

Change is headed for Tulsa

by Randy W. Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=776#more-776>

Several weeks ago I briefly spoke with John Fregonese, Tulsa's planner for our new Comprehensive Plan, regarding what our new zoning code will look like as a result of the new plan. He said that he would not be writing our zoning code, but that he recommended a code similar to those that are being adopted by Dallas and Memphis. Later I received a draft of each of these codes. This week I will discuss the Dallas code, and next week I will cover the Memphis code.

These are important codes to get familiar with, because each represents what we may be seeing in the coming years in Tulsa.

The Dallas code is a form-based code, which the The Form-Based Code Institute (FBCI) defines as “a method of regulating development to achieve a specific urban form. Form-based codes create a predictable public realm primarily by controlling physical form, with a lesser focus on land use, through city or county regulations...Form-based codes address the relationship between building facades and the public realm, the form and mass of buildings in relation to one another, and the scale and types of streets and blocks.”

The Dallas code differs from the SmartCode, which is also a form-based code, in that it is not transect-based and does not impose growth boundaries. One purpose for a growth boundary is to force the eventual “build-out” of the area that the growth boundary defines, increasing the density of construction primarily through mixed use, multiple storied buildings. Another purpose is to reduce the use of the automobile by restricting parking and encouraging the use of mass transit.

That the Dallas code does not include a growth boundary should come as no surprise. As one author wrote in Architectural Record, “Texans are never going to abandon their cars. Deep down they believe that legs are purely decorative and the world looks best at 60 mph with the top down.”

The Dallas code does include requirements for open space, but not in the same way as the SmartCode. The SmartCode has two open spaces. One is a “preserve” where virtually no construction or human habitation is allowed, and the other is a “reserve”, which is land that has limited construction and human habitation, but which is ultimately destined to become a part of the preserve area. The Dallas code blends their open spaces in with other zones, requiring them to be landscaped and available for people to use and enjoy.

Other parts of the Dallas code are very similar to the SmartCode. Both include specific requirements for streets, parking, building sizes, building heights, locations of buildings in relation to streets, and types of entrances and facades. Both encourage mixed use in conjunction with mass transit, such as light rail or bus lines, and walkable neighborhoods.

For example, the Dallas code includes WMU (Walkable Mixed Use) districts that are “intended for use in the vicinity of rail transit stations, immediately adjacent to the Central Business District, and in the 23 study areas of the Trinity River Comprehensive Plan” but are “also appropriate for major job centers and concentrations of multifamily housing...”

Another similarity is the requirement for “shopfronts”, which are essentially multiple story residential buildings with businesses on the ground floor, much as buildings were done a hundred years ago in most American downtowns.

Churches will be impacted by the Dallas code, but perhaps not to the same degree that they would be by the SmartCode. The biggest problem I saw were the maximum parking allowances, which amounted to a parking ratio of 1:4 (one car per 4 people) or even less, when most churches need a minimum ratio of 1:2 or more. This will obviously affect newly constructed churches, but will probably eventually affect existing churches when they do major projects.

I was not able to tell from the draft of the code just how much of Dallas would be immediately affected by the new code. There are references to zoning maps in the code, but they were not included in the code itself, so the question would be whether the entire city will be re-mapped immediately, or if the transition will be done gradually.

I do find it somewhat surprising that Texans would accept a form-based code, and it will be interesting to see how it will be once its use begins. It may be that the public is not well informed about how it will work, which is my same concern for Tulsa as it rewrites its zoning code.

Though the Dallas code is not as stringent as the SmartCode, it is a classic example of New Urbanism nonetheless, and it is altogether likely that it is a good example of what is coming to Tulsa.

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