

Call for Participation

Last week I attended the kick-off event for PlaniTulsa, the City of Tulsa's effort to re-write its Comprehensive Plan. Touting this as Tulsa's chance to affect the next 30 years of its development, Mayor Taylor introduced the consultant she has hired to form the new plan, John Fregonese.

Fregonese has been involved in city planning for the past 30 years. He formed his own firm in 1997 after leaving the city of Portland's planning department.

When I learned that Fregonese had been hired as the planning consultant, my first concern was that forcing Tulsa into a New Urbanist model would be the goal, especially since Fregonese has worked with Andres Duany, the New Urbanist guru. Duany wrote the "Smartcode", a new zoning code that plans the reduction or elimination of the use of the car and the extreme densification of urban areas to the preclusion of people from rural areas.

After speaking with several people from the City of Tulsa, it is apparent that Fregonese is no Andres Duany, which in my opinion speaks in his favor. I was told that Fregonese's style is not dictatorial, and some brief research on the internet bears that out. Fregonese is apparently very good at two things – getting a community involved, and helping a community envision what their community can look like.

When asked about his involvement with New Urbanism and Smart Growth movements, he was quoted on the Michigan Land Use Institute website as saying, "I'm not a member of that church, but a lot of my friends go there, and I sometimes enjoy their services. I'm not as dogmatic; I feel a need

to adapt solutions to local values and cultures. New Urbanism in some cases tries to impose culture. Urban form fundamentally has to be driven by local culture and values. The plans are based around local solutions. I really believe that people have the solutions in their heads and I'm there to put them into action, not come up with a new solution. It's an important movement in that it's really shown there's an alternative to the auto-oriented model, which was the only one around for a long time, and forming a contrast is really important. I have a lot of friends that I really admire who work in New Urbanism."

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On the same website, John Norquist, President and CEO of Congress for the New Urbanism, said, "I think it's his ability to organize public opinion that sets him apart...He gets people to think that density is not bad, which is a remarkable accomplishment."

So the question is, does Fregonese have an agenda, or is he really willing to listen to Tulsa? As one person put it to me, and I am paraphrasing, is Tulsa going to go through this elaborate process, one that will not be completed until the end of 2009, only to find that the plans had already been made at the start?

I was impressed enough by Fregonese's speech at the PlaniTulsa kick-off event to say that he may turn out to be a good choice; but the fact is that he has his own beliefs, his own values, and his own mission in regard to sustainable development. As anyone with strongly held beliefs,

those are sure to emerge. Whether or not he is willing to suppress his own prejudices and be willing to listen and be open to ideas remains to be seen.

The truth of the matter is that the only way Tulsans will get what they know is best for Tulsa is to be involved. Fregonese's plans include a lot of community input and workshops. While that is extremely important, oversight is needed to make certain that Tulsa gets a viable plan that improves the city, but doesn't destroy its unique character.

I spoke with Fregonese at the kick-off event, but only having a moment to do so, I reminded him that Tulsa is a city of churches. But it will take more than that to make certain that churches are not left out or relegated to second-class status in the grand scheme of things. And so for the first time since I began writing for the Beacon in 2001, I am asking for my readers to help me do something.

If you will go to the PlaniTulsa website, you will find a "Community Feedback" button that leads to a very long list of community groups that the City of Tulsa consulted with in preparation for the new Comprehensive Plan. Not one of those groups represented the interests of churches of Tulsa.

It is critical that churches receive fair consideration and inclusion in the new Comprehensive Plan. If you are willing to be part of a group that will do so, please send me an e-mail with your name, phone number, and a brief description of your concerns and abilities so that we can put together an influential group of people who can protect the interests of our city's churches.

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