

Tulsa to Update Comprehensive Plan

Last week I attended a seminar hosted by the City of Tulsa that was intended to inform local architects, engineers, builders and realtors about upcoming changes in the way the city will be doing business. One of the things the city is in the process of doing is an update of its Comprehensive Plan.

The new plan, however it is developed, will have a big impact on how our zoning codes will work. Consequently, it will affect our construction rate and our economy.

Tulsa has had four comprehensive plans done, beginning in 1923, then with two updates that were done in 1949 and 1960. The last one, from 1972 – 1978, was the “Vision 2000” Comprehensive Plan.

Residents of the Tulsa are now being asked to attend public hearings and to go on to a new Tulsa website, www.planitulsa.com, to provide their comments about the next Comprehensive Plan. At the time this article is published, there will be five public hearings remaining, each beginning at 6 PM on the following dates:

May 21, Memorial High School auditorium; May 22, Hardesty Regional Library Redbud Auditorium; May 23, Tulsa Community College Northeast Campus; May 29, Martin Regional Library auditorium; and June 4, Rudisill Regional Library Ancestral Hall.

There is also a form on the website that you can use to provide input should you not attend any of these meetings.

The Planitulsa program will focus on urban design, land use,

economic development, housing, environmental protection, transportation, public facilities, historic preservation, art and culture.

After the city receives input from the public, the next step will be to hire a planning consultant to develop the new Comprehensive Plan.

From 1970 to 2000, Tulsa’s population grew by over 65,000, but it has dropped over 10,000 since 2000. Most of the area in its corporate limits has been developed. The city is concerned, as it should be, that its development is in decline.

Photo

Randy Bright

One of the speakers at the seminar who presented the city’s approach to the new Comprehensive Plan mentioned that they would be looking at planning for more “high density” and “mixed use” development. After the seminar I asked one of the speakers if that meant that the city was considering the New Urbanism model. He said that was possible, but that is why they were asking for citizen input.

I have written several articles in the Tulsa Beacon about New Urbanism, and gave as an example the city of Ft. Collins, Colorado. Ft. Collins adopted this model in 1997, calling it their “City Plan”.

To understand the difference between a New Urbanism plan and our current zoning codes, draw two concentric circles. Under our current zoning code, the inner circle represents the city limits, and the outer circle represents land that

is within the Tulsa fenceline, but not in the city limits. A fenceline, which is a strip of land about twenty feet wide, essentially “reserves” land for the city to grow. It is usually created by annexing a large area of land into the city limits, then immediately de-annexing all of it except the fenceline.

When suitable land for a project cannot be found within our city limits, developers are able to go just outside the city limits to buy land. This is how Tulsa has grown gradually over the years.

In the New Urbanism model, the inner circle represents its city limits and its fenceline, just like the zoning code example. However, the land between the city limits and the fenceline is called a “growth management area”. No construction is allowed in this area unless it is a part of a planned subdivision that has been designed according to strict guidelines including “mixed use” and “high density” requirements. These developments will only be allowed when there is no where else to go within the city limits, after the city itself has been developed to a greater density.

So if, for example, a church in Ft. Collins wanted to buy a 20-acre tract of land within the growth management area, they would not be able to do so unless it was a part of a development that included housing, shopping, community services, and was on an established mass transit route.

The result of Ft. Collins adoption of the New Urbanism model is scarcity of land within the city limits and the discouragement of new development due to increased regulations.

I sincerely hope that the City of Tulsa is not considering this model as a basis for its new Comprehensive Plan. And while I want to give them the benefit of the

doubt, I am concerned that it may very well happen. Given that most of the land in the city limits of Tulsa is already developed, Tulsa is a prime candidate for the New Urbanism model.

This would not be good for Tulsa's growth, and we need to be vigilant to prevent it from happening.

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