

Builders concerned as El Paso embraces New Urbanism

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by [Randy Bright](#)



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On October 2nd, an article by Tod Newcombe appeared on the Governing website entitled “El Paso Teaches New Urbanism to Architects, Engineers.”

The sentence under the title was “Hoping to reinvent the sprawling city, El Paso officials decided to teach the development community the importance of new urbanism. Now, other cities are following in its footsteps.”

I discovered this article through a link on the Planetizen website when I saw an introductory article entitled “El Paso Officials Spread the Gospel of New Urbanism.” Its tag line read, “Looking to move beyond its history of sprawling development, El Paso turned to New Urbanism. But instead of hiring New Urbanist experts, the city decided to indoctrinate its staff and private sector designers in the movement’s principles.”

According to Newcombe’s article, El Paso officials have worked for some time to convince local developers to adopt the design principles of New Urbanism as a means to eliminate sprawl. He wrote, “El Paso officials waht (sic) to reinvent the city by following the tenets of new urbanism, which means a greater emphasis on dense walkable neighborhoods, mixed-use buildings that are street-oriented and more green spaces.”

Apparently there has been a growing conflict between city officials and local builders and developers as the city began to reject permits for an increasing number of projects because they did not follow the principles of new urbanism.

In order to solve the problem, the city initially developed a training program for their own public officials and for the development community. That led to the development of a nine-week long training program for its own community, which was eventually developed into a three-day course that they offer to other cities.

El Paso now requires design firms to have at least one person who has been accredited in new urbanism by them or other organizations that offer similar programs on capital projects for the

city. They estimate that around 100 architects and engineers have been certified in addition to around 100 of city staff members.

I have been writing about this subject for nearly a decade now, in an attempt to point out the problems with new urbanism. I have been clear in stating that I have no objection to new urbanism per se, as long as it is a result of market forces. I have also been clear about the increased risks that are associated with dense development. It is easier for a terrorist to kill more people at a time in dense developments, and disease can spread much more quickly. Are those likely events? Unfortunately, yes, and history has proven both to be true.

That aside, my objections to new urbanism were not its aesthetics, because some developments are quite functional and beautiful. I even agree that there should be more freedom in design and fewer zoning restrictions, considering mixed-use developments as an example.

But not everyone likes dense development. Not everyone considers sprawl to be a dirty word. Not everyone considers the suburbs to be the evil institution that land planners have portrayed them as. Quite the opposite; poll after poll has shown that “sprawl” and the suburbs are still the preferred way of living for the majority of Americans.

Therein lies the rub. How do city planners and government officials convince local communities to adopt these principles? According to Newcombe’s article, the “new urbanism concepts have become institutionalized.”

For now, El Paso is only requiring new urbanism to be used on its own projects. But they are going to discover, if they haven’t already, that these kinds of developments won’t happen naturally. They have to be forced as a matter of law and politics.

One of the most useful tools to do so is the urban growth boundary, which is not a line, but a wide area that surrounds a city in which construction is prohibited until the city is fully developed. This creates a class of big winners and big losers as land values plummet in the urban growth boundary and land values skyrocket inside the city as land shortages occur. I discovered this in Ft. Collins, Colorado when a zoning official told me that churches were allowed anywhere in the city, but that there was no longer any land available large enough for a church.

Oh, by the way; El Paso is apparently going to be conducting their course with Oklahoma City. How long will it be before it reaches Tulsa? Just something to think about.

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