

Where are the churches in PlaniTulsa planning?

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=1253#more-1253>

Last week I received an e-mail from someone who had attended two of the PlaniTulsa workshops and wanted to alert me to some of the things that were being done that may have an impact on the future of Tulsa churches.

This is the account given to me by that person, who will remain anonymous.

Prior to the workshops, this person attended a meeting held by Mayor Kathy Taylor, who encouraged people to attend the workshops and provided a handout with her goals for Tulsa, which included such things as Transit Oriented Developments and becoming the greenest city in the country.

The workshops consisted of roundtable discussions about how the future growth of the city should be done. Participants were given stickers representing various types of buildings and areas, such as duplexes, live/work units, mid-rise mixed use, mid-rise office, office over retail, plazas and rail stations. The stickers were placed on an aerial map of Tulsa to show where they believed growth should occur and where certain types of buildings should be located.

In the first workshop, this person asked if there were any stickers representing churches, and was told that there were none included in the packets. When this person asked where churches would be allowed, the answer given was that Tulsa did not need any more churches.

Apparently word got back to the facilitators of the workshops, because in the second workshop, the packets included stickers titled “place of worship” that represented churches. All of the stickers were of a size that the facilitators assumed would be appropriate. The church stickers were very small.

At the table were seven people, four of whom were employed by the City of Tulsa in varying capacities. The fifth person was from Texas. The other two were citizens from Tulsa that had no connection to city government.

During the discussions, one of the participants placed a large sticker titled “Future Rail Station” at the southeast corner of East 21st Street and South 145th East Avenue. Then he placed a sticker titled “Large Plaza” on top of Plainview Baptist Church, claiming that we should have a park across the street from a rail station. No stickers were placed over St. Joseph Catholic Church and the South Tulsa Adventist Fellowship, just east of Plainview Baptist, but stickers representing a mid-rise office were placed over Tulsa Teachers Credit Union, located just west of Plainview.

The point of this article is not to impugn or embarrass any one individual, but to stress what I have been writing about for some time now. The process of transforming a city into a New Urbanistic model will not be good for many of the churches in any city, especially a city of churches like Tulsa.

There are too many people involved in the planning process that have no interest in protecting or preserving churches. They see churches as a burden to cities because they take too much space, don't pay property taxes, and are perceived to be a nuisance.

The fact that the stickers representing churches were supplied as an afterthought is significant because if churches had been important to the Fregonese team, they would have been included in the packets at the beginning of the process. That the stickers were very small in relation to the kind of space churches really need is significant as well. It is consistent with the statement I have quoted in previous articles from a New Urbanist who said, "We are opposed to the mega-church isolated in the countryside or suburbs surrounded by acres of parking. This is an environmentally and socially unsustainable model; it paves the landscape, it forces driving, it isolates the membership from the rest of the community, and it isolates the driver from the church. It is profoundly anti-civic."

I have not attended any of the workshops because I do not believe it to be a valid process for collecting criteria that represents what Tulsans really want. Though citizens have been actively and aggressively encouraged to participate, city employees, who came with preconceptions, have tainted the process. The results we will get will be skewed toward what city administrators want, not what the citizens of Tulsa want.

As for the churches in Tulsa - you need to wake up to what is going on, because it may be your church that will eventually be taken. No church is safe - small churches are easy to take and large churches are big targets. If you wait to find out that your church has been "stickered out," it may be too late already.

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