

Professional planners know don't know much about churches

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=5452>

Several years ago, an article by Stuart Laidlaw appeared on TheStar.com website entitled Churches kickstart suburban sprawl, study shows. The opening paragraph stated, "Fast-growing churches, frustrated with the slow pace of municipal planning, often find themselves pushed into setting up shop in rural areas on the edge of town, where they end up contributing to suburban sprawl, a Ryerson University study has found."

Laidlaw quoted the study's author, Sandeep Kumar Agrawal, who said, "They (churches) rapidly gobble up prime agricultural land, adding to the sprawl and causing burden on the city's infrastructure."

I attempted to find a copy of Agrawal's study, *New Ethnic Places of Worship and Planning Challenges* on the internet, but it is no longer available. (If any of my readers has a copy, please send it to me.)

Laidlaw said in his article that Agrawal had spoken to a Toronto conference on municipal planning and churches and said that "neighborhoods are best designed when services such as parks, stores, schools and places of worship evolve out of the needs of the community." Agrawal also acknowledged the problems included difficulty finding land large enough for worship space and parking, taking more than a decade to get a facility built, and churches who were choosing to move to industrial areas.

Recently an article appeared on the friendsoffrederickcounty.org website that that reiterated some of the same concerns. While the article acknowledged that "churches and religion are an important part of our life and culture in Frederick County," the size and impact that churches were having was a problem. It said, "...large churches can have significant impacts on traffic, storm water runoff, lighting and glare and act as anchors to promote surrounding residential development." (emphasis mine)

The author of the article was not identified, but it appeared to be someone involved in planning for Frederick County. The author made references to Agrawal's study, *New Ethnic Places of Worship and Planning Challenges* saying that Agrawal "found that the trend to build church complexes in rural areas is most often among (the) fastest-growing ethnic communities and often exacerbates suburban sprawl."

The author also said that churches should not be allowed to exceed 25,000 square feet on agriculturally zoned land so that "it conforms with the beauty and bucolic nature of our countryside in Frederick County"; questioned whether the churches would be willing to "farm the land around their structures"; claimed that they were concerned that churches wanted to build

in a manner inconsistent with their master plans; and even questioned the consistency of “the churches own doctrine” with their plan.

“Keep your eyes open for upcoming Public Hearings on Mega Church proposals...” the article said.

A 25,000-square-foot church is a megachurch? That’s a congregation of about 250 people at the most.

Heavy sigh. Where do I begin?

I am constantly amazed at how little the professional planners know about churches. I am even more amazed at the prejudice that some have perpetuated against churches, as though they are the cause of community ills.

For at least seven years I have been writing about how new zoning codes are crowding churches out of city borders because of the drive to densify their communities. For many cities, rural areas at the fringe of the city limits has been the only place churches could go to expand. Some cities place urban growth boundaries within their own city limits, forcing churches to build even further from the city core. And now they don’t want them in the rural areas? Where are they supposed to go? Are churches going to be declared anti-civic because they are simply trying to exercise their Constitutional rights to assemble and to exercise their religion freely?

Churches and communities are on a collision course because there is so little regard or even knowledge about the positive impact that churches have on communities. And they are conspicuous in their absence in the books that planners write. The last three I have purchased either did not mention churches at all, or barely covered the issue. In fact, only one had one suggestion for churches, and that was to sell off its “excessive parking” for development of high-density housing. Now that’s creative.

More on this subject next week.

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Randy W. Bright, AIA, NCARB, is an architect who specializes in church and church-related projects. You may contact him at 918-582-3972, rwbrightchurcharch@sbcglobal.net or www.churcharchitect.net.

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