

New Tulsa ‘planning director’ will be a powerful person

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=4970>

My Google Alerts picked up an interesting, but lengthy, article by Mike Easterling that effectively demonstrates that we are likely to see a big shakeup in how planning is done downtown. At issue is the role that INCOG will play in providing zoning code conformance analysis of proposed projects.

Some speculate that INCOG will be phased out in favor of creation of an in-house staff that would take over INCOG’s duties. I thought that was made clear when the draft of the Comprehensive Plan was published. The text of the document suggested a diminished role for INCOG, not outright dismissal, but my interpretation of the text seemed to indicate that INCOG would become less important or involved in planning issues. Instead, I believe that INCOG will eventually only be used as a source for maps and other records, and even that role will eventually disappear.

In response to what INCOG’s role might be and the creation of the new Planning Director post, Easterling quoted Mayor Barlett’s Chief of Staff Terry Simonson as saying, “that kind of decision belongs, first and foremost in the hands of a professional planner. Once we have a professional planner on board, we will ask he or she to do a comprehensive review of the planning landscape as we know it for the City of Tulsa and then make recommendations to the mayor on how or where planning functions should be changed. It would be premature at this point for those of us in government, those of us in politics, to presume that we would know better, or know best, than a professional planner who’s had that type of high-level experience in a city government.”

At some point in time, a decision was made that the City of Tulsa needed a new Comprehensive Plan, one that would bring Tulsa up to date with today’s trends and make us competitive with other cities. But I think it fair to say that someone also decided that Tulsa needed high-density development and light rail.

So we hired a professional planner, John Fregonese, to develop the new plan, and guess what he gave us - a Comprehensive Plan that is geared to high-density development and light rail. No offense to Mr. Fregonese intended, but the fact is that those are things that he believes in. But even his organization admitted in the comprehensive planning process that their surveys indicated that Tulsans like their single-family suburban homes.

Tulsa has been working toward a “one-stop shop” for a number of years prior to the new Comprehensive Plan, and from my experience in working with them, I believe that they have made a lot of progress in streamlining the building permit process.

This ability to streamline the process is now crossing over into the realm of zoning and urban planning. The goal is to make it as easy as possible for developers and property owners to

develop their property in a short amount of time. In theory, this will bring more development, and therefore more business and tax revenues, to our community.

But the reality is that the new zoning codes, especially form-based codes, can only effectively do that when developers and property owners elect to submit to the rules that are written in them. The idea is that if all or most of the requirements for projects are cast in stone, strict adherence to the rules will prevent strict and lengthy reviews of the project.

This method works well with building codes, but my experience with building codes is that they do not discourage innovation, nor do they establish any rules for aesthetics. However, form-based zoning codes are written to create a certain “desired outcome” that does in fact discourage innovation and establishes a certain aesthetic.

What has made this new way of doing things more palatable is that developable property - that is, land that has already gone through the lengthy reviews, sometimes for years - has become a rare commodity, something that can be sold for a serious profit because there is no longer uncertainty about what it can be used for. This sets the stage for deep-pocket developers, who after spending enormous amounts of money getting land ready to build on, to sell the land to builders, who in turn will sell the property as soon as it is built.

The result? Higher land costs.
So who will become our planning director?

Will it be someone who can look at both sides of this issue, or someone devoted to constitutional property rights?

Will it be someone who will see Tulsa’s churches as a burden on society, as many professional planners now do?

Regardless, you can bet that this person will become one of the most powerful positions in city government, and what that person believes in will make or break Tulsa as a city people will want to be a part of.

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