

Tulsa embraces New Urbanism with PlaniTulsa

Randy Bright

With little discussion, city councilors approved PlaniTulsa, a New Urbanism design for the city's Comprehensive Plan for future development.

That vote could affect how Tulsans live for decades.

Randy Bright, a Tulsa architect and columnist for the Tulsa Beacon, has written extensively about the possible impact of PlaniTulsa's adoption as the city's comprehensive plan.

It is part of a New Urbanistic-style form-based code. Form-based codes describe how structures will be placed and to a degree, how they look according to the "community vision."

Bright wrote, "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."

The "vision" came from a two-year process in which a paid consultant held meetings with Tulsans to determine the future development of the city.

"Typically a 'visioning' process is conducted, whereby facilitators hold workshops to collect the ideas of the community," Bright wrote. "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."

Bright said this type of manipulation occurred in Tulsa and is happening all over America.

The aim of PlaniTulsa all along was to set the stage for "densification."

"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,'" Bright reported. "This is part of city densification, which is a key component of New Urbanism."

The term New Urbanism is not found in the 45-page document.

New Urbanism also emphasizes light rail and streetcars - a plan that has been embraced by the Obama Administration, some state legislators and some city councilors.

“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,” Bright wrote. “How extensive will this network be? On page 24 of the “Our Vision for Tulsa” 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.”

Bright, who specializes in church construction, said the report only mentions churches twice and only in the context of a neighborhood. He thinks the plan will exclude approval of the so-call mega-churches with large congregations and huge buildings and parking lots. Tulsa already has several churches in that category.

In the planning process for PlaniTulsa, some who attended the public meetings said churches were almost completely ignored. Across the nation, city councils are discouraging construction of new churches because they are tax-exempt.

Others reported that it seemed the plan was already in place and the public meetings were just for show, with no real opportunities for genuine input.

“In my opinion, the process of collecting data was flawed, and even with the data that was collected, I have a difficult time coming to the same conclusions that they did,” Bright wrote in his column.

Bright wrote that New Urbanism (PlaniTulsa) is popular for two main reasons.

First, it seems to offer something for everyone. It means higher tax revenues for cities and more centralized power. This has been true in the investment of more than \$400 million of public money in the “revitalization” of Downtown Tulsa.

Developers like it because it speeds up projects because they must adhere to a prescribed formula. For extreme environmentalists, it is a way to get rid of automobiles - a symbol of American freedom and mobility.

Secondly, New Urbanism is popular because the public doesn’t look below the surface of what it promises. Most news sources in Tulsa have simply parroted the city’s press releases on PlaniTulsa without serious study.

Bright said Tulsa needed to update its 30-year old Comprehensive Plan. “The new zoning code should be innovative, but it should pass constitutional muster,” Bright wrote.

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