

Dense development can't be achieved without forcing it

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=6142>

It occurred to me that it has been some time since I have articulated the problems that I see with the current trends of urban planning, and what the impact of those trends are having on our society and our freedoms.

Many of my articles have dealt with New Urbanism, but in understanding the problems the more appropriate concept is to consider is compact development.

The goal of compact development is to increase the density of communities. Proponents claim that these kinds of communities are more “walkable” or “liveable” - basically meaning that many or most of the destinations that the average person goes to frequently are within walking distance of their home. To accomplish this, compact developments are designed to include mixed uses, so destinations such as schools, grocery stores, jobs, pharmacies, coffee shops or restaurants are within walking distance of one's home.

Most of today's zoning codes are the antithesis of this kind of development because they separate rather than mix these uses. Under these codes areas are in categories such as residential, office, retail, industrial or commercial zones. Typically these codes do not allow mixture of uses. Proponents of mixed use development claim that mixing uses is illegal under the current codes, and strictly speaking that is true. However, current codes also allow for Planned Unit Developments, which would allow a developer to plan a mixed use community. To become legal, it simply must be approved by a planning commission or a city council, depending on the governmental structure in that particular city.

But this alone does not bring about the density that compact development seeks to achieve. When communities are developed under new codes that promote mixed development, they seek to increase the number of living units and other structures per acre, while reducing the amount of parking under the assumption that when a community becomes walkable, there is less need for cars.

So far I have no problem with this, as long as it is voluntary. However, this is where the problems begin.

It would be inaccurate to say that people would not volunteer to live in dense or even extremely developed cities. It is clear that many people like that lifestyle. It would be accurate to say, however, that not all people want to live that way. In earlier times people lived in densely developed cities, but when the car was invented, many, if not the majority, of people left the cities for the suburbs. The suburbs are still the most popular place for people to live, especially for families with children.

The disdain that proponents have for the suburbs is not even arguable; they have labeled the suburbs “sprawl” and have assigned the most derogatory connotation to it. There are now a number of books and schools of thought about how to “repair” sprawl.

Unfortunately for the proponents, dense development can not be achieved without some way of forcing it. One way is to create urban growth boundaries. These can be lines or areas on a map, or they could be official or unofficial moratoriums on construction. Regardless, the goal of the urban growth boundary is to confine all growth in a city to certain areas.

This is not without significant problems. As a city “builds out,” the supply of land begins to dwindle, making the value of land climb to artificial highs. Since most compact development codes require open space areas (land that can be used as parks or to limit human contact for environmental reasons), some landowners who are unlucky enough to have their land classified as such see their values plummet. Others, who want only to build small projects, may find that their land has been rezoned to allow only projects too large for them to afford. This has also impacted churches, making it difficult or impossible to find land sufficient in size or location to suit their needs.

Eminent domain has also become a tool to promote these codes, as *Kelo v. New London* demonstrated when homes were taken from their owners and given to a private company to develop. Since churches do not pay property taxes, it has made them a tempting target for taking of their property or refusal of building permits by cash-strapped cities who want the property to produce revenue.

These are just a few of the problems, but they all come down to one thing – property rights. When Americans can no longer use their land in the way they want to, or their land can be taken from them, property rights no longer exist and the motivation to produce disappears, and so does freedom.

©2012 Randy W. Bright

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.

This entry was posted on Thursday, August 2nd, 2012 and is filed under [Columns](#).