

Colorado Springs intriguing

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=1234#more-1234>

If it is possible to hear some good news about New Urbanism, I think the plans that a church in Colorado Springs has to build a 113-acre Christian community would be it.

Actually, I find this to be an intriguing idea and thought about this many years ago, wondering why some church doesn't try to do a project like this. Back then, there wasn't a reason, but now with the advent of New Urbanism, there is.

Woodmen Valley Chapel is moving forward with a development called "Shiloh Mesa" that will eventually include a four-story, 140,000-square-foot church, single-family homes, townhouses, a village for seniors and apartments that will accommodate about 225 families. The church will include a 60-foot high steeple, and some of the other buildings will be three stories (to the chagrin of neighbors with views of the mountains). There will also be a sports complex, about two dozen other buildings that include retail and commercial space, and a conference facility.

The acreage that the megachurch owns is in a rural area that was recently annexed into the City of Colorado Springs. As you might guess, not everyone is happy about the project. Neighbors are concerned about traffic, noise, water and especially their concern that they will lose their view of the mountains.

The man in charge of the project, Les Krohnfeldt, was quoted by reporter Bill Vogrin of the Gazette (Colorado Springs) saying, "It is going to be a faith-based community. We want to be a magnet to the outside community. A place people come and stay. Not a gated environment. It will be a place where the church will be the town square of the surrounding, walkable community."

I learned about this project from Sandy Sorlien, managing editor of the SmartCode, when she sent me an e-mail with a link to an article by a blogger who seemed to be simultaneously happy about and horrified by the project.

The blogger quoted an excerpt from Phillip Bess' book, *Till We Have Built Jerusalem: Architecture, Urbanism and the Sacred*, which said, "Suburban sprawl fosters disinvestment in historic centers; excessive separation of people by age, race and income; extreme inequality of educational opportunity; pollution and the loss of agricultural lands and wilderness; record rates of obesity; and cultural indifference to a shared and beautiful realm."

So the blogger was happy that the church was embracing New Urbanistic principles in designing the complex, but was horrified at the idea that the church would build a "Christian city", saying "...I think I'd prefer this to be simply a traditional mixed-use neighborhood, rather than a 'faith-based community.' I don't want to artificially limit these neighborhoods to some religious purpose..."

Shiloh Mesa is not the only church attempting such a development. In Longmont, Colorado, LifeBridge Christian Church is attempting a similar project, as is another church in Naples, Florida.

Despite the objections of neighbors, Shiloh Mesa is moving ahead. Colorado Springs City Planning Commission has done an extensive review of the project and unanimously approved the project last October, pending addressing some remaining concerns.

In previous articles I have warned that New Urbanism creates land shortages, more specifically, shortages of parcels of land large enough to build a typical church project. This church is able to do this kind of project for several reasons. First, they had the foresight to purchase a large amount of land a number of years ago before the land was annexed into their city. Second, Colorado Springs is still friendly to churches. And third, because their land was not in an area that had been restricted from building.

Is the church as developer the wave of the future? Probably not in the immediate future because of the enormous cost and risk of development, and most churches don't yet see a need for getting involved in these kinds of projects.

However, as zoning codes throughout the nation begin adopting New Urbanistic codes (as is already happening to a great extent in major cities), it may become the tactic that prevents some churches from being pushed out of their cities by eminent domain or New Urbanistic zoning policies. It is certainly something that some churches should begin looking at if they are going to reserve a place for themselves in the future.

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