

# Michigan Stakes Out its Own Chapter in Growing New Urbanism Movement

by Leslie E. Kettren



*This is lively downtown Holland. While shopping malls are failing all across Michigan—downtowns are making a comeback! These are positive signs that New Urbanism is a desirable alternative type of development. Photo by Greg Holcombe*

There is an exciting new organization in Michigan—the Michigan Chapter of the Congress for the New Urbanism (MiCNU)—aimed at stopping sprawl and re-establishing compact, walkable and environmentally sustainable neighborhoods and communities.

## Stopping Sprawl

In order to accomplish our mission, we believe in the promotion of education, networking and outreach. Some of our closest partners are the Michigan Municipal League, the Michigan Association of Planning, and the Michigan State Housing Development Authority. MiCNU is not a grassroots organization. Our members are primarily professionals in the architecture, planning, and building

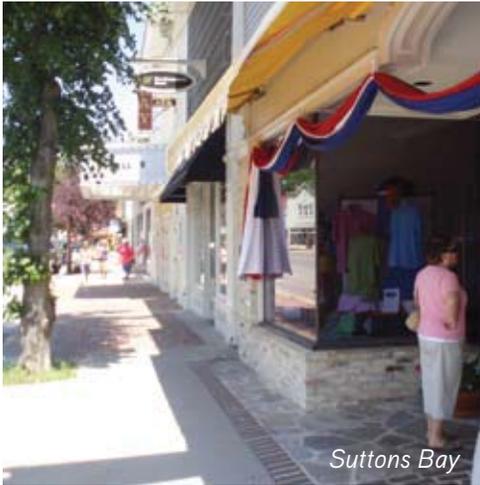
trades. Our role is to work alongside our partners, not to supplant or compete with them.

## What is “New Urbanism”?

The Congress for the New Urbanism was founded in 1993 by a group of architects to promote alternatives to sprawl. New Urbanism—sometimes called “smart growth”—uses design concepts and tools that provide solutions to unsustainable urban and suburban growth patterns (sprawl). Some of the specific principles include mixed-use housing, preservation of the historic built environment and surroundings that improve bicycling, walking, and use of public space.

## Growth of New Urbanism

In recent years, interest in new urbanism has increased as the social and economic effects of sprawl have become more fully understood. MiCNU stands for the restoration of existing urban centers and the reconfiguration of sprawling suburbs into communities of real neighborhoods. We recognize that the physical solutions by themselves will not solve social and economic problems, but neither can economic vitality, community stability, and environmental health be sustained without a coherent and supportive physical framework. This framework involves designing communities for pedestrians and public transit as well as for the car. The best urban spaces are framed by architecture and landscape design that celebrates local history, climate and ecology.



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### MiCNU's Goals

To that end, MiCNU is dedicated to reclaiming our blocks, streets, parks, neighborhoods, villages, cities, and the environment. How do we accomplish this? MiCNU is doing more than talking about improving the quality of our communities. MiCNU has a three year plan to get the ball rolling through education, networking and outreach. In our first year, we are actively involved in introducing form-based codes to Michigan communities.

### Form-Based Codes MiCNU's First Initiative

Michigan needs zoning reform. The built and natural environments demand it, and so do the demographics and markets. Zoning codes that have been adopted in the last 60 years strongly favor spread-out single-use development. The biggest culprits that lead to sprawl are minimum lot sizes, building setbacks, parking requirements, street width standards, and restrictions that separate uses.

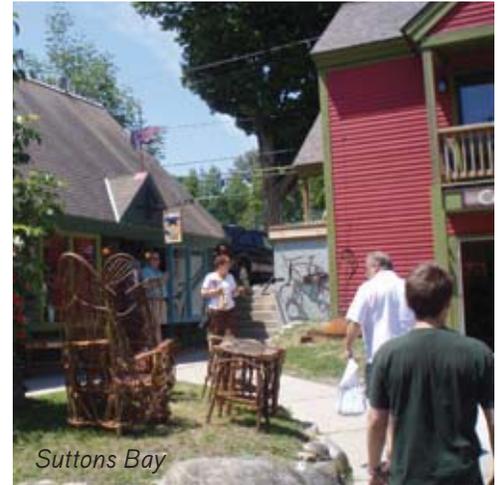
Hardly anyone defends conventional codes anymore at professional conferences or in publications—yet they persist. Conventional zoning (also called euclidean zoning), is very difficult to change because the status quo is so powerful. Zoning has made the public wary of new development because the built environment that has been created through this zoning is of low quality; it does not encourage walking or alternative forms of transportation or

add to cultural, social and entertainment offerings, which improve the quality of life.

So along comes form-based codes—a new tool available to planners. Ten years ago there was little alternative to conventional zoning. Form-based codes address the relationship between building facades and the public realm, the form and mass of buildings in relation to one another, and the scale and types of streets and blocks. Form-based codes have brought about a wave of research and development into new coding techniques. Nationwide, more than 150 communities have adopted these codes. In Michigan there are at least five communities that have adopted a form-based code and another 20 communities that are working on or considering a form-based code.



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### Where Form-Based Codes Work

One of the first communities to adopt a form-based code was Columbia Pike in Arlington, Virginia in 2003. Since then, the aging commercial strip corridor has begun a transformation into a hip urban center. The new code has enhanced both public and developer confidence in what will be built. This is taking place despite poor timing—the code had not been in place for long when the nation entered a housing slowdown and recession.

Montgomery, Alabama is another example. The city adopted a SmartCode in 2006, which is a form-based code that keeps the urban areas compact and the rural lands open. Montgomery now has two traditional neighborhood developments under construction in addition to infill projects in their downtown.



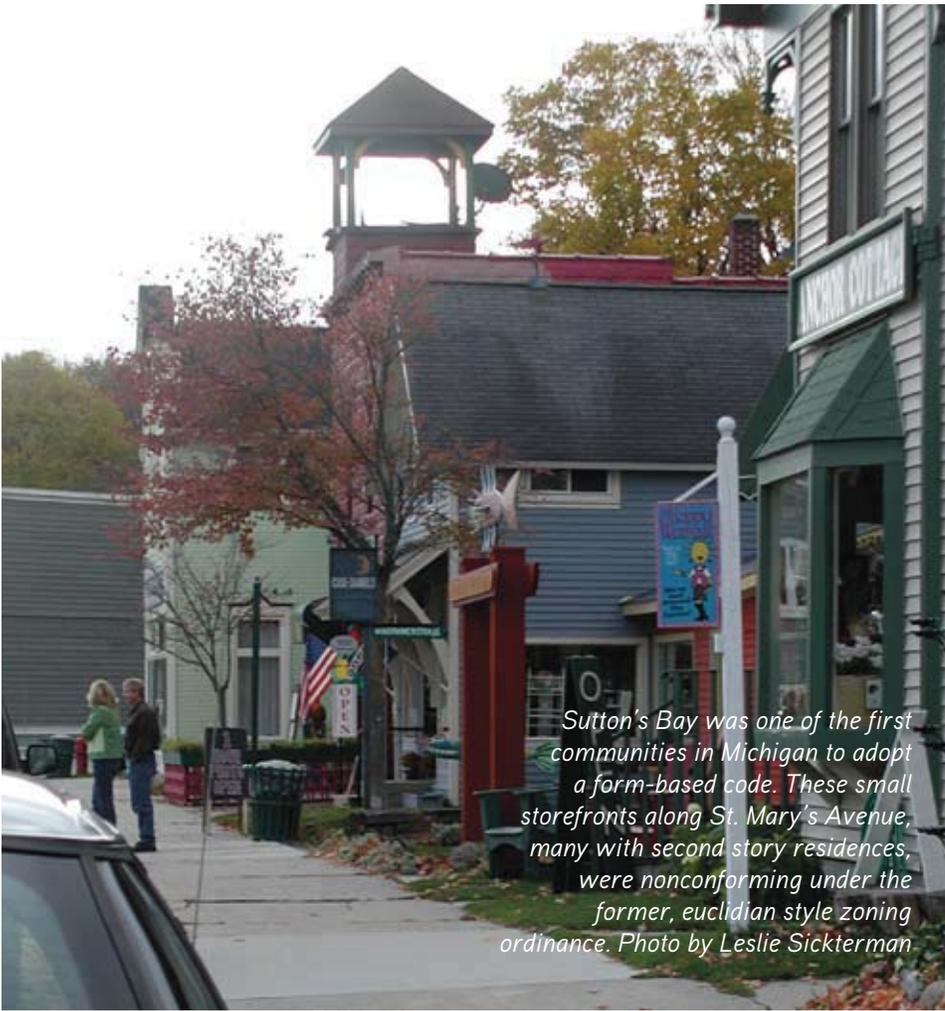
- Cost Allocation Plans
- User Fee Studies
- Project Management Studies
- Utility Rate Studies

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*Sutton's Bay was one of the first communities in Michigan to adopt a form-based code. These small storefronts along St. Mary's Avenue, many with second story residences, were nonconforming under the former, euclidian style zoning ordinance. Photo by Leslie Sickterman*

It's not just the quantity of development that matters, it's the quality. These places are getting better physically. The codes recently adopted in Grand Rapids and Birmingham are too new to judge. But in discussions with city officials—optimism abounds!

What this means is that planners no longer have the excuse that form-based codes are exotic, untested, and difficult to implement. If Michigan is to deal with the housing, energy, and global environmental problems, zoning reform is a necessity. Now is the best time to tackle this issue—when the real estate markets are slow.

### Summary

Although MiCNU and form-based codes are new to Michigan, the idea and philosophy of new urbanism has been here for a decade. More than ever, we need to act now. Recent research shows that Michigan is losing its young and talented population to places that offer a better quality of life. Our organization is working actively, in partnership with the League, to help redesign Michigan's communities in becoming more people friendly places. If you are interested in joining us in this effort, please contact MiCNU at [michigan@cnu.org](mailto:michigan@cnu.org). 





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## Form-Based Codes

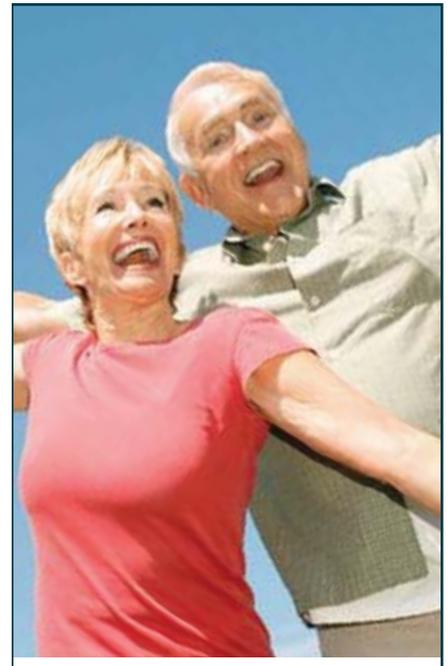
### Certified Training is coming to Michigan!

Form-Based Code training, a three-session curriculum, is approved for AIA and AICP continuing education/certification maintenance credits. This curriculum will serve as a “starter” for ongoing training and education in the principles of New Urbanism. The program is as follows:

- FBC 101: Introduction to Form-Based Coding, offered April 1-2, 2009.
- FBC 201: Preparing a Form-Based Code, offered May 18-19, 2009.
- FBC 301: Completing, Adopting and Administering the Code, offered July 13-14, 2009.

This program is offered by the Form-Based Code Institute in partnership with the MML, MiCNU and MSHDA. For more information, visit [http://www.mml.org/events/training/calendar/form-based\\_codes.html](http://www.mml.org/events/training/calendar/form-based_codes.html)

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