

PlaniTulsa Conclusion may not be the best choice for Tulsa

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=2581#more-2581>

The results for the Scenario Preference Vote for PlaniTulsa was finally announced last week, five weeks after the final date of voting.

You can read the results in a document entitled Which Way Tulsa Survey Results that is available at the PlaniTulsa website

Were there any surprises? Not really. The interpretation of the votes, in addition to the information from the Detailed Mapping Workshops and the phone interviews that were done earlier, was that Tulsans wanted development to be focused on downtown and to bring light rail to Tulsa.

But just because there weren't any surprises doesn't mean that the vote wasn't interesting or that the interpretation of the vote was correct.

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. This is particularly true of the votes between Scenarios A, B, C and D. Here is a brief description of each (you can see more detail at the website):

Scenario A (Trends Continue) describes a plan to simply continue doing the same thing.

Scenario B (Main Streets) included development along major streets and some light rail.

Scenario C (New Centers) included three major development areas and some more light rail.

Scenario D (Centered City) focused development on downtown and included a lot of light rail.

As for the votes, on page 8 of the document it states, "Scenario D is the strong preference from most parts of the city". However, on page 13, a graph shows that Scenario D only got 49 percent of the vote. But that also means that 51 percent of voters did not want Scenario D.

In addition, I question that Scenario D would have even received 49 percent of the vote if the ballot was not worded to lead the voter to D. If you read the description of each scenario, you will see that D is described much more positively than A is.

For example, the description for A says, "Scenario A follows trends of the past several decades and results in a large sparsely populated city with little new investment in the downtown core. Community life is found mostly in suburban neighborhoods. The city loses most new people and jobs to the suburbs."

But Scenario D gets a much more positive presentation: “Scenario D focuses most new growth in downtown and along major streets. Downtown is a 24-hour hub of activity and the heart of the city. Other neighborhood centers grow along main streets. Citywide, people enjoy a range of housing and transportation options.”

If you weren’t well-informed about city planning, which scenario would you vote for? Well, D, of course.

Who doesn’t respond to words like new growth, activity, heart, enjoy and options instead of words like sparse, little and lose?

Light rail also received favorable results in the survey. To the question, “What kind of transportation investments are important to you?”, the response was 48 percent for light rail. The problem is that the question does not prompt any real consideration of the question, nor does it reflect data gathered in the phone interviews that indicate light rail to be a very low priority.

Let me describe this another way. I’m a private pilot, and started flying when I was 16 years old, but I’ve never owned a plane. If you were to ask me, “would you like to own a plane?”, my answer would be yes.

But if you were to ask me, “can you justify the cost of owning a plane if you had to choose between owning a car or an airplane?”, the answer would be no, or no not yet.

What the survey did was lead voters in a direction where the writers of the survey wanted them to go by how they wrote the questions and the choice of answers.

I wonder what the results would have been if there had been a Scenario E that simply stated, “none of the above.” I wonder what the results for light rail would have been if the question informed the voter that only a very small percentage of the population, perhaps 4 percent, would use light rail as their primary means of transportation, and if the question had also informed the voter of the astronomical cost of constructing light rail.

There was little to no emphasis placed on educating Tulsans on the issues that this city will face when it implements its new Comprehensive Plan and the new zoning code that follows. I think we would be ill-advised to use the results of this study to make decisions that will impact Tulsans for decades to come.

And don’t forget, this is only Phase 1 of the Comprehensive Plan. Phase 2 will come later, and will include all of the unincorporated areas of Tulsa County, so what is done now will have even more impact later.

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