

Churches need to be protected from Tulsa's newest comprehensive plan

by Randy Bright

Since Tulsa will be re-writing its zoning code soon after the Comprehensive Plan is completed, churches in Tulsa need to get involved in the process and insist that churches will not be discriminated against, even if it is inadvertent. Once written, it could become quite difficult to change.

Churches in outlying communities should also be very interested in how Tulsa's zoning codes are written, since it is likely that they will eventually follow suit with similar codes.

The people who write this code will probably be from a consulting firm that is not from Tulsa, and the first thing that they should recognize is that churches are not like a Starbucks or McDonalds. You can go to any of these and get exactly the same espresso or quarter-pounder regardless of where they are located, but it is not the same with churches.

While God is the same God everywhere too, it is not so with individual churches. Churches have their own individual character and personality because of the people that make up the church and because of varying denominational beliefs. So when people select a church, they select the one that fits them best. It is a bit like getting married; people don't want to join a church with the idea that it won't be a permanent relationship.

Most form-based codes that follow New Urbanism principles will require each new development to provide civic space, which would include a community center or a church. The assumption is that because everyone in the development would be within walking distance, very little parking would be provided.

That might work for the community center, but the likelihood of a church being attended only by people within that development is virtually nil. Most of the people who would attend that church would come from outside the development, so a significant amount of parking would be needed.

Churches have been a part of the urban landscape from the time of Christ. In the old days of mixed-use neighborhoods and high-density cities, churches were an important and visible part of cities. But because of the nature of today's churches, they simply do not fit into the New Urbanism motif very well. For that reason, zoning codes affecting churches need to be written to accommodate their specific needs and rights. Here are some examples.

Churches should not be required to give up their architectural identity. They should not be forced to design their building so that it does not look like a church, nor should they be forced to conform the look of their church within development rules. The freedom to design a church with a discernable identity as a church is an expression of worship that should not be limited.

The size of church buildings or their property should also not be limited. Churches already have natural restrictions based upon the congregation's belief regarding what they feel God wants them to build, as well as their budget.

If they believe God has called them to build a mega-church, it would be a restriction on their religious beliefs for a city to deny them permission to do so.

There should be no minimum or maximum number of parking spaces imposed on churches. Churches should be free to provide the number of spaces they feel are necessary to allow their facilities to function well. Intentionally restricting the number of spaces in order to restrict the number of people who attend would also violate religious rights.

For the same reason, churches should not be specifically restricted to a certain number of people who can attend. Christians are called by scripture not to neglect the gathering of themselves together, and by example, Jesus as well as his disciples gathered many thousands of people together at a time.

Churches should be allowed to build in any zone within the city. They need to be free to go to any part of the city where they feel they are called by God to go. They should also be allowed to move back into neighborhoods where they are desperately needed.

Churches should be allowed to be build mixed-use facilities. If they want to operate a school, retirement center, or nursing home on their property, they should be allowed to do so without restriction by code.

Does this mean that churches should have free rein and should not be accountable to their community for what they build? Not at all. Churches are as much a part of the community as any other entity and as such have certain responsibilities. If they are to be effective in maintaining good relations in their community, they need to observe the Christian principle of "do unto others as you would have them do unto you".

More on that next week.

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