

Can we not build communities without over-regulation?

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=6045>

I don't read Cosmopolitan, and never have, but when I'm in the supermarket checkout line and see the magazine I think about a story that came out several years ago about how they get the cover photo shot. The girl on the cover always looks perfect, but if you could get her to turn around, her clothing is pulled tightly to her body with dozens of clamps, pins and safety pins. Sometimes perfection just isn't what it seems.

Administrators in Norman, Okla., recently began the process of introducing the idea that form-based codes, Smart Growth, and high-density development are what their city needs. According to an article by researcher Kaye Beach (axxiomamuse.wordpress.com), the city is holding meetings to see if they should codify high-density development.

The facilitated meeting began with a Power Point presentation explaining what Smart Growth and New Urbanism was, and how they related to dense developments.

Things became more clear when a slide entitled, "Pros and Cons of Density" was shown. It said, "It is promoted by those who value urban streetscapes, efficient infrastructure supply, walkable neighborhoods, and increased housing options. Increased density is opposed by those who imagine ugly buildings, overshadowed open space, parking problems and irresponsible residents."

In other words, those in favor of density have values, those who do not are ignorant and uninformed. Even if I did not already know about form-based codes and high-density development, I am always suspicious when ridicule is used to sway people. After all, who wants to be identified with the ignorant and uninformed?

Beach provided a link in her article that led to the "Real South Padre Island Forum," a blog where many residents vented their complaints and frustration with their city's pending adoption of form-based codes. Few of the bloggers spoke of the codes in a positive light, but more importantly, it demonstrated how polarizing the codes had been between residents and the city administration.

One blogger wrote, "I realize there are provisions allowing for the grandfathering of existing buildings and thresholds before a building will need to be brought into compliance - but the minute this code passes my building becomes essentially obsolete and the resale value will become substantially diminished. This is a great way to thank the current business owners on the Island for our investment in the City of South Padre Island. The business environment of SPI is difficult, to say the least. The measures proposed by this code may look great to those who want to 'upscale' the island but I see them as effectively making it even more difficult for any small entrepreneur niche type business to be able to meet the high cost of entry to doing business on the island."

Another complained, “All of this is fine, if you want to live in a managed community. That is not why I moved here,” and another who had read the proposed code wrote, “this is not a small business friendly building code...I supported the idea behind the form-based codes but this is not what I expected.”

There is a good reason why there is so much rancor in South Padre Island, Norman, and other cities that have imposed these codes. The codes have come about because of a facilitated “visioning” process that generates a “form” that development must conform to. As the author of one of the books on form-based codes put it, it is about the “desired urban form” that the planners want the city’s eventual image to be.

In reality, even that is just the cover of the cosmo girl. Behind all the public meetings, presentations, and Power Points, there is an agenda that is sweeping the nation to create sustainable cities, and by letting the public see only the gorgeous gal on the front cover, the hope is that the public doesn’t see what it takes to create that “vision.”

We see the beautiful photos of communities that have been built under these codes, but what no one likes to talk about is what will routinely have to be done to implement it. Eminent domain, restriction of property rights, high taxes, favoring business with deep pockets over small business, and more regulations, just to name a few.

Are we become so shallow that we think that we can no longer design and build vibrant, healthy, beautiful communities without volumes of regulations and bureaucrats that force us to build only to the “desired urban form?”

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