

## New urbanism and churches

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=1903#more-1903>

It's been a couple of years now since I began writing articles in response to the City of Tulsa's effort to revise its Comprehensive Plan, beginning with the seminar that the city presented where words like "sustainability" and "mixed use development" were gently introduced to a crowd of architects, engineers and realtors.

I was already very aware of and self-educated on New Urbanism at the time, and when I asked one of the city staff people if that is where the city was headed, I was told, "maybe we are, maybe we aren't".

After watching PlaniTulsa, I don't think that there is any doubt that that is exactly where this city is headed. In my opinion, the decision to lead Tulsa in that direction had already been made far in advance of that seminar or the hiring of the comprehensive planning consultant.

Tulsa is certainly not alone. I have my Google Alert set to pick up the phrase "New Urbanism", and it is a rare day that passes when there aren't a number of hits. Most of the hits extol the virtues of New Urbanism, and many of them cite examples of yet another city or town that is adopting one of a number of variations of New Urbanistic form-based code. It is a movement that is literally sweeping the nation.

However, it appears to me that this trend is one that primarily originates at the municipal level. Cities around the country are in financial trouble, and elected officials and city staff are frantically looking for ways to not only keep their bills paid, but also to be competitive with other cities and towns for jobs and events.

The concepts embodied within New Urbanism (mixed use development, containment of construction within restricted areas, mass transit, eliminating or reducing the use of the car, and creating extremely dense development) all work to the advantage of the city in the regard to the cost of building and maintaining infrastructure. But to create an allure to it, it is touted as a place that creates a quality of life, a place where people can finally be happy.

But it is also a concept that requires big government to enforce. While some people will enjoy living in a NU development, there are many others who do not want to be forced to live in close quarters with others. Anyone who has lived in an apartment complex for any time at all can attest to that.

Because of that, there are not that many cities that are adopting form-based codes on a city-wide, compulsory basis. Most are keeping their old zoning codes and gradually introducing the form-based codes only in certain areas or where developers want to take the risk of building a NU development.

However, the desperation of economically failing or ailing cities is only going to grow worse as we enter the Obama era of hyperspending, hypertaxing, and hyperinflation. New Urbanism, a product of liberalism, may very well fail under the weight of the economy, because the dirty secret of building highly dense developments is that it takes more capital to build them than it does for individuals to build individual buildings. But once the economy recovers it will be back on track. This is an idea that won't go away easily and whose advocates are well-funded and patient.

But even though many cities may not adopt a city-wide form-based code right away, most will begin enforcing building moratoriums in certain areas in order to limit the amount of roads and utilities that they must build for new development.

When the City of Tulsa completes its Comprehensive Plan and the new zoning code that will certainly follow, I believe that they will gradually begin declaring areas between the city limits and the city fenceline off-limits to construction. That is where the real problems will begin because the inevitable result will be land shortages, especially shortages of larger tracts of land that churches need to build.

In addition, I believe that we will see more cases of eminent domain, the threat of eminent domain, or the prohibition of permits to entities like churches in an effort to cleanse the city of properties that don't pay property taxes.

None of this will happen overnight because people react strongly to rapid and drastic changes (look at the Tea Parties last week). It may take ten to twenty years before churches begin feeling the real impact of the changes that are coming. But make no mistake, unless something is done to stop it, these changes will come even to a conservative, traditional city like Tulsa. Churches absolutely must begin accepting the present reality, and begin mapping their future now. It may not be possible later.

©2009 Randy W. Bright

Randy W. Bright, AIA, NCARB, is an architect who specializes in church and church-related projects. You may contact him at 918-664-7957, [rwbrightchurcharch@sbcglobal.net](mailto:rwbrightchurcharch@sbcglobal.net) or [www.churcharchitect.net](http://www.churcharchitect.net).

This entry was posted on Thursday, April 23rd, 2009 and is filed under [Columns](#).