

Smartcode requires a lot more study

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=541#more-541>

Well, Smartcode is onto me. Sandy Sorlien, the managing editor, e-mailed me last week concerned that I was giving New Urbanism a bum rap.

So let me share some of the things that she shared with me and the deal she and I made. Sorlien was responding to my June 12 article, “Christians Have to Become Involved,” in which I described the plight of a church in Alaska that has spent years trying to get permission from its city to add on to their church, and finally had to sue the city for violation of its religious rights.

The point of the article was not that it was the fault of New Urbanism that this particular church was having problems, but that people within a city government who do not like churches can prevent them from building and that under New Urbanism it can be just as difficult, if not more so.

In the article, I pointed out that the Smartcode only allowed churches in two out of six “transect” zones, which it clearly stated in Version 8.0 of the Smartcode. In her e-mail, Sorlien stated that the Smartcode allows churches in “every inhabited transect” in Version 9.0. Since then, I have received that most current version, and that indeed has been revised.

Sorlien explained that “we did change it about two years ago because the phrase ‘religious assembly’ may be interpreted to refer to the use, not the form, so it really should be permitted everywhere, including your living room or city park.”

She continued, “a church is exempted from the code’s basic building-scale standards because it is of greater importance to civic life and architectural character of a community than most other buildings. Therefore, the community should be allowed to have some say in how it looks and relates to the surrounding neighborhood, and the building should be exempt from the usual height and setback limits.”

This is part of what I e-mailed back to Sorlien. “It might surprise you that I am not a big fan of our current zoning codes because they have had a devastating affect on neighborhood churches. People who attended churches that were built in neighborhoods prior to our current zoning codes were able to park in the streets. Many such churches did not have any on-site parking. After the zoning codes went into effect, churches have been required to add on-site parking when they did an expansion. As a result, many churches have either closed, dwindled in size or moved to the suburbs. In my opinion, our current zoning codes are bringing about the eventual demise of the small and medium-sized neighborhood church.

“Do I believe that someone set out to eliminate neighborhood churches with zoning codes? Absolutely not. It was an unintended consequence of poorly written, poorly thought out and poorly visioned codes done by people who did not have any prejudice whatsoever toward churches.

“Do I believe that New Urbanists have written their codes to eliminate churches? Again, absolutely not. What I am concerned about are the unintended consequences that will cause churches even more problems than they already have.”

One of the things that Sorlien included in her e-mail to me included the following statement:

“We are opposed to the mega-church isolated in the countryside or suburbs surrounded by acres of parking. This is an environmentally and socially unsustainable model; it paves the landscape, it forces driving, it isolates the membership from the rest of the community and it isolates the non-driver from the church. It is profoundly anti-civic.”

Unfortunately, what she described was not just a mega-church; that was a description of nearly every church in the country, and I am very concerned about what that means for churches in a New Urban environment.

I have spent many hours reading and studying the most recent version of the Smartcode. It is very complicated, but the more I read it the more I understand it. I can tell you that so far, some of my opinions of the Smartcode have changed somewhat, but none of my concerns about it or about New Urbanism in general have. I will write more about that in future articles.

Now – the deal. Sandy Sorlien and I have agreed to continue dialogue. I will be asking her a lot of questions and posing scenarios for her to answer (such as a clarification of her mega-church statement) and I will include my findings, whether I am right or wrong, in my articles. She will do the same for articles she writes in the New Urban News. She has also expressed interest in learning more about churches that could possibly affect future versions of the Smartcode.

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