

What happens now that PlaniTulsa has been passed?

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=4530#more-4530>

Now that PlaniTulsa has been approved by the City Council, I think it is important to restate my position about how it could affect Tulsa's churches. As a reminder, nothing has been codified yet. A new zoning code will be written or the existing code will be revised, but in either case, that could take a significant amount of time. (After all, it only took Denver eight years to rewrite their code.) Even so, that should not diminish the urgency to affect its outcome.

This is by no means a time to feel defeated. I certainly don't. This process has barely started. And I don't believe there are people in the administration downtown with evil motives, nor has anyone there ever expressed any animosity or the slightest displeasure over my opinions, to me personally or to the public about my opinion. There are plenty of good people downtown that want the best for Tulsa just like I do.

That doesn't mean, however, that I don't believe that there aren't those in the overall movement that aren't in it for themselves. It would be naïve and foolish to think that there aren't those who weren't in it to enhance their own wealth or to push their own political agenda. This movement is too big and too political to just be a fad. It is not going to go away by simply by pointing out its flaws, nor have I ever expected to prevent PlaniTulsa's passage by doing so.

Having said all that, why would I risk my reputation and professional standing with those in city government? The bottom line is that I care about Tulsa, I care about Tulsa's churches and I care about the property rights of the citizens of Tulsa.

I began studying the sustainability movement over eight years ago. It was that long process of study that led to my discovery of its depth, and during those years I have read case after case of the abuse of the rights of churches and individuals. The problems are real.

Tulsa has always been a city of churches, and that has made it, at least in my book, a very special place. But Tulsa's churches are like every other church in the country in this regard; they absolutely must fight to maintain their place in community. To be frank, few churches have come to grips with the reality that churches are not as appreciated in their communities as they used to be.

While I think that it is extremely important that churches become active in, and aware of, the planning of their communities, that alone will have little effect in their ability to maintain their place in community.

Many churches have become so inwardly focused that they have become irrelevant to their communities, and the standing that they think they have in their community doesn't exist anymore. That doesn't mean that they don't do important things. It doesn't mean that they don't accomplish a lot of good works, that they aren't well-oiled machines or that they don't preach

the Gospel. They have simply allowed the government to take over functions that churches used to perform.

For that reason, and because secularism is more widespread, many cities are taking the view that churches are no longer important to their community. Some see them as liability to their community because they don't pay property taxes. A few are even taking the extreme view that churches are merely parasites and as such should either have no place in their communities, or that their size, visibility and locations should be engineered by ordinance or unwritten law so as to affect their perception of the public good.

There was a time in American history, and not that long ago, that even unbelievers and backsliders would fight to the death for the churches in their towns. But now, churches can no longer take it for granted that, just because they are a church, their city will do all that they can to help them get what they need. Even though Tulsa has not reached that stage yet, I believe that over time, and especially after our new zoning code is finally enacted, it is going to become much more difficult for churches to build new facilities or to expand the ones they are in.

The answer to the dilemma is twofold. First, churches must get involved and vocal in the planning process, and certainly there is still time to affect Tulsa's new zoning code in a way that will be favorable to churches.

Second, and most important, churches have to become more relevant to their communities. Churches should be so loved by and so valuable to their communities that no one in city government, even the most hardened atheist, would ever consider excluding them.

So PlaniTulsa doesn't have to be the death knell to Tulsa churches. In fact, it could and should motivate its churches to become better, stronger and more visible than ever.

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