

QuikTrip and the bias against auto-oriented businesses

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=5936>

This week an article appeared in Boston Magazine entitled, “Growing Pains: Why Must a Few Lonely Cranks Decide the Future of Boston’s Buildings?”

Author George Thrush writes, “Boston’s construction refuseniks are hell-bent on blocking anything a developer puts in front of them, and they have the power to derail major projects... These refuseniks are not interested in what you or I think is best for the city. They’re hell-bent on blocking anything a developer puts in front of them. Crazy as it sounds, in one of the nation’s largest cities, a few local characters who regularly show up at public meetings somehow have the power to completely derail major projects. This has to change. If it doesn’t, Boston could lose its competitive edge.”

The author describes the process that developments must go through to get approvals, including a review by a citizen’s advisory committee. That committee apparently has a bad habit of spending years in endless debate and those who show up for the meetings are “committed anti-development gadflies”.

Boston used to have a more structured approval process that allowed professional planners to make most of the decisions, but when at some point the public got a voice in decision-making, decisions stopped being made. Now Boston is hoping for a major building boom, and some are worried that if the developers don’t have the deep pockets and patience they need to survive the protracted approval process, the public could scuttle it all.

Last week in Tulsa, an article appeared in the Tulsa World regarding QuikTrip’s plans to replace its store at 11th and Utica.

For readers who are unfamiliar with this Tulsa-based convenience store, QuikTrip is a nationally acclaimed company that is one of the best-run businesses on the planet. Owning hundreds of stores in cities like Tulsa, Atlanta, St. Louis and Des Moines, Quiktrip has its formula for success down pat. It is also the kind of corporate citizen that any city would love to have.

One of the things in QuikTrip’s business plan that has made it so successful and the envy of other convenience stores is that it doesn’t let its stores get very old before enlarging or upgrading them. Their prototypical plans are an important part of their success, but now the City of Tulsa wants them to do things differently in order to fit in with the Pearl District’s small area plan.

The small area plan calls for the new store to be to be built at the property line at the street with parking in the rear instead of QT’s prototypical plan that is just the opposite. The Tulsa World article stated that “Representatives of Quiktrip, McDonald’s and Sonic, which all have stores or restaurants in the district, say such guidelines would devastate their auto-oriented businesses.”

This prejudice against auto-oriented businesses is part and parcel of form-based codes that favor pedestrians and discourage the use of cars. This form of planning typically can only work in areas of very high density, and would require an entirely different business model than QuikTrip, McDonald's and Sonic currently have. The Pearl District does not have that kind of density, and is not likely to in the foreseeable future.

Several years ago I learned of a restaurant chain that wanted to build a new restaurant in a city that was in the process of adopting form-based codes. The owners of the restaurant knew that they needed a particular amount of vehicular traffic and parking in order to make their business viable, yet the city refused to allow the number of spaces that they needed, so the project was cancelled.

Don't be surprised if QuikTrip does the same thing. What good does that do for our city? The problem in Boston and here in Tulsa are different in one way, but the same in another. In Boston, they have created a system that promotes the new philosophy that "what the public sees, the public owns," but here in Tulsa we are creating a system that is going to allow a few people to micromanage who can build and what they can build.

What they both have in common is that they deny the free market system and property rights that would work to the full advantage of the property owners and for the community.

Conflicts like these can be seen in every community that has adopted form-based codes, and the inevitable effect is that building projects are delayed or abandoned, project costs skyrocket, and jobs are lost. Why pursue a model like that, especially when we're one of the last cities in the nation to do so? Why doesn't Tulsa want to be a leader instead of a follower? Why not leap frog to a more promising model based on freedom?

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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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