Push for densification is putting the squeeze on churches

October 24, 2013 by Randy Bright



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Last week my column was about how the city of El Paso had embraced the "Gospel of New Urbanism" and once again I warned about the impact that this type of planning can have on churches.

To be fair, it is not fair to say that New Urbanism is the culprit in creating a zoning environment that excludes churches, rather it is a mindset of those in planning that seek to create conditions they believe are conducive to improving the economy, but in reality are creating conditions that outcast churches.

For example, it was reported recently that Grand Rapids Planning Commission unanimously voted to deny a permit to Gracepointe Church to occupy a storefront because it was not a retail establishment. Ironically, one of the commissioners who is a pastor, stated that "a church open Sunday mornings and one night a week does not fit with the city's plan for the property to be part of a vibrant daily commercial scene." City planners said that the location was in a "pedestrian-oriented retail zone district" and as such, the church did not fit the plan.

From the report, the storefront had been used in the past by several churches, and even though it was in a retail zone, it had not been used as such for years. The commissioners suggested that the church find a more suitable location, but the pastor says that they will probably continue to meet in hotels because "the cost of buildings that meet the church's needs are prohibitive."

Apparently, Gracepoint's situation is typical of many churches that are finding it difficult to find a place to worship. They are small (about 40 people) and do not have the resources to fight for their right to have a place within their own community.

Less than a year ago, Victory Church in Springdale, Arkansas, was forced to move from their facilities to make way for a new street interchange. The Springdale City Council granted the church a temporary permit to move into a shopping center, but they were given less than three months to move. One report printed last December indicated that the city had not compensated the church for the move, but had stated their intent to do so. However, the same report indicated that the amount offered was not what the church believed that their property was worth.

In Greenville, South Carolina, Clemson University is fighting the construction of a megachurch next to its International Center for Automotive Research. NewSpring Church plans to build a 1,400-seat, 67,000-square-foot building with 874 parking spaces. Clemson argues that a church is not an allowed use on the property, but the developer of the church property says that while there are many prohibited uses, a church is not among them.

A spokesperson from Clemson claimed that they supported the church project, but not next to their property.

Because it is a megachurch, NewSpring likely has the financial ability to fight for its right to build on its own property, but that is not a guarantee that they will construct their project. Several years ago, Rocky Mountain Christian Church in Boulder County, Colorado, fought a long legal battle and won – but the battle took so long that they built elsewhere to meet their immediate needs.

Churches are in a fight to maintain their place in their communities, and many are not even aware of their plight until they need to build additional facilities, are forced to move to make room for economic "progress", or attempt to build new facilities.

Many cities are still very friendly to churches, but pressures from the planning professionals and the federal government's role in promoting dense development are likely to change that in the near future.

Other locations are becoming openly hostile to churches because the social barrier of deference to churches is being torn down. It used to be that inhibiting churches was, at best, considered wrong, and at worst, considered to be bad public relations. Now it is perfectly acceptable to deny a church a building permit for arbitrary reasons. Now it is considered more responsible to grant a building permit to a big box store than to a church for tax reasons, and it seems to baffle the planners that churches don't agree with them.

Churches are important, even vital to a community's vibrancy. They are the one influence upon the behaviors of its members that can make a community safe and a good place to do business. And – dare I say it – how can God bless a community that rejects his churches?

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