

# Christians have to become involved

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=483#more-483>

Last week, I spoke at the OK-SAFE meeting in Tulsa about the adverse affects that New Urbanism can have on churches. Despite the fact that many churches are winning their cases with the help of advocate groups like The Beckett Fund, the Christian Law Association and others, there seems to be no shortage of cities that make a conscious effort to keep their churches from expanding their facilities.

Today while searching the Internet, I found a new lawsuit that was just filed last week by a church in South Anchorage, Alaska.

Rabbit Creek Community Church has filed a suit in federal court alleging that the Municipality of Anchorage has violated its First Amendment rights by imposing greater standards upon churches, in the city's zoning code, than on other assembly uses.

The lawsuit states that city agencies have "imposed a substantial burden on the rights of the church and its members to the free exercise of religion."

The city's zoning code requires that churches that build in residential areas must submit a site plan for review, but don't require other assembly uses to do the same.

The church began working with the city to get their site plan approval in 2004. The city's Planning Department initially approved the site plan, but the Planning Commission later rejected their site plan due to objections by homeowners in the neighboring wooded area.

Their original plans called for an addition to the church and the addition of a school. After their plans were rejected, they revised their site plan to reduce the size of the addition to the church and eliminated the school addition. The 25,000 square foot, two-story addition would bring their entire facility area up to 45,000 square feet.

The church submitted their revised plans to the city in 2006. It was rejected by the Planning Department, the Planning and Zoning Commission, and the Board of Adjustment.

The reasons given for the rejection included the effect that the expanded facility would have on the water supply, traffic, vegetation and surface drainage. The church contends that the rejections were based on faulty information.

One neighbor claimed that the building would be a monstrosity, and complained about the church "clear-cutting" for the new building. Another neighbor was quoted to have expressed doubt about the church's withdrawal of the school from its plan.

Since the suit was just filed, and the Municipality of Anchorage has asserted that they will fight the lawsuit, it may be years before the outcome is decided. For the time being, however, the

damage has been done, and the church will not be allowed to build for at least a few years, if at all.

As society has grown increasingly secular, its perception of a church facility has changed from being a desirable, stabilizing element of a neighborhood to being considered a public nuisance. The truth is, people tolerate things that they either like or have a neutral attitude towards, but they consider things that they don't like to be an annoyance.

To be fair, and not knowing all of the particulars in this case, it is possible that the church made some planning mistakes, but usually planning mistakes can be corrected. The giveaway in this case is that the project was initially approved by the city, then rejected when neighbors learned about the project and raised objections.

Under a New Urbanism set of rules, it will be much easier to block churches from expanding. In my speech to the OK-SAFE group, I explained how New Urbanism and the Smartcode worked. Out of the six specific "transcept" areas that range from the "natural" perimeter of a city to the inner core (downtown) area of the city, churches are only allowed in the two innermost areas of the city, or in the outer areas as a "Special District" that is set aside just for the church.

In comparison, that would be like saying that the only new churches that could be built under that scenario would be in downtown and the immediate area around it, where there are no appreciable tracts of land available for a church project.

Granted, most cities that adopt New Urbanism don't adopt the Smartcode in its entirety, but that should be little comfort to churches in Tulsa who think that expanding their facilities or building new ones will be easy under any new New Urbanistic system. It won't.

It won't, that is, unless the Christians in this community awakes and a raises objections of their own to a system that could be, by default or intent, hostile to churches.

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