

Most Tulsans have the wrong view of New Urbanism

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=2996#more-2996>

I know a lot of my readers question why I have raised so many concerns about the City of Tulsa's adoption of a form-based code as a result of the comprehensive planning process. After all, what's not to like about places like Branson Landing or the Riverwalk in Jenks, or any number of enjoyable places like them.

I was at the Riverwalk last week when my daughter sang at a recital at the amphitheater area. I thoroughly enjoyed the ambiance of the shops, watching other people enjoy themselves, and being by the river. Everyone likes places like that.

The problem is, that's what people think New Urbanism is, when in reality it is only a very small part of a New Urbanistic-style form-based code.

Why are they called form-based codes? Because the codes prescribe how structures will be placed, and, to a degree, how they will look, according to the community "vision." The idea is that if you create enough regulations, you can create the "form" of community that fits that vision by default. In other words, the outcome of projects will fit the vision because project owners and their architects will follow a detailed set of rules that leaves little room for creativity. Regardless of what they do, the only buildings that will be approved will be those that meet the criteria that are pre-established in the codes.

Where does that vision come from? Typically a "visioning" process is conducted, whereby facilitators hold workshops to collect the ideas of the community. Regardless of how the facilitators conduct the process, the end result is going to be a plan that fits New Urbanistic principles, but that is "calibrated" to the community.

Tulsa is a city of people that love their single family homes, which PlaniTulsa's draft report "Our Vision for Tulsa" acknowledged, but the report also emphasized the creation of a "broader range of apartments and condominiums in downtown, along corridors, and in new neighborhoods and centers." This is part of city densification, which is a key component of New Urbanism.

People in established single-family home neighborhoods may also experience a side effect of the new code, which is increased traffic within their neighborhoods. This is eluded to in the report with a diagram that indicates that traffic will be routed through neighborhoods to alleviate traffic congestion on major city streets. This is also a practice widely accepted in form-based codes.

There is heavy emphasis in the report on transportation, especially for light rail and streetcars.

Light rail is extremely expensive to build and maintain, yet there is nothing in this report that explains where the money is going to come from to pay for it. How extensive will this network be?

On page 24 of the report, it says, “Downtown, nearby university districts, new centers, and the city’s main streets and multi-modal arterials will be some of the most intensively walked parts of the city. They will also be the most transit-rich, with frequent bus, streetcar, and rail transit service within a couple of blocks of most homes and businesses.”

Who is going to pay for this? It’s a rhetorical question, of course. It won’t be the riders who pay the majority of the cost. Most of the cost will be covered with higher property and/or sales taxes.

What do higher taxes represent when they subsidize services to people who don’t pay the full cost? It is a redistribution of wealth, by force of taxation, from one person to another.

As I continue to read and study New Urbanism, I have come to realize why it is so popular, and there are two reasons in particular.

The first reason is that it has something in it for nearly everyone.

For city government, it means increased revenues and more centralized power. For developers, it means getting projects approved more quickly simply because they are given a prescribed formula. For environmentalists, it means the reduction of the use of the car. For people who care about those who don’t drive, it means they can walk or take public transportation. But a careful examination of the concerns of each special interest group shows a willingness to compromise in return for having their own needs met.

The second reason is that the vast majority of people don’t understand the whole picture. It’s not that they are stupid, they’re just uninformed. It takes a lot of time and effort to educate yourself on this subject, and most people either can’t or won’t commit themselves to doing that.

I don’t object to a new comprehensive plan, nor do I object to a new zoning code. We need to do this. But Tulsa needs to be a leader, not a follower. Our new zoning code should be innovative, but it should pass Constitutional muster. More on that next week.

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