

# Urban planners showing little regard for property rights

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By [Randy W. Bright](#)

Last week I spent nearly two days at a church convention, kind of a church trade show really, to see what others were talking about.

I was overwhelmed by the number of vendors selling audio, visual and lighting systems, and how rapidly advanced they have become in the last few years alone. I was also looking to see if there was any evidence of any knowledge of form-based codes.

Besides visiting with a number of product vendors, I attended two seminar sessions.

In the first session, the presenters stressed the importance of doing diligence before purchasing a site on which to construct their facilities, giving an example of a church that had not.

In that example, the church had very little of their site left after the state had taken land for a highway, the city had insisted that the church build a street through the middle of their property (at church expense, of course), and the city had required a substantial area be set aside for stormwater detention. To finish things off, an electrical easement crossed their property diagonally. The church abandoned their project at that site.

What wasn't explained that some of these things were possible only because cities have adopted a very different position toward property rights, (i.e., you have few rights left) which is common thinking among urban planners now.

In the other session, the presenters first posed a question, "what if you could walk to church", and then went on to describe two massive dense multi-use projects that they were developing. To be fair, I left the session before they finished, so I don't know if they went on to describe how they were going to fit churches into these kinds of developments. What I can say is that in the first two examples they presented, they listed what types of projects were going to be included and there was no mention of churches.

The presenters were clearly pro-dense development, obviously believing that this type of development is the future of America. Others, like Jeremy Madson, the executive director of the Greenbelt Alliance, believe it as well. He was quoted in an article by John King to have said, "A decade ago, things like smart growth and transit-oriented development were being pushed by planners and environmentalists as what we should do. Now, more and more people want neighborhoods where they can walk out the door and have a degree of urbanity in their lives without living in San Francisco or Oakland."

Despite this, there have been numerous studies and surveys done that still indicate that most people overwhelmingly choose suburban or exurban settings in which to live, rejecting the urban lifestyle. Also despite the fact that urban planners insist that our urban centers and inner cities be

reconfigured for TINKS (two incomes, no kids), young people are still rejecting urban areas when they get married and enter their child-rearing years.

Among all of the church architects and builders I saw at the convention, I saw no example of urban churches that would have fit into either one of the dense developments that were presented. There is a reason for this, and that is that the vast majority of churches, even among the most contemporary, still seek to build the traditional campus that is theirs alone, not one that is obscurely placed on the fifth floor of a twenty-story office building.

Still, there might be some hope that someone is finally recognizing how important churches are to our communities. In an article entitled *The Faith-Based Gap in the Institutional Landscape of Cities*, author Milton Friesen laments the fact that the church community lacks the organizational structure to communicate with city urban planners, but states the importance of involving churches in planning.

Speaking about the city of Calgary (Canada) in particular, he wrote, “charities... and planning professionals alike have a public good requirement...hundreds of faith-based organizations serve a wide and significant number of citizen needs and dynamics of nearly a million residents as distributed across the more than 700 square kilometres of land occupied by the city”, and that “I would assert that the gap (between faith-based organizations and planners) in the social infrastructure can, and should be bridged.”

That gap can, in fact, be bridged, but not if churches are going to be forced into built environments that are the result of form-based codes, smart growth, etc. These are not what churches want, but from what I learned at the convention, few know what is actually awaiting them in the future.



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