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Planning A Smarter Future

If Tulsa is to prosper in progress, leaders need to stop and think about the big, urban picture

BY MICHAEL D. BATES

If you ever had any doubts about the value of city planning--or the dangers of failing to plan--a zoning case last week should put those doubts to rest.

On Tuesday, February 12, the City of Tulsa Board of Adjustment (BoA) voted 3-2 to allow the John 3:16 Mission to expand its ministry to the homeless, located just south of the Inner Dispersal Loop and just across Denver Ave. from the Tulsa County Jail.

The closeness of the vote reflects the difficulty of the decision. On the one hand, you have the nearby neighborhoods of Crosbie Heights, Owen Park, and Brady Heights. After being left for dead in the '70s, these neighborhoods have undergone a rebirth in the last 10 years or so, as people have come to see the value in classic homes and close-to-downtown living.

But the accumulation of social service agencies, shelters, and bail bondsmen around the jail attracts an element that hurts the perception of their neighborhoods. Expanding services to the homeless could well attract more vagrants to the area, some of whom may be violent or may engage in crimes against property to feed their drug or alcohol habit.

That's also a worry to those who are trying to encourage people from across the region to come downtown and spend money. John Bolton, general manager of the BOK Center, and Jim Norton, president of Downtown Tulsa Unlimited, both spoke against the mission's expansion as something that would hinder their efforts to revitalize downtown.

On the other hand, you have an organization that works with those who have hit bottom and successfully helps them put their lives back together. Allowing the John 3:16 Mission to expand should help more substance-addled vagrants to become productive citizens again.

At the heart of the matter is a city planning failure. Every city of Tulsa's size is going to have a population in need of services like the John 3:16 Mission and the Salvation Army shelter. A county with a half-million people will need a large jail.

But where those facilities have been placed, whether by deliberate planning or by default, interferes with the long-held public policy goal to revitalize downtown and near-downtown neighborhoods.

By the early '90s, Tulsans had begun to see the potential of the downtown warehouse district north of the tracks to become an arts and entertainment district. The area, known as Brady Village or the Brady Arts District, was identified as such in city plans. As the area began to develop, the city designated it a TIF district in 1995 to pay for street and sidewalk improvements.

But that same year, Tulsa County asked the voters for a half-cent sales tax to demolish a residential area and build a sprawling jail right across the street from Brady Village.

It seemed crazy to me at the time, and it still does. You had a piece of land that could have been revitalized as a link between the Brady District and the surrounding neighborhoods. Long ago, Urban Tulsa Weekly identified the

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Bad Planning. Allowing the John 3:16 Mission to expand should help more substance-addled vagrants to become productive citizens again...
Lisa Newman

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location as the ideal spot for a downtown ballpark, where the seats could face toward the skyline and away from the setting sun.

If you're not going to put the jail right next to the courthouse, why put it right next to an entertainment district? Oklahoma County had the good sense to put their jail far from Bricktown and to make it a high-rise, allowing Oklahoma County to accommodate twice the prisoners in one-third the footprint.

It's hard to figure how planners overlooked the conflict caused by putting a jail and social services corridor right next to areas that you intend to revitalize and re-gentrify. Sound city planning looks for such conflicts and seeks to resolve them.

Some libertarian types would lump city planning in with all other forms of central planning, equally deserving of scorn. They'd rightly point to the failure of centrally planned economies like the Soviet Union and the failure of wage and price controls in the U.S. And they'd object to the idea of the government restricting what someone can do with his own land.

But land is different than other forms of property because it is fixed in relationship to its surroundings. What I do with my land necessarily affects my neighbors' enjoyment of their land. That's particularly true in a densely settled city.

In other spheres of the economy, disputes can be resolved by dissolving a relationship, buying out a contract, paying a settlement. But you can't resolve conflicting land use by detaching one parcel from its spot on the surface of the Earth and moving it somewhere else. Land stays put.

One libertarian thinker proposed to deal with land use conflicts as an ordinary tort, rather than depending on land use planning and regulation. If you believe that your neighbor's use of his land has damaged you or the value of your property, you would take him to court. Over time, through the accumulation of precedents, land owners would learn how they could safely use their land without getting sued.

That solution might make trial lawyers happy, but the unpredictability of the situation would have a chilling effect on all investment in real property. Homeowners would hesitate to buy and restore a home, uncertain about what could be built next door. Every development would be under threat of lawsuits, whether well grounded or not.

Far better for everyone to operate under a clear set of rules, allowing change within predictable and stable bounds, so that homeowners, business owners, and developers alike know what they and their neighbors can and cannot do with their property.

Predictability is why Tulsa needs a neighborhood conservation ordinance. Councilor Maria Barnes and Planning Commissioner Michelle Cantrell are to be commended for making this issue a priority. We have to allow for infill development, but it needs to happen in a way that doesn't undermine the investments of neighboring property owners.

Certain minimal criteria, customized for each neighborhood, dealing with issues like scale, setback, and garage placement, will ensure that new development will be in line with the character of our midtown neighborhoods. Within the bounds of those criteria, home builders will have free rein to be creative. We're not talking about regulating paint color, window types, or doorknob styles.

Tulsa lags behind other cities on this issue. Many other cities in our region, including Oklahoma City, Little Rock, and Dallas, have found value in neighborhood conservation districts.

One caution: Rules for Tulsa's neighborhood conservation districts must be objective and measurable to provide the predictability that homeowners and developers need. It would be a mistake to give a review board the power to say thumbs up or down based on subjective impressions of a development proposal.

It's being reported that the development industry is lobbying against a neighborhood conservation ordinance. The industry has been on a political losing streak in recent years, losing control of the Tulsa City Council in 2004, failing in their effort to recall two councilors in 2005, failing to elect a majority of their chosen candidates and failing to defeat the zoning protest amendment to the City Charter in 2006, and losing control of the Broken Arrow City Council in 2007.

Tulsans are no longer willing to allow a self-interested lobby to control the evolution of our city. The developers need to reconcile themselves to the fact that they aren't going to get their way, and then they need to sit down with Councilor Barnes and groups like Preserve Midtown, acknowledge that their concerns are valid, and work with them toward a neighborhood conservation ordinance that addresses concerns on both sides.

Resolving conflicting aims and concerns is what good planning is all about.

COMMENTS

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Bob F, South

2/22/2008 - 9:31 am



I am amazed at how Tulsa Plans for the future. We boast the best homeless help in the area, from Kansas City to Dallas. Are we really helping or are we being enablers to a lifestyle? That we have a homeless network that attracts the homeless. There is trash on the road, on the sidewalks and blown next to buildings. You can see them relieve themselves on the corners next to buildings or in the alleys. This all facilitates and maintains an area of filth. To add to the less attractive area, you have bail bondsmen that have placed large signs on buildings to attract business. The county could make some money and sell space on the walls inside the jail and remove those signs that tell

people to stay away from this downtown area. In public areas inside the jail to inside where inmates are held, space could be sold to the highest bidder, to advertise their bailbond business. Then those buildings and land around the jail could actually be used for development, that would enhance the area and it's historical significance to our city. This may be too much common sense for those government types, but how great would it be to the City development!

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