

Bureaucracies calculate ways to slow progress in cities

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=6289>

I bought my first calculator back in 1974 when I was a student at the University of Illinois. It cost \$200 then for the same functions of a \$5 calculator now.

At the time, I was working a drafting job at the university's Digital Computer Lab, and one of my co-workers was Stan Zundo, who was in his sixties. Stan (whose real name was Stanislaus), had been trained as a surveyor in Latvia, and had made his way to America just after World War II.

When Stan saw my new calculator, he chuckled and said that he could add numbers in his head faster than I could do it on the calculator. So we wrote down a long line of two and three digit numbers and began adding numbers as quickly as we could. By the time I had made it through three-fourths of the column of numbers, Stan already had the correct answer. I know it was right because I double checked it with my calculator.

Question is, who was better off? The one who had the ability to perform math in his head or the one with the calculator? The answer is obvious, but let's face it, having a calculator was cool and adding in your head was just old school.

An article in the Minnpost entitled, Why (almost) nothing seems to be getting done in Minneapolis, caught my eye. The author, Marlys Harris, had written a series of articles about the difficulties developers were having getting permits to build various projects.

One project in particular was Trader Joe's, a grocery store chain that had proposed building one of their stores in an area that required rezoning. The proposed structure would have been larger than the allowable limit for the zone that it was in, and liquor sales were not allowed. The developers had requested a zoning change that would have allowed for both.

The attorney for the property owners pointed out that the store would create 75 living-wage jobs, and that "Trader Joe's is a highly sought after retailer that's been trying for years to open a store in Minneapolis."

Even though the Minneapolis Department of Community Planning and Economic Development and the City Council were in favor of the re-zoning and a petition with 1,400 signatures in favor of the project was produced, the city council member who represented the ward where the project would have been built objected, stating, "this is not about Trader Joe's...This is about a zoning change, period."

In Minneapolis, when a councilor does not want a project in his or her ward, other councilors automatically vote to reject the project. (This is a practice called "Aldermanic Courtesy.") As a result, it takes very little to kill a project, and that is exactly what the City Council did.

The attorney said, “The committee’s vote was against jobs, against new business and against amenities. It went against the recommendations of city staff and did not match up with the plans for the area or the findings of the City Planning Commission.”

Harris also discussed another case that involved an empty one-and-one-quarter area lot that had sat undeveloped for seven years. The city claims that the property is needed as a staging area for a sewer line project, but Harris points out that there have been repeated attempts to develop the property - all of which has been rejected not just by the city but by neighborhood groups.

She cites one example about a neighborhood group that the developer insisted on a number of changes to a proposed project, but after great time and expense, the project was rejected anyway.

Though Harris and I would probably disagree on how a city should be developed, her objections to the way Minneapolis is run is similar to mine – there are far too many regulations and too many ways to prevent projects from being built. Harris wrote, “...even the pettiest objections can bring a project to a halt” and “unless the developer is trying to put an abattoir (slaughterhouse) in a residential neighborhood, maybe we should take a breath before taking a stand.”

Quoting a developer, Harris wrote, “Let’s find the best, most creative architect and not put many constraints on.”

Will that ever be done?

Probably never there, or in many other cities in America.

You see, we have a new way of doing things in America. More regulations and bureaucracies will bring about a desired urban form that is cool - or at least that’s the plan.

The old way of doing things may not be cool now, but when there were fewer regulations and bureaucracies, the Empire State Building was built in a year. Now it takes a decade to build a skyscraper.

Just something to think about the next time you pick up a calculator.

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