

Where will churches benefit in ‘Our vision for Tulsa’

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=3544#more-3544>

I have been reading the final draft of “Our Vision for Tulsa,” the outcome document of the comprehensive plan, and I still have the same concerns I had in the past that include, among others, how our churches will be treated as we fall under the heavy regulation that will come with zoning changes.

Consider this statement, found on page 38 of the document: “Tulsa’s land-use program and enforcement regulations must be driven by the goals they are meant to achieve. Owners, for example, must be able to determine easily and efficiently how property can be developed. Variances should be granted rarely if allowed uses are clear and support a community vision.”

Isn’t this a bit like Henry Ford, who cheerfully said that you could have your Model T in any color you like as long as it’s black? Even a genius like Henry Ford quickly discovered how foolish that philosophy was. And yet this document’s statement cheerfully, and with optimistic enthusiasm, says that if you do it our way, it will be easy. If not, we won’t let you do it at all.

What is being considered as the format for our new zoning code is undoubtedly a form-based code, in which stringent rules are written so as to force a certain outcome called the “desired urban form.”

Who defines that? Who defines whose urban form is desired? The answer is always “the community”, but who is that? And why should anyone be able to tell a property owner what he or she can or can’t do with his or her own property? It’s one thing to tell someone that they can’t build a fireworks factory next to an elementary school because it’s not safe, but it’s quite another to tell someone that the building they want to construct, one that meets their personal or business needs, and meeting their own taste in architecture, can’t be built on their own property because it doesn’t meet some unelected officials’ idea of their “desired urban form.”

The statement on page 38 foretells the fact that there will be regulations regarding how land can be used and that they will be enforced (both of which are Constitutional issues), but that it will be easy for you to build as long as you do what you are told.

Again, how will that affect our churches? Remember, churches were not highly regarded in the mapping exercises held in PlaniTulsa’s workshops, and it was only when someone protested that churches were not being included in the mapping process that churches were considered at all.

Regarding the final draft, there were no other references to churches other than the two that were included in the preliminary draft. In both cases, the references made were non-specific and wide open to interpretation.

I'm sure there are those that believe I am overreacting, and that I have nothing to be concerned about, but one of the thickest files I have in my filing cabinet is the one that regards cases of discrimination against churches.

The other reality is that for several years I have been writing about my concerns that the new form-based codes will be detrimental to churches, and while a few have challenged my assertions, not one of them has ever given me any evidence to show me that my concerns are unfounded. Not one of them has given me an example of a church that is thriving under such a stringent set of regulations. All I have been given is theory.

I know that this column is being read by people all over the country. So I am going to do something that I have never done before. I'm issuing a challenge. If you are one who can give me evidence of how a form-based code was actually good for a church, I would like for you to send me an e-mail and tell me about it (no calls please!).

But for me to seriously consider your story, and to share it my readers, here are the rules. It can't be a single sentence or paragraph saying how wonderful you think your new zoning codes were or will be for churches. I'm not looking for opinions, I'm looking for detailed case studies.

By the same token, if your new form-based codes (or any code for that matter) have been bad for churches, I would like to hear from you as well.

These form-based codes have been around long enough that there should be plenty of cases available for study. Despite what my critics may think, I do have an open mind, and I am not out to vilify anyone. What I want to know is the truth. I want to know so that Tulsans get a chance to see the reality of what they are about to do is clear.

Tulsa is a city unlike any other city in the country, because it is a city of churches. And Tulsans are also Oklahomans, who are perhaps the most freedom-conscious, Constitution-loving people in the country. I believe they have a right to know what is about to happen to their community, and I believe that they will do the right thing with the truth when they get it.

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