

Communities feel the squeeze of accelerated church growth

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By Amy Green

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ORLANDO, Fla. (RNS)—Some neighbors complain about too many Wal-Marts or too many strip joints in their midst. In southeast Orlando, it's too many churches.

About a dozen churches—Baptist, Nazarene, Pentecostal and independent—are located within a few miles of each other on the city's outskirts, and more are under construction.

Neighbors venturing out Sunday mornings for bagels or errands often find themselves stuck in traffic, heads bowed not in faith but frustration. Some complain the congestion persists all week as religious, youth, sports and other activities draw crowds after work and school, too.

(RNS illustration/Monica Seaberry)
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Unmitigated in many places by taxes, zoning and other restrictions, church

development can pose a delicate quandary for municipal leaders who want to balance neighbors' concerns with the valuable services churches provide.

In some places, a concentration of churches—because of their tax-exempt status—strains the economy, according to some municipalities.

Frustrations have grown especially since President Clinton signed the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act in 2000, said Marci Hamilton, a professor and church-state scholar at Cardozo School of Law at Yeshiva University in New York City.

The law protects religious landowners from many zoning and other restrictions that apply to other developers, she said. Across the country, governments are challenging the law in cases that could eventually reach the Supreme Court. But it will take time, and meanwhile, neighbors are unhappy, she said.

“It’s happening all over the country,” Hamilton said. “I get an e-mail from a new neighborhood daily. It’s unbelievable because of this law what religious entities are willing to impose on residential neighborhoods.”

Religious leaders say they are responding to community growth by providing needed services, such as youth activities and sports facilities.

While religious organizations usually are exempt from property taxes, communities are finding other ways to tap them for revenue, said Chris Hoene, director of policy and research for the National League of Cities. For example, some may tax profit-generating enterprises, such as health care or child care.

Especially in communities that operate on small margins, a small change in the budget can mean a big difference, Hoene said.

“It’s a growing concern, because if you look at the sectors of the economy that are growing, the not-for-profit sector is continually noted as a fast-growing sector,” he said.

Neighbors can feel hamstrung and frustrated by laws and politics they feel encourage religious organizations to develop with little restraint—especially in areas residents had thought would be preserved for agriculture or conservation. Religious organizations sometimes are immune to such restrictions, and neighbors who had moved to open spaces for peace and quiet suddenly find themselves near a megachurch.

And when they turn to county commissioners for relief, elected officials don’t want to look like they don’t support a church.

In Montgomery County, Md., just outside Washington, D.C., leaders in 1980 zoned 93,000 acres—about 140 square miles—as an agricultural reserve. The zoning allowed churches, and there were about 60 scattered in the area, said Royce Hanson, chairman of the county planning board.

But in recent years, neighbors balked as a few megachurches sought to develop in the reserve. Civic leaders moved to curb the growth by rejecting building plans that required separate water and sewer systems.

“Churches, because they produce a level of activity, it was out of character with the rural area,” Hanson said. “Those of us who want to preserve the agricultural reserve believe it was a good solution.”

In Stafford, southwest of Houston, leaders decided the city’s 50 or so existing churches were enough, especially since only 200 acres remained available for development.

Many worshippers don’t actually live in the Houston suburb, Mayor Leonard Scarcella said, and without a city property tax, Stafford’s budget was stretched. Leaders imposed new regulations meant to put anyone who

wants to develop in Stafford under stricter review.

“We believe very strongly in God. If you want religion you can get just about anything here,” Scarcella said. “We don’t have 50 of anything else. ... We’re looking into ways that we can maintain balance, maintain viability and vitality of our economy.”

In southeast Orlando, the 6,000-member Faith Assembly of God will pay up to \$1 million in impact fees for its new building, Pastor Robb Hawks said. The idea that churches don’t shoulder a fair share of development costs is a fallacy, he said.

The church plans to maintain its old property—home to a school, fitness classes and youth programs—and hold worship services at its new site.

Across the street from the new facility, another large church is under construction. Neighbors worry the roads can’t handle the development, but Hawks offers no apology for his church’s growth, saying it reflects Orlando’s growth.

“I find it fascinating that people will move into a housing development and ... the first thing they want to do is stop any developments going in around them,” he said.

“People come, and they move into the city. They’ve transplanted themselves possibly from up north and they come looking for community, and where do you find community? ... They go looking for a church to not only fulfill their spiritual needs but their social needs, as well.”