

Tulsa's comprehensive plan will say little about churches

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=5589>

Tulsa will soon begin its campaign to write a new zoning code that will be more conducive to the framework established in the PlaniTulsa comprehensive plan that was developed and approved last year.

It will likely be written by an outside consulting firm that specializes in form-based codes. There were only two mentions regarding churches in the final draft of the comprehensive plan (entitled "Our Vision for Tulsa") that was completed in June of 2010. Regarding new residential neighborhoods it stated, "Churches and schools will continue to be important parts of Tulsa's community and culture and new neighborhoods will be designed so residents can easily reach them on foot, by bike or car."

Speaking of existing neighborhoods it said, "Parks, schools and churches will continue to be important community assets, and will be protected and maintained."

That churches would receive so little attention in our comprehensive plan is not that surprising. The newest planning books by the most respected planners have little to say about how important churches are to community or how they should fit in. Two of the most recent books, *Retrofitting Suburbia* by Ellen Dunham-Jones and June Williamson, and *Sprawl Repair Manual* by Galina Tachieva, focus on the concept that the suburbs must be redeveloped into sustainable communities that are more urban in nature.

Much emphasis is placed on the concept of community in modern planning. Planners believe that cities can and should be developed so that everyone lives in a kind of microcosm, within a region that is within walking distance of home and work and one that contains "third places" that give people a sense of belonging and camaraderie.

Since its beginning, churches have always been an important part of communities in America. They have been the traditional gathering place in cities and towns for centuries. They served as the "third place" long before the term was invented.

In *Retrofitting Suburbia*, the authors refer to sociologist Ray Oldenburg, who comments on "third places" as "neighborhood gathering places where local people routinely hang out and socialize" and gives examples that include "the corner pub, diner, coffee shop, barbershop or hair salon, and even at times the hardware or general store." I can imagine that because I saw it in the small town where my father grew up, where my grandfather would meet with his buddies at the local barbershop to play checkers every day.

But I also remember the churches, especially in my own hometown, that were the favorite places for people to gather and socialize. The churches performed an important function in providing

not only day-to-day socialization, but also in grounding people in the solid moorings of morality that make a community safer and infinitely more enjoyable.

Oldenburg's omission of churches in his list of third places is disappointing, and indicative of the thinking that permeates the minds of planners today. In *Retrofitting Suburbia*, the authors state, "Is suburbia generally lacking in "third places"? Oldenburg thinks so and he is not alone in connecting the decline in public forms of sociable behavior with suburban development patterns."

The *Sprawl Repair Manual* seems to have even less to say about churches. The only example that I could find in the book spoke about how churches could "create additional revenue and improve their surrounding neighborhoods by urbanizing their underutilized parking lots with housing or mixed use buildings." This was exemplified with a drawing of a church that gave up more than half of its parking to development of housing, which would be a death knell to most churches.

The point I am trying to make is that in the world of professional planners, planners seem to know very little about churches, how they function in our communities, or even how important they are to the morality and vitality of our communities. As such, little thought may be given to the role that churches will actually play when Tulsa's new zoning codes are written. My hope is that whoever Tulsa hires to write the new codes will pay attention to how both new and existing churches can continue to play an "important part of Tulsa's community and culture".

Planners need to recognize that the decline in society that Oldenburg noted is not the result of suburban sprawl. Social decline begins in the heart of mankind, not in its arrangement of streets and buildings, and no form of community we design can remedy the ills of society. It can only make the lives of good people in society a bit more enjoyable. That is the perspective that I hope Tulsa will adopt with its new code.

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