



Tough Love in High Point

By: Sam Hieb – May 29, 2013

Allow me to do my part in helping the city of High Point reinvent itself by suggesting a few marketing slogans:

High Point: Miles of mediocrity;

High Point: Where Krispy Kreme steals the show; High Point: What the world has never seen before.

Odds are city leaders aren't going to embrace my ideas. But they don't need to hear it from me; they heard plenty of it from famed architect Andres Duany, who was contracted to provide ideas about revitalizing High Point.

The marketing slogans are actually Duany's words, not mine. "Two miles of mediocrity" is his characterization of Main Street; the Krispy Kreme doughnut shop "steals the show" from the next-door downtown public library, which he described as "weirdly orientated"; and a proposed downtown roundabout is "what the world has never seen before."

Whether or not the city deems it worth the \$410,000 payout (\$50,000 from the city, the rest from "private sources") to hear the tough love Duany's been dishing out remains to be seen.

And it's been tough love, believe you me. During his final presentation to city leaders at High Point University after months of so-called "design charrettes," Duany concludes that High Point is "one of the most peculiar places" he's ever seen.

"Let's face it, this isn't a charming little town," he added.

Duany is a "new urbanist," and anybody who has read my Piedmont Publius blog knows that normally I cringe when I hear that term.

New urbanism is what it sounds like: an attempt to revitalize urban living with emphasis on high-density residential buildings, walkability and mass transit.

Local governments are doing everything they can to encourage new urbanist living, spending millions on greenways and light rail projects (look south to Charlotte) in the belief that high-density residential development will follow.

But in my mind it's yet another governmental attempt to force a square peg through a round hole. People don't want to live on top of one another; they want space and privacy, no matter the demographic.

Cato Institute senior fellow Randal O'Toole best illustrates this point of view on his blog, the Antiplanner, which he dedicates to debunking new-urbanist myths.

In a recent post, O'Toole writes "[D]espite claims of a downtown population boom, the reality is that every demographic group is growing faster in the suburbs than in the cities — and that includes poor people."

Mind you Duany had a few "new urbanist" recommendations for High Point, including constructing streetscapes and narrowing existing roads to encourage pedestrian traffic while reducing automobile traffic.

Duany also speaks out against so-called urban sprawl, although he acknowledges its reality by stating that it needs to be "repurposed."

But pay close attention to Duany's presentation — it's available on YouTube — and you'll note that he believes the biggest obstacle to new urbanism is — hold on — government.

Duany spoke repeatedly of adopting "pink zoning and "pink tape." In other words, local governments should move toward lighter zoning regulations and lighter red tape. In his opinion, local governments, through burdensome regulations, make it so difficult for developers to take on revitalizing older downtown buildings.

Duany said some things that city planning officials no doubt would find appalling. For example, he questioned the need for sprinkler codes, taking a note of a downtown building that's grandfathered out of sprinkler requirements.

"The book says you have to have sprinklers or people will die. Well, how many people have died in 40 years? Zero."

Duany later backed off and said he was using sprinklers as a metaphor for the excessive red tape that strangles development. The message he's trying to send is High Point simply isn't enough of a destination for developers to put up with big-city regulation.

"It works in Geneva, in San Francisco, in New York. It doesn't work here. You're not ready to play in the big leagues," he said. "You have to go back to a condition that is relative to your economic condition, which is relatively low."

Duany's dislike for bureaucracy reaches beyond architecture, too.

He asked the audience if they knew why seemingly every young person today is either an artist or a filmmaker.

"It's the only thing you can do without a permit," he answered. "We need to give those kids the breaks we had when we started a business. I'm of an age when it was easy to start a business."

In conclusion, Duany questioned whether or not there was the political will to cut the red tape in the interest of revitalizing High Point.

All I know is when Duany pointed to his forehead and said, “The whole country is up to here with bureaucracy,” the audience erupted in applause.

Whether or not the politicians and the bureaucrats heard that applause remains to be seen.