

Maryland church faces regulations and much higher costs

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=2887#more-2887>

Want to learn what development is like under high-density development rules? The best way is to look at cases in areas that are already under dense growth rules.

One such case is that of Christ Evangelical Lutheran Church of Bethesda-Chevy Chase in Maryland. The church has been working for years to get zoning approvals needed to renovate their existing sanctuary building and to add other buildings to their site.

Located on a 1.87 acre site in an area that is already somewhat densely developed, the church wants to demolish several single family homes it owns in order to build a five-story community building and an eight story, 107-unit residential building, complete with an underground parking garage.

Along with a rezoning request, the church has asked for the abandonment of two streets to enhance their project.

For approval, their District Council must make five findings, which include “substantial compliance with the master plan; compliance with the purposes, standards and regulations of the zone; compatibility with adjacent development, compliance with environmental standards; and “that the proposed internal vehicular and pedestrian circulation systems and points of external access are safe, adequate and efficient.”

In reading this case, I noted numerous problems that were unique to development in high-density cities.

As the City of Tulsa approaches the point that it will re-write or revise its zoning ordinances, it would be good for city staff and residents to consider not only what the impact of high-density development can be, but the position it places churches when they want to maintain a presence in a city that gives them no room to grow.

I thought it admirable that this church wanted to build so much on such a tiny site so that they could continue a 70-year old tradition of serving for the needs of their community, and to their credit, city planners felt the same way. There are many needs to be met because as a city grows more dense, so do the problems that generate the need for ministries.

However, because of the shortage of land and the desire to stay at their existing location, the church was forced to plan for mid-rise and high-rise structures, along with underground parking. This created a new set of problems that would not have been encountered had they been able to build out instead of up.

Neighbors who live next door to the church have objected to the project because it dwarfs their homes, which is understandable because it even dwarfs the existing church building. Other neighbors have objected on similar grounds that the heights of the buildings are not compatible with the neighborhood.

Though I have not seen the budget for the project, I think it safe to assume that the cost of constructing this project must be staggering.

In addition to the cost of the buildings, the cost of building an underground garage and demolishing three single-family homes (when homes have reportedly sold for \$1.6 million in that area) add a lot of unnecessary cost.

There are other costs as well. About 15 percent of the units in the residential high rise must be “Moderately Priced Dwelling Units”; they must dedicate a certain amount of land to public use, when they have very little land to begin with; and 50 percent or more of their land must be “green space” (they have even designed a green roof to help meet this requirement). In combination, that means taller buildings with smaller footprints and bigger cost.

Of course, with all the regulations and neighbor considerations, the process for approvals becomes more complicated, intense and time consuming, which adds legal and professional costs, increased construction costs due to inflation, and additional fees.

The answer for many cities has been to adopt Form-Based Codes, because they are designed to streamline and shorten the approval process by making rules that make approval more predictable. In other words, if developers know what to expect, they can obtain quick permits by simply planning their project to conform to the rules.

On the other hand, if the rules are written with an agenda or without sufficient consideration for consequences, then it may leave citizens without recourse if, for example, a church was forced to build an eight-story building a few feet from their home.

Do we really want to set the stage for this kind of conflict? More on this case next week.

©2009 Randy W. Bright

Randy W. Bright, AIA, NCARB, is an architect who specializes in church and church-related projects. You may contact him at 918-664-7957, rwbrightchurcharch@sbcglobal.net or www.churcharchitect.net.

This entry was posted on Thursday, September 17th, 2009 and is filed under <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=2887#more-2887>.