

Churches get very little mention in PlaniTulsa research

Two weeks ago I wrote in this column how churches need to get involved in the process that the City of Tulsa is conducting to write a new Comprehensive Plan, a plan that is going to affect how our city and its churches can do business for the next several decades.

PlaniTulsa is the name given to this two-year long initiative, and it has already led to the recent naming of a planning consultant, John Fregonese of Fregonese Associates of Portland, Oregon.

Last year city officials conducted extensive interviews with various groups and associations, using a format that asked three questions of each – “What does Tulsa most need to achieve?”, “What are Tulsa’s most valuable or important assets?”, and “What are Tulsa’s most critical issues, problems, or concerns?”

The interviews, all of which are available on the PlaniTulsa website, were conducted with a total of 66 groups. I read all of them, looking for comments that had to do with our churches.

Fortunately, there was not one negative comment made about churches. Unfortunately, there were very few comments made about churches at all, especially in comparison to many of the topics that seemed to get the most attention. In fact, it wasn’t until I read the sixteenth report that I found the word church, and that was in reference to church architecture being an asset to Tulsa.

Here’s the tally – out of nearly 200 pages that made up the interviews with 66 groups - of words that are related to churches.

The word “churches” – once.

The phrase “faith-based communities” – once.

The phrase “church architecture” – once.

The phrase “religious communities” – once.

The phrase “religious diversity” – once.

The phrase “spiritual city” – once, with the comment that we should “play it up”.

The phrase “mainline churches downtown” – once.

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That’s it. That’s all. We have more churches per capita in Tulsa county than any county in the country, and this is how much attention is being paid to churches in our planning process, at least by the people who were interviewed, and this is assuming that all of their comments were reported.

So the question is, “why not?”. If churches are so important to the community, why isn’t there more attention being paid to them?

I can assure you, there is a lot of attention being paid to churches, and there is going to be a lot more. And the reason why is money. Churches take valuable property out of the city’s tax base, and I have been told by someone who should know that there have been discussions and concern expressed at the city government level about how much property megachurches are taking.

On the other side, there were numerous references to all things green in almost all of the interviews. Subjects that included

walkable communities, light rail, sustainability, mass transit, bicycles, urban sprawl, and infill development were mentioned many times, and affordable housing, gentrification, and form based codes were moderately mentioned.

To be sure, most of the interviews were very positive about Tulsa. If these interviews are an adequate cross section, most Tulsans genuinely love Tulsa and want to make it better.

But can Tulsa stay the city that Tulsans love without its churches? Will there be any left fifty years from now, or will they all have been forced out of the city by New Urbanistic rules and need for tax revenues? Or will they simply disappear because no one cares anymore?

I’m betting that a lot more people care than were represented in this study, but I need your help to prove it.

Last week I received a call from John Fregonese’s office requesting an interview with me, and another interview with John Fregonese personally. They have developed a list of ten local churches (I don’t have the list yet) to consult with, but in addition to that I would like to say that we have a grassroots level group with even more clout.

Please contact me if you would be willing to serve. Tulsa’s church community needs to make its presence known in the development of the new Comprehensive Plan, but you can bet that it will not get the consideration it deserves without some prodding.

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