

What will happen to Tulsa churches in 5 to 10 years?

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=3841#more-3841>

If you would like to know what kind of relationship will exist between Tulsa and its churches five or ten years from now, it's very easy. All you have to do is look at churches in other parts of the country that have already adopted planning strategies that promote high density development.

According to a report by Jason Tomassin, a staff writer for Gazette.Net, the First Baptist Church in Silver Spring (Maryland) needs to replace its deteriorating 1928 facilities. But without funding, they are attempting to sell part of their property to a developer who would, as part of the deal, construct a new 45,000 square foot church on the same property along with a 210,000 square foot, 180-unit apartment building that also includes retail space and an underground parking lot for 140 cars.

Their efforts began in 2005, but neighborhood opposition over a zoning change needed to allow an increase to the maximum building height caused developers to abandon the effort.

Then, in 2008, the church made a deal with a developer based in nearby Washington, D.C., and their current plans do not require a zoning change.

The pastor said, "This time, we are pretty sure that it's going to work out, because we are doing it by code. If not, the church may be forced to move, merge with another church, or dissolve, because it can't afford the roughly \$1 million in repairs needed for the existing building. It's unlikely we will survive another church project."

But neighbors are once again opposing the project, claiming that the new facilities will generate additional automobile traffic and worsen existing traffic congestion.

To make matters worse, the construction of a new mixed-use facility that includes a library, residential living units and a mass-transit station is already planned near the church, which will further aggravate traffic and parking problems.

Neighbors also base their objections on the height of the buildings the developer will construct for themselves and the church, which by code can't exceed 60 feet. They believe it will set a precedent for easy approval for other projects that are also being planned to reach the maximum height, fearing that taller buildings will change the character of their neighborhood.

A quick look at Google Earth reveals that the church's site in Silver Spring is located along the east edge of a concentrated area of mid-rise buildings. Residential neighborhoods of single-family homes are located east of the church.

In this case, we cannot ignore what got the church into its dilemma to begin with, and that is their lack of funding. Regardless of the reason, lack of funding put the church in a position of

considering alternatives that they might otherwise find objectionable. It is a situation that many, if not most, churches, in America are experiencing, and it begins with the unwillingness or inability (perhaps due to high taxation or too much debt) of their members to tithe. Had this church possessed the funds it needed, it could have renovated or replaced its facilities without any assistance from a developer.

That aside, there are at least two very important things to consider with this case.

First, zoning codes that favor dense development change the parameters for planning significantly. When a city is densely developed, land becomes scarce and very costly. In this case, the developer is willing to give this church a new building in order to get the land that they need. Parenthetically, they should be given serious credit because they want to help the church maintain its place in the community, when *Kelo vs. New London* certainly gave them another avenue to take it. Not all developers are so altruistic.

Second, the cost of meeting extensive regulations, in the form of a laborious, time-consuming planning and approval process, can even stretch the budget of churches whose members do tithe. Churches spend thousands, sometime millions to meet local government requirements, and still have no guarantee that they will ever be allowed to build. The promise of streamlining the approval process by adopting a form-based code apparently doesn't apply to anyone who wants to build something that is not in the established plan. That is especially true in communities that have become intolerant of Christians.

Do Tulsans want its churches to be facing these kinds of problems after it revises its zoning code, the next step in the Tulsa Strategic Plan that has been developed by PlaniTulsa? Yes, Silver Spring is a much different city, with little room to grow because of its proximity to Washington, D.C., but when density is forced on a city, the outcome is no different.

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