

The jury is out on the negative impact of comprehensive plan



by Randy Bright

The jury is still out on the future of Tulsa's churches in its new comprehensive plan. Voting for one of the four proposed PlanitTulsa scenarios was completed June 18, but there are still no results posted at the website.

Jack Crowley announced his plans for downtown Tulsa on June 30, which apparently will include light rail. If it is anything like his preliminary plans that were released some time ago, it will include a spider-like network of light rail lines from downtown Tulsa to a number of outlying communities.

It seems inappropriate to be announcing specific plans before the votes on the four scenarios have even been announced, but I don't think it is inappropriate to begin asking how the new comprehensive plan or the new zoning code will treat churches.

It also seems obvious it was a foregone conclusion that the comprehensive plan would follow some New Urbanistic or Form-Based Code model, despite the fact that Scenario One was presented for a vote to do nothing different than we have been doing for the last four decades. If the comprehensive plan and the new zoning codes will in fact follow a New Urbanistic model, then Tulsa's churches need to be very concerned about what churches will be allowed to do in the future. Many of the planners who write these zoning codes either do not understand how churches function or wish to change how churches function within the context of the type of community they wish to shape.

The zoning codes that John Fregonese suggested that I study some time ago were the ones being drafted for Dallas and Memphis. Each of these severely limited the amount of parking that would be allowed. New Urbanists would like to see that the majority of churchgoers walk or bike to a church within their own neighborhood, without regard to denominational choice or long-established personal relationships someone might have with their church. In other words, most people continue going to their church even after they have moved some distance away from it. They are not going to choose to go to the church in their new neighborhood just because it is the politically correct thing to do.

Memphis went further with a requirement that churches must have a minimum lot area of 20,000 square feet and be located on a corner lot. If they had a gymnasium, they would be required to have a minimum of 10 acres and be located on a corner lot.

While these requirements may not appear threatening, it becomes clearer when you consider that the goal of this kind of code is to densify the city. As a city becomes “built-out”, parcels of land of these descriptions become either nonexistent or too expensive. The consequences of these kinds of regulations would be to stifle or prevent churches from expanding.

While the Religious Land Use Act might provide some legal protection to churches under some of these conditions, it would not help in cases where market forces cause harm, even if those market forces were artificially created.

Many planners and city officials have come to believe that churches are parasites on the community because they don't pay property taxes and that they are a nuisance to the community because of the traffic they generate. But what they are missing are the economic and social benefits of a strong church presence within a community. Though it is not as easy to quantify the financial benefits as it is to calculate the loss of property tax revenue, it is nevertheless easy to assume that the financial benefits far exceed the loss of revenue. Here are some examples. Churches teach people morality that leads them to make the right choices in life. These choices, in turn, benefit the community. For example, teens that are taught abstinence within the context of religion will have fewer children out of wedlock, do less drugs, and commit fewer crimes than those who are not taught any morality at all.

Churches provide for community needs by providing food, clothing, education, job training, emergency services and a whole host of other things that bring economy, stability and quality of life to neighborhoods and cities, as well as provide financial savings for city governments. It would seem apparent to me that Tulsa needs more churches, not fewer, and that it would be to our benefit to write our zoning codes in such a way that would help, not hinder, churches to build.

How those codes should be written will be my topic next week.

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This entry was posted on Thursday, July 16th, 2009 and is filed under [Columns](#).