

Coverage of comprehensive planning is a little unsettling

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=3055#more-3055>

I know some folks downtown are getting nervous about the attention I have been giving to what is going on with our comprehensive planning effort.

My interest in city planning was sparked by the realization several years ago that the current trends in planning was creating critical shortages of land that would preclude churches from building the kind of facilities that they need.

I realized this when I spoke to a zoning official at Ft. Collins, Colorado, who told me that even though their code allowed churches in nearly all zones of the city, “good luck finding land.”

It was at that time that I began to research form-based codes and New Urbanism, and I began to discover that there are two sides to those issues, and as I began to write about that, others around the country began to discover me. Most found it incredulous that the new codes would ever be harmful to our churches, and for every one who challenged me on the facts, I challenged them to produce for me one real example of how the new codes benefited a church. Not one of them ever did.

I was challenged by the editor of a popular form-based code, and actually had a very long e-mail discourse discussing the topic of how the codes would affect churches. I was told, “We are opposed to the mega-church isolated in the countryside or suburbs surrounded by acres of parking.

This is an environmentally and socially unsustainable model; it paves the landscape, it forces driving, it isolates the membership from the rest of the community, and it isolates the non-driver from the church. It is profoundly anti-civic.” Of course, that statement did not describe just mega-churches; that is a description of most churches in this country.

As you can imagine, that got my attention.

So I began reading as much as I could find on the subjects of smart growth, new urbanism, and form-based codes - Internet articles, books, papers by thinktanks, model codes and actual codes written for various cities - so that I could feel certain that the problem was real. What I discovered was that about 99 percent of what you read on the internet was in favor of new urbanism and the like, but most of the other materials were mostly against.

About that time, the City of Tulsa began to develop its comprehensive plan, and I was told by an attendee to one of the workshops that not only were churches not being considered in the study, but that at least one church had been “stickered over” with a light-rail station, and that comments had been made to the effect that “Tulsa doesn’t need any more churches.”

It was about that time that I also rediscovered our Constitution, and began to learn how absolutely vital property rights are to our freedoms, religious and otherwise.

It was then that I realized just how much the Constitution had been inspired by God, which gave me new meaning to the phrase, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

That knowledge made me dig even deeper to educate myself, on both sides of the issue. One book I just recently read, entitled, War on the Dream - How Anti-Sprawl Policy Threatens the Quality of Life, gave statistical and anecdotal evidence of how current policies that demonize the car, big-box stores and suburbs actually do more to make the problems of congestion, poverty and housing affordability worse, not better.

I also discovered just how badly that authors, of anything that were critical of smart growth or who wrote anything pro-Constitution, have been demonized by the pro-smart growth lobby.

For example, I was told recently by one person that she would not read The 5000-Year Leap, a book that explains the Constitution, simply because it had been endorsed by radio host Glenn Beck.

I have also seen angry remarks on the internet toward Randal O’Toole, who has written what I felt were objective, well-documented articles critical of smart growth.

The bottom line of it all for me is this:

I want protection of the property rights of our churches to remain in and to build in our communities as they see fit and as they feel directed by God, because at the end of the day, regardless of how beautiful our communities may appear, it is just a facade. People still go home to loneliness, abuse, poverty, broken marriages, troubled teens and despair.

What people need most is not religion, but a relationship with Jesus Christ, and it is through our churches where people find the help and the relationships they need.

God help the community that doesn’t care about its churches.

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