

February 2001

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## Growing Churches—Threat to Environment?

There is much reason for optimism—if not rejoicing—in Washington DC these days. It appears the public is closing ranks around our new president and is quickly gaining confidence in this man whom many believe was prayed into office. President Bush has a big job ahead – but not too big if God goes before him.

Three thousand miles to the west, however, much different attitudes are surfacing in the “other” Washington.

Church and state relations in King County have become strained, resulting from a slow-growth plan unveiled last year by County Executive Ron Sims. Initially, the Sims plan called for severe restrictions on church and private or parochial school growth in rural King County – limiting new construction to 20,000 square feet per site. But, based on warnings from the county’s legal staff that such specific targeting could raise constitutional concerns, Sims amended his plan to include public schools.

Backers of the slow-growth plan voted last week to place a ten-month moratorium on new construction so that a further impact study can be conducted. According to several church-friendly council members, the moratorium is more bad news for churches.

Provisions of the moratorium call for a task force to examine the long-term effects of building large churches and schools in rural areas. No doubt, this task force will “discover” that building churches and private schools brings more people, pollution, and excess traffic to pristine areas of King County. However, other projects such as the rural amphitheater, which will attract loud and raucous rock concert crowds, will receive no mention.

King County Council member, Chris Vance, one of five on the council who voted against the moratorium, stated, “I believe that this is the single worst decision the County Council has made in the eight years I have served on the County. Freedom of religion is one of the foundations upon which society is based. I believe the King County Council is overstepping its legal authority in regard to land use by trying to restrict the way people choose to worship.”

Councilman Kent Pullen, also vehemently opposed to the moratorium, stated “... I believe that certain elected officials are using land-use planning as a weapon to infringe on people’s right to worship and to provide a healthy, values-oriented private education for their children.”

Some feel this rather drastic approach to “growth management” is intended to counter the increasing political clout of evangelical Christians who attend some of the fastest growing churches in the area. Yet, churches not especially known for their political activism are also up in arms over this.

Western Washington’s Roman Catholic Archbishop, Alexander Brunett, has vowed to fight King County’s proposal to limit the size of churches and schools in rural areas. Brunett, who does not describe himself as political by nature, said, “It is time to step out when you see politicians who have a total disregard for faith and traditions.”

Besides encouraging their members to be involved citizens and advocating family values, values which some elected officials view as dangerous, how does the church impact a community? A story told by Chuck Colson on the August 2 *Breakpoint* provides an example:

“Eight years ago, the Boston neighborhood known as Dorchester had hit bottom. The crack epidemic had not only produced hundreds of addicts; it had spawned a terrible wave of violence, in particular among young people.” (Enter the Church. Eugene Rivers, the pastor of the Azusa Christian Community in Dorchester and other local pastors decided to get involved in the community). “The results the pastors achieved in Boston were astounding. The crime rate dropped 77 percent in less than a decade. Even more amazing, Boston, which had averaged nearly 20 juvenile homicides in the years preceding ... went nearly five years without a single juvenile murder.”

“In addition to saving lives and bringing hope where none existed, the story of Eugene Rivers ...is a reminder of why...Christians make the best citizens. Love of God and neighbor drives Christians—like Eugene Rivers and his friends—to do more than is required.”

Rulers down through the ages have come against the Church – it is to be expected. Scripture says, “...the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so.” (Romans 8:7,8 NIV)

What should the Church do in response to this attack? For starters, pray. And, praise God for His sovereignty over King County. Who knows but that the Lord is using Ron Sims to stir His people to action?

If you are a resident of King County, please consider contacting your King County Council member to make your thoughts known on this issue. Since several council members are up for re-election this fall it wouldn’t hurt to let them know you will “Remember in November.”

Sure, this is a big problem. But not too big if God goes before us!

*Rick Forcier*

Executive Director