

Fort Collins Land Use Code Updates Winter 2025 Outreach Summaries

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Compiled for Staff Review by Kearns & West

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Fort Collins Land Use Code Updates

Winter 2025 Outreach Summary

Overall Themes and Takeaways

Approach

The City of Fort Collins is updating its 1997 Land Use Code (LUC or Code) to meet the community's evolving needs. The first set of updates focused on housing, reorganization, and moving to visual representations of code standards, away from a fully text-based code. City Council adopted these updates in May 2024. The second set of updates, which was the focus of outreach in January and February 2025, is centering on commercial and mixed-used corridors.

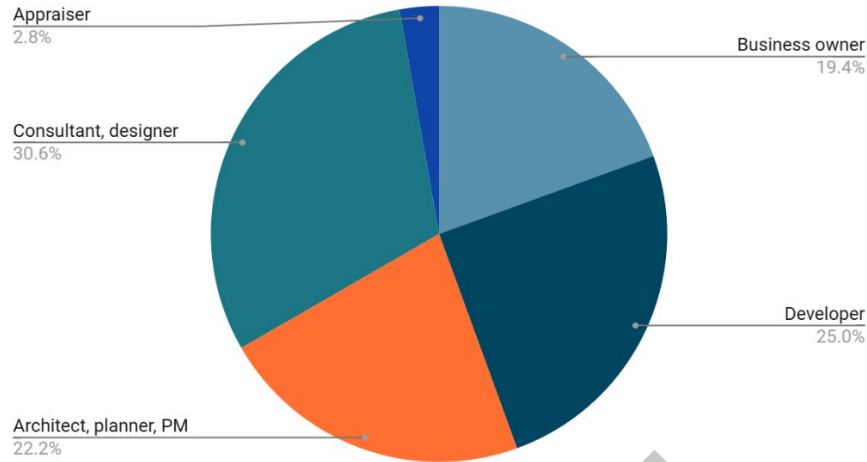
Kearns & West, a neutral facilitation firm, facilitated five focus groups, held five 1:1 conversations, and received email feedback to capture the perspectives of developers, consultants and designers, architects, site planners, project managers, brokers, agents, and business owners. The goals of the outreach were:

- Identify how the LUC can enable outcomes that align with City Plan's values and priorities.
- Understand perspectives on the existing Code and ideas for changes in the new Code.
- Understand how the LUC is or is not supporting interests and desired outcomes, need for clarity, and pain points.

Participants

Focus group participation was by invitation and referral from invitees, prioritizing frequent Code users to ensure that their technical expertise informs this set of updates. The City of Fort Collins provided Kearns & West with a list of individuals recommended for outreach, including developers, architects, site planners, designers, consultants, and small business owners, including recent development or permit applicants whose experience with the development review process demonstrated common challenges and opportunities with the Code. Across all technical outreach, Kearns & West heard from 36 frequent Code users (participants, users, or individuals) Most participants could be primarily categorized as business owners; consultants or designers; architects, planners, or project managers; or developers.

Stakeholder types



Individual focus group feedback, and a summary of all feedback heard from 1:1 conversations and written feedback sent to Kearns & West, are summarized in individual documents. This document captures themes and takeaways across all feedback received.

The City of Fort Collins is also reaching out to the public for feedback on the future of commercial corridors and centers through in-person and virtual open houses and an online comment form.

Summary

Outreach participants offered feedback on what is working well with the existing development review process and LUC, what they would like to see changed about the process, and what they would like to see changed about the Code. While participants named sections of the Code that needed improvement, much of the conversation focused on the development review *process* and how the LUC interacts with codes and standards from other divisions, departments, and agencies. Participants felt strongly that streamlining processes and standards across all divisions and departments is just as important as Code updates. This summary captures feedback received, recognizing that some is outside the scope of the LUC itself.

What's Working Well

Participants expressed appreciation for several elements of the development review process:

- Comments are timely and organized into a single document for easy review.
- City staff are generally helpful and great to work with.
- Recent improvements to the appeal process are saving time and money and ensuring that appeals are substantive.
- The conceptual review process is generally appreciated.
- Staff are willing to help applicants schedule meetings where all departments come together to work through tradeoffs and modifications in their respective codes and standards.

- The addition of a development review coordinator position has helped applicants navigate the process more smoothly.
- Form-based code is helpful.

Process Feedback and Recommendations

Participants expressed frustration with the interaction of standards and codes across various departments as well as with the expensive and lengthy development review process. They recommended improvements to address these concerns:

- Consider land use, building, forestry, utility, and fire department codes and standards holistically and update the process and standards accordingly to ensure coordination and/or integration of requirements as well as easier navigation of all processes.
- The City should affirm its priorities—small business development, affordability, density, etc.—and ensure that the Code is helping developers realize those priorities, including streamlining the review process for projects that help with those priorities.
- Match review cycles to the complexity of the project.

To improve coordination immediately, participants suggested solutions that have worked for some Fort Collins projects or in other jurisdictions:

- Implement weekly office hours to allow a work session after the first review/set of staff comments, where two or three staff are available to discuss design comments and answer questions.
- Organize design charettes that involve the project leads and representatives from various departments (planning, utility, Poudre Fire Authority, etc.) to coordinate across departments before conceptual review. The process allows all parties to discuss priorities and site constraints, tradeoffs, and needed modifications, address conflicts proactively, and save time.
- Invest more time up front in listening, understanding the needs of an applicant, and ensuring that an applicant understands what is and is not possible to save time in the future.

Participants also offered observations and recommendations related to staffing and staff support:

- Consider the impact of staff turnover on the review process. New staff should be required to sit in on reviews and/or meet with a developer for additional context soon after they are hired.
- Once properly trained, empower staff to take decisive action to support applicants, navigate conflicts, and evaluate modifications or variances.
- Increase the budget for development review coordinators.
- Better insulate staff from public feedback and/or set better boundaries around the impacts that the public has on the project design level. Staff get demoralized and may leave their positions if the public has too much power to hold up projects.

While the City has expressed a desire to support small businesses and the public loves living in a community with many small businesses, the development process is frustrating for small

business owners (SBOs) and discourages them from opening a business in Fort Collins.

Participants offered some recommendations specific to supporting SBOs:

- Provide a clear and accurate summary of the costs SBOs should anticipate throughout the development review process. SBOs need to plan financially and may base their design on the financial risks.
- Invest time upfront to listen to SBOs' visions for a property to ensure that they are pursuing the level of development review appropriate for them.
- Make clear to SBOs which feedback they must incorporate into their plans and what interpretations are applicable to them. The process does not make clear that some recommendations are required by the LUC and some are interpretations of the LUC.
- Consider creating a program for SBOs to move into a building, comply with essential standards, and then start operating, gradually becoming compliant with the Code in its entirety. Consider the purpose of the small business and its benefit to the community in relation to LUC gradual compliance.
- Better support already-operating SBOs in complying with modifications required by Land Use Code updates.
- Communicate clearly with SBOs about how construction on nearby roads and/or businesses will impact them and how/whether they can weigh in before and during construction. This will help build trust between SBOs and the City.
- Provide more upfront financial support to SBOs to make it easier for them to open their businesses and navigate the process, especially for SBOs from underrepresented groups. Consider how Small Business Administration loans impact an SBO's ability to meet other process or Code requirements.

Code Feedback and Recommendations

While most participants recommended fixes to the process not directly outlined in the Code, and considered them just as important as Code changes, they also had many suggestions for improvement of the Code:

- Make the LUC easier to navigate. There is a steep learning curve for laypeople who are trying to navigate the Code. It is not organized in a user-friendly way.
- Build in ranges and flexibility to make it easier to make modifications for infill development. Where possible, articulate an objective and offer flexibility in how a developer meets that objective.
- Participants like the form-based code but want to ensure that examples are realistic and representative. Build in flexibility around form definitions.
- Better distinguish between infill and greenfield standards, as infill projects always require modifications to the Code standards, which are currently better suited for suburban landscapes.
- Loosen restrictions related to historic preservation, as buildings that meet the threshold in Fort Collins may not meet the spirit for structures that merit preserving.
- Expand the definition of "uses," as the change of use process is complicated.
- Revisit required reviews for major or minor amendments and Type 1 and Type 2 uses. Participants feel that simple changes are subject to unnecessarily complicated processes.

- Define “compatibility” more clearly in the LUC to establish a consistent, non-subjective standard and allow flexibility in meeting it.
- Revisit architectural design requirements, as requirements intended to improve architectural diversity hamper creativity.
- Clarify which natural habitat buffers should be protected, particularly emphasizing the differences in protection requirements for human-made habitats. Simplify the requirements to protect natural features to eliminate complexity and red tape.
- Clarify requirements for compatibility and transitions between adjacent uses, especially if there is a transition in density.
- Re-evaluate restrictions on secondary uses and redefine employment zones to better reflect the current, post-pandemic market.
- Update parking ratios and calculations in mixed owner environments and based on market conditions, for example in big shopping centers with a mix of business types and property arrangements.
- Include a shared parking section in the Code for commercial and residential mixed use.

Differences Across Feedback

There were more similarities than differences in the feedback received from different user types. The most prominent difference was philosophical, with some practical applications: With respect to transportation, do you plan projects to move the city closer to City Council’s vision for the future or build to accommodate current conditions and preferences?

For example, some participants felt frustrated with parking minimums, especially in denser parts of town, and encouraged the city to let the market decide what is needed in terms of parking. Some felt strongly that parking needs to continue to be a priority, especially in shopping centers and for SBOs who worry about the impact of lack of parking on businesses. Some felt that Fort Collins will always be a city of cars and bikes, and that catering to public transit does not make sense.

Participant Appreciation

Kearns & West is very grateful to the individuals who shared their time and expertise to inform these LUC updates. We offer a hearty thank you to everyone who participated.