



Land-use debate asks: Should the Twin Cities be more like Houston?

By John Reinan

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Planners are “the Ebola of urban living.” The Twin Cities should strive to be more like Houston. And we’d be better off financially if we bought a Tesla automobile for each new southwest metro rail commuter, instead of building a light-rail system to serve them.

That was just the opening salvo fired by Randal O’Toole, an author and senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute in Washington, D.C. O’Toole was in the Twin Cities on Wednesday as one-half of a debate on land use with Myron Orfield, a University of Minnesota law professor and senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, another D.C. think tank that bills itself as offering “innovative policy solutions.”

The dueling fellows faced off at a meeting of the Sensible Land Use Coalition, a Twin Cities group that includes both professional planners and land developers. Their debate may not have changed many minds, but it forcefully highlighted the differing viewpoints between those who believe government should plan for growth, and those who believe the market should decide.

After O’Toole’s vigorous opening, Orfield fired back, referring to loosely regulated areas — many of them in the rural northern metro — as “the Randall O’Toole Belt.”

“The Metropolitan Council was not created to spread pointy-headed socialism,” Orfield said. “It was created to keep our water clean. The people living in the Randal O’Toole Belt aren’t doing so well. Their wells aren’t doing so well, their lakes aren’t doing so well.”

Making land-use decisions on a sensible, orderly basis, Orfield argued, is the kind of planning “that is the practice of every efficient corporation.”

O’Toole said that today’s leading trend in urban planning, often called “new urbanism,” is “dedicated to turning cities across the country into Greenwich Village.

“I don’t mind building Greenwich Village if people want to live in Greenwich Village,” he said, but “I don’t like subsidies or zoning mandates. That is what most urban planners are doing these

days.” O’Toole cited Houston and Indianapolis as cities that are thriving with little or no planning.

“You should go to Houston and look around Houston,” Orfield retorted. “It’s not everybody’s cup of tea to have low density without the urban amenities.”

As the debate ended, a questioner from the audience asked O’Toole, “Is there anything the two of you agree on?” He paused ... and paused ... and the room broke out in laughter.

“I doubt if I changed any minds,” O’Toole said afterward, “but I hope I gave the people who agree with me some ammunition.”