

Census figures conflict with the ‘wisdom’ of city planners

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=5017>

I hope Tulsa’s city planners are taking a hard look at data recently released from the 2010 Census because it paints a much different picture of where growth is occurring than the urban planner crowd has been telling us.

Urban planners have been telling us for years that population growth will necessarily be in urban areas, primarily because of changing demographics and the development of light rail. But the Census is showing that their predictions of urban growth in favor of suburban growth were simply incorrect.

This does not mean that city cores are not growing, because for the most part they are, but what the Census data does indicate is that the majority of growth is in the suburbs.

For example, the Dallas-Ft. Worth metro area experienced a 30.2 percent increase in its suburbs, while the city cores saw only a 0.8 percent growth.

Indianapolis is a city that has seen a great deal of growth over the last few decades. (I recall in the 80s it was referred to as India-no-place because it was so dead.) Its suburbs grew 28.3 percent in the last decade, while its core grew only 5 percent.

Other cities have lost ground. Baltimore lost 4.6 percent of its urban area, and Chicago lost 6.9 percent, but their suburbs grew by 9.9 percent and 9 percent respectively.

Other highly dense metropolitan areas saw slower growth rates. Seattle’s dropped from 19 percent to 13 percent, Portland dropped from 27 percent to 15 percent, and Denver dropped from 32 percent to 17 percent.

Some of these cities may be experiencing the effect of their planning policies. Urban growth boundaries and limitation policies may be leading to a shortage of buildable space, which could be discouraging growth. The economy probably has much to do with slowing growth as well, though of course it would affect construction in all areas, not just urban cores.

More likely the reason that suburban growth has greatly outpaced urban core growth is that most people still prefer living in the suburbs. I believe it is a universal human need to prefer more space that is on the ground over the densely packed, high rise developments surrounded by paving. Space is more conducive for family life, and despite popular assertions to the contrary, most people still want children and families.

However, whether people choose to live in the city core or the suburbs, or even prefer to be an exurban country-dweller like myself, I see real challenges for church growth in cities. Jenks recent refusal to grant a re-zoning request for Kirk of the Hills Presbyterian’s satellite

congregation, Kirk's Crossing. This is another example of the kind of resistance churches have been experiencing for some time. They were refused because their property had been planned for retail.

Not so coincidentally I might add, churches have been experiencing resistance from cities for about as long as the trend toward densely developed cities has been around. It has only been made worse by the fact that so many cities have gone or are going broke.

My point is that we need to be supporting existing churches with their need to grow, and we need to allow them to plant new churches in all areas, not just urban or suburban.

Most congregations have a life span. They begin small, they grow to a certain point, then they die out as other congregations form. Even megachurches are not immune to this life cycle, though they may live longer than smaller congregations.

However, as the life of congregations come to an end, and no new congregations are allowed, the end result will be that cities will eventually have no churches at all.

The proof that policies can cause this is that Euclidean zoning codes (such as our existing code here in Tulsa) led to the demise of neighborhood churches by requiring off-street parking. As a result, we have far less churches in our neighborhoods than we had fifty years ago. However, that code did not restrict where churches could be built so long as they had space for parking, and so new churches could be built. The new codes (and perhaps attitudes) will not be so kind.

So, while I find that fact that suburban growth far outpaces urban core growth very interesting, and that urban planners should face that reality, my real concern is that planners for both areas are going to feel compelled to adopt an antagonistic viewpoint of disallowing any entity to develop that does not produce revenue, and especially churches.

That is a trend that we must reverse. The communities that embrace and integrate churches are the ones that will find themselves the most blessed and successful, and isn't that the goal shared by all?

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