the consideration of standards that facilitate adequate transitions from the more intensely developed downtown to residential areas nearby.

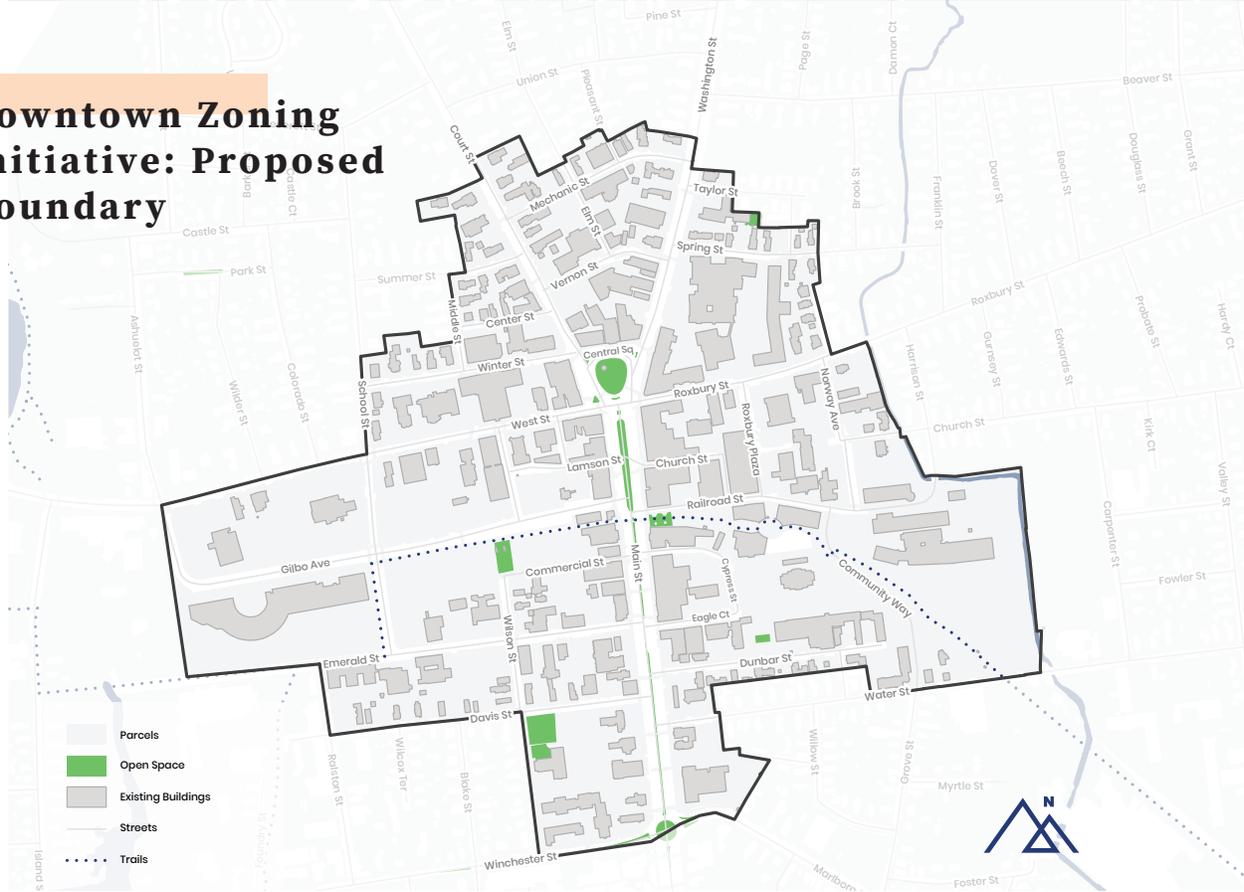
Building Activation.

Building activation addresses elements such as minimum ground floor heights, limitations on blank wall area to maintain visual interest and activity in the pedestrian realm, building entry spacing standards, and other similar features. These standards should acknowledge the predominant development character of the varied places within Keene's downtown, with the intent of ensuring that new development is permitted architectural and design flexibility, while being subject to a basic set of standards that help to ensure the bulk and form of new structures remains in character with their established context.

Public Realm.

Keene's Downtown Zoning Initiative does not address streetscape elements, or recommend changes to the existing streetscape. However, development standards for downtown may need to include how buildings address the street, to reinforce existing patterns or encourage change where needed.

# Downtown Zoning Initiative: Proposed Boundary



To determine an appropriate boundary for the extents of the downtown form-based code, the City’s current “Central Business” and “Central Business Limited” districts were used as an initial guide. The boundary was then refined and broadened, extended to the north, south, east and west based upon a physical analysis of the built condition conducted via multiple tours and a detailed walking survey of the entire downtown area.

## Design Standards.

In order to ensure quality infill development and redevelopment in downtown Keene it is recommended that the downtown zoning incorporate a series of basic design standards. Good design standards for downtown Keene can help to protect the City’s valuable physical resources from inappropriate alterations, and maintain the flexibility needed to solve difficult design issues while allowing for creative architecture and innovative new development.

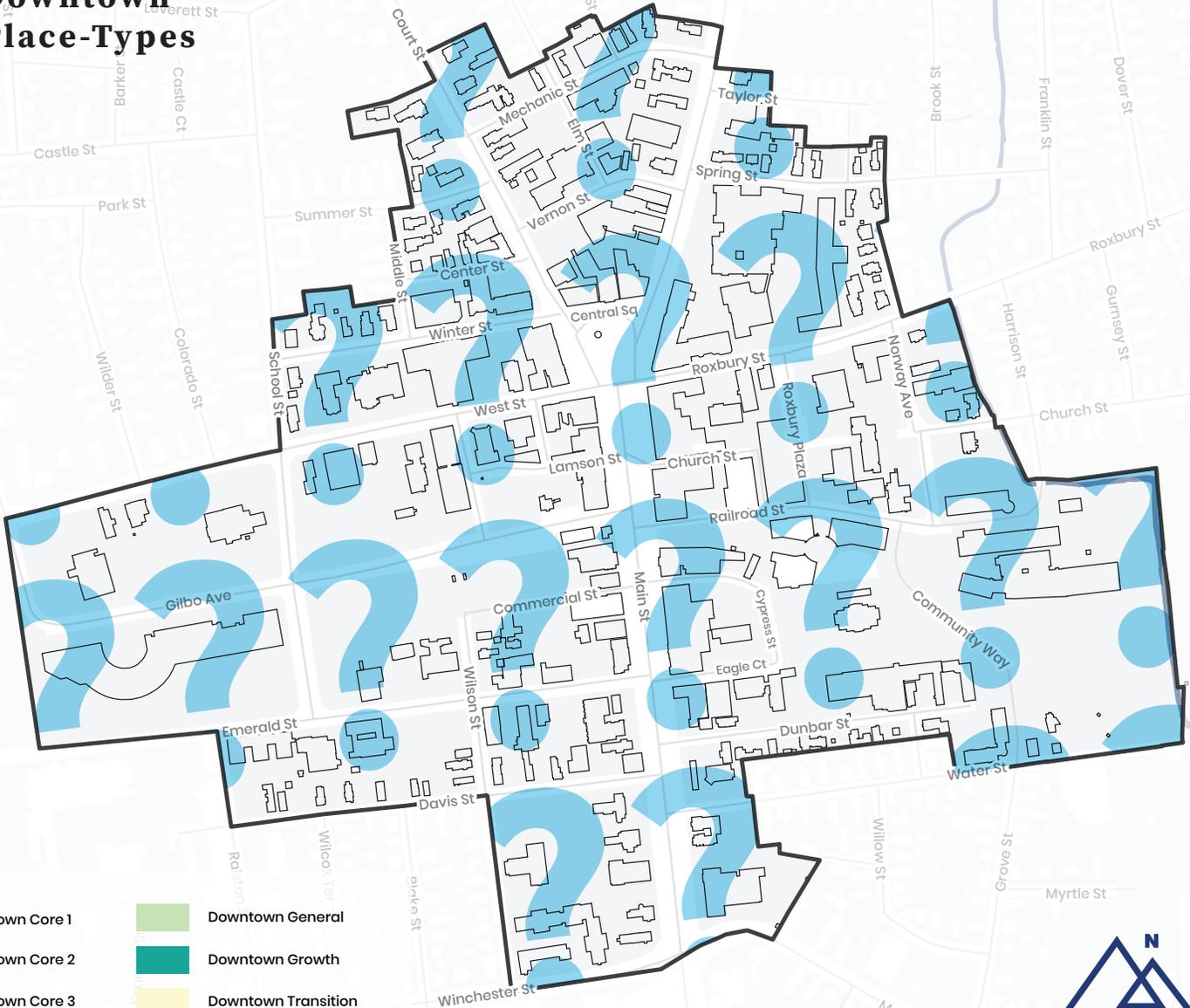
The intent should not be to control the architecture of new development but rather to address basic building design as it relates to the established character of downtown Keene: façade articulation, fenestration, public entrance design and similar elements.

## Site Development Standards.

In addition to the dimensional and design characteristics discussed above, there are numerous additional elements of downtown development that will require consideration in process of creating a new form-based code for downtown Keene. Site development regulations such as parking, landscape, signs, and permitted encroachments will all be addressed within the City’s new Unified Development Ordinance, but special attention should be paid to ensuring they work in both the context of the overall UDO for the City, and for the unique conditions downtown.

# Downtown Place-Types

- Downtown Core 1
- Downtown Core 2
- Downtown Core 3
- Downtown General
- Downtown Growth
- Downtown Transition



## Preliminary Downtown Place-Types.

Downtown Keene comprises a series of character areas, or place-types, each possessing a unique development character, scale, and pedestrian orientation. As such, a new form-based code for downtown must acknowledge these places, and build in standards that reinforce or enhance the character of each place.

Based upon initial physical analysis of downtown, and review of the City's Comprehensive Plan, a series of preliminary "place-types" have been identified on the next page. Some of these reflect existing conditions within downtown, and others are oriented toward implementing the vision in the Comprehensive Plan. As the project moves forward, it is anticipated that the place-types will be refined and fully fleshed out with detailed standards and regulations.

**We need your help! Are there places within downtown that aren't captured in our preliminary list (below)? Are there any that you think should be removed? Where should these be put on the map?**

**Downtown Core 1:**

**Purpose:** This is the heart of downtown Keene, encompassing Central Square and the Main Street Corridor. Accommodates the widest variety of uses encompassing commercial, multi-family residential, civic and cultural uses and public open space in a highly walkable, horizontally and vertically mixed-use urban environment.

**Physical Character:** 0' build-to line. Two to five stories in height.

**Downtown Core 2:**

**Purpose:** Accommodates dense, walkable, mixed-use urban development radiating off of Central Square and the Main Street Corridor. A wide variety of commercial, multi-family residential, civic, and cultural uses, as well as public open space would be permitted, and additional building heights may be appropriate.

**Physical Character:** 0-5' build-to zone. Two to seven stories in height.

**Downtown Core 3:**

**Purpose:** Accommodates the lower-intensity, generally smaller-scale development toward the north and south ends of downtown. A variety of multi-family and attached residential dwellings may be appropriate in this place-type, horizontally or vertically mixed with lower intensity commercial uses.

**Physical Character:** 5-15' build-to zone. One to four stories in height.

**Downtown General:**

**Purpose:** Accommodates mixed use, as well as general commercial activity, including transitional areas exhibiting a combination of traditional walkable development as well as a more auto-oriented development form toward the southern edge of downtown.

**Physical Character:** 0-30' Build-to zone. One to four stories in height.

**Downtown Growth:**

**Purpose:** Accommodates reuse of existing structures, as well as new construction of significant size, providing flexibility in both physical form and permitted uses to facilitate the creation of a mixed-use environment that encourages both growth and infill that complements the walkable, urban form of downtown. A wide variety of multi-family residential, commercial, and light industrial activities are permitted.

**Physical Character:** 0-10' build-to zone. Two to seven stories in height.

**Downtown Transition:**

**Purpose:** Accommodates a variety of residential (including multi-family, townhouse and single-family), open space, and lower intensity commercial uses in mixed-use environment of attached and detached structures that complement and transition into adjacent existing neighborhoods.

**Physical Character:** 10-20' build-to zone. One to three stories in height.

## From concepts to zoning: next steps:

The preliminary approaches and place-types discussed in the Technical Review and Approaches Report will be used to establish a basic set of physical and use-based parameters that will be used to create the regulations of the form-based code. Following a series of opportunities for public engagement and feedback (**see [keenebuildingbetter.com](http://keenebuildingbetter.com)**), these approaches will be edited and refined, and will be expanded into draft code language with further development of dimensional, design, and use standards that address both current development conditions as well as the community's desires for the future of downtown Keene.

A first draft of the form-based code will then be prepared, incorporating many of these initial approaches as well as refined concepts and new ideas brought forth during public review of the Technical Review and Approaches Report. This draft will include a fleshed-out set of sub-districts based upon the identified place-types, complete with dimensional, design, and use standards, as well as regulations or references to the Unified Development Ordinance tying to site development issues such as parking, landscaping and signage. Special attention will be paid to ensure coordination and alignment between the approaches being employed by the overall UDO rewrite process and the form-based code process as it relates to issues of use and site development.

Following the first draft of the form-based code, there will be additional opportunities for public review and feedback, as the draft is edited and refined, moving through a public process in coordination with the City's Unified Development Ordinance. Further information will be provided as these two efforts progress.