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Zoning codes

A majority of the Cobb County Commissioners want to replace our current zoning code. They claim that it is outdated. When asked to explain, they point out that the current code is 50 years old. When the MDJ asked for examples of how the current zoning code is out of date, the commissioners did not provide any examples.

Every January, Cobb County undergoes a very comprehensive code amendment process, which includes annual updates to our zoning code. This process assures that our zoning code is kept up to date. Additional code amendments may occur at other times throughout the year, whenever issues arise that are urgent enough that the update cannot wait until the following January.

The US Constitution is more than 230 years old. We don't replace it every 50 years just because it becomes 50 years old.

The commissioners have dismissed concerns by saying that they aren't going to get rid of everything in the zoning code. But they won't tell us what they want to get rid of, and what they want to keep.

Here is the most important question that citizens should insist that Cobb County answer. What is structurally broken in the current zoning code that could not be fixed through the normal code amendment process, and which necessitates spending several hundred thousand dollars on an outside consultant to write an entirely new code to replace the one we have? So far, Cobb County has been unwilling or unable to answer this question.

Our current zoning code is a land use based zoning code, which does a great job of providing the foundation for enabling and preserving suburban style development, which includes low density housing on individual lots, in neighborhoods that are characterized as "single family residential" neighborhoods.

The only real reason to replace the zoning code is to adopt a new code that will be less supportive of suburban style development, and more supportive of more urban style development, and more supportive of a broader range of uses in existing suburban neighborhoods than just single family residential.

Many urban planners, and other "urbanists", don't like suburban style development. And in particular, they don't like low density single family residential neighborhoods, and zoning codes that allow suburban neighborhoods to be just single family residential, and nothing else.

A recent MDJ letter writer detailed the "urbanist" view. Some of his points included:

♦ "Local government regulations, planning and zoning . . . produce an unsustainable way of life, based on car dependency, inefficient housing and infrastructure, and a lack of public transit."

♦ "Zoning rules . . . lead to wasteful spending on infrastructure. Imagine the cost of roads, sewer, electrical, land, etc. to build 100 low density single family homes versus putting those same people into one building complex."

♦ "We must re-think our car-dependent lifestyle, 'build up, not out', and redesign our communities for walking, biking, and transit. Let's scrap 20th century zoning and planning regulations . . ."

Raise your hand if you want to be herded into "one building complex" that can house 100 families. Raise

your hand if you want the urbanist letter writer, or the Cobb County Commissioners, to decide what lifestyle they want to impose on your family.

I consider myself to be a "suburbanist". I disagree with self-righteous urbanist zealots, about what lifestyles they think they should be able to impose on other people.

Large portions of Cobb County are inhabited by people who live in suburban neighborhoods because that is the lifestyle that they like, and that is what they think is best for their families. I think those people who want to live in suburban neighborhoods, have the constitutional right to do so. And I certainly disagree that urbanists should have the right to decide what other people's lifestyles should be.

I agree with the letter writer that Cobb County's current zoning code provides a solid foundation for suburban style development. That's good and should not be changed.

Cobb has instructed the consultant to draft a new code based on current best practices in planning and zoning. For many urban planners, that would include ideas such as those expressed by the urbanist letter writer.

There is nothing structurally broken in our current zoning code that could not be fixed during the normal code amendment process, without spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on an outside consultant, unless the real objective is to adopt a new ordinance that is less supportive of suburban style development, and more supportive of urbanizing Cobb County.

Ron Sifen's views are his own and do not represent the opinions of any other group.



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