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AUGUST 13, 2008

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## To Have and Have Not Are you a good NIMBY or a bad NIMBY?

BY MICHAEL D. BATES

More importantly, if BTBL is really about helping the homeless, why does it seek to uproot the population from downtown?

Ruth Kaiser Nelson was, for all practical purposes, my first Latin teacher. When I was an eighth-grader and starting my first year of Latin, the regular teacher took a leave of absence shortly after the school year began, and Mrs. Nelson filled in for the rest of the semester.

Because the class occurred during the girls' Phys. Ed. period, it was an all-boy class, and Mrs. Nelson, the mother of three boys and a girl, did a fine job of keeping us in line, but also keeping us amused, and giving us a good start in the language. I have only happy memories of her class, which laid the foundation for a lifelong love of the language and literature of ancient Rome.

The Romans had a way with pithy proverbs. Mrs. Nelson is surely familiar with this one: Quod licet Jovi, non licet bovi. Literally, it means, "What is permitted to Jupiter (the king of the gods) is not permitted to the ox."

The proverb justifies double standards for the wealthy and connected, on the one hand, and the hoi polloi on the other. The law that binds the commoner should not inconvenience the plutocrat. He who has the gold not only makes the rules, he's excused from obeying them.

At the August 7 City Council meeting, homeowners from nearby neighborhoods came to protest the location of a 76-unit multistory home for the chronically homeless, some of whom are currently housed at the downtown YMCA, some of whom are mentally ill.

Neighbors were asking the Council to rescind a resolution, passed the previous week, that opened the door for the project to receive \$4 million in state funding.

The large apartment building, to be located at 10 S. Yale, between Admiral Pl. and I-244, is part of the Building Tulsa Building Lives (BTBL) initiative. The Ruth K. Nelson Revocable Trust is listed as one of the initiative's principal partners, along with the George Kaiser Family Foundation (Mr. Kaiser and Mrs. Nelson are siblings), and the Tulsa Housing Authority, a public trust of which Mrs. Nelson is the chairman.

At the City Council meeting, Mrs. Nelson characterized the concerns of neighboring homeowners as typical NIMBYism:

"If we were to move all of these facilities to places where no one would protest, they would be in the middle of nowhere . . .

"Isolated people would not have the opportunity to rebuild their lives and become productive members of society."

Mrs. Nelson told the Council that the Admiral and Yale site was chosen for its relative proximity to downtown, where many social service agencies are located, a bus route, and stores within walking distance.

But this plan will make the people she professes to serve more isolated than they are now. At the YMCA, they aren't just close to downtown, they are downtown and near the social service agencies. Her plan would move them four miles from those agencies.

At the Downtown YMCA, residents are a block away from a bus station that gives them access to 20 bus lines which will take them directly to shopping, jobs, doctors, parks, and services without needing to transfer.

Four of those lines provide night-time service to hospitals and schools for shift work and night classes.

Mrs. Nelson wants the Y residents to move to where they'll have only a single, daytime bus line. Going anywhere that isn't on Admiral Pl. will require a long wait for a transfer at the downtown bus station. Going anywhere after 7 at night or on Sundays will be impossible.

At the Downtown Y, residents have the library and the County Courthouse across the street and the State Office Building and a hospital just a few blocks further west. Riverparks is about a mile to the south. There are eight churches within easy walking distance. Social service agencies are just a few blocks to the north.

There aren't any groceries nearby, but there are a few convenience stores not too far away and the bus provides non-stop service to a number of supermarkets.

They won't even have to walk far to see the Eagles or Celine Dion at the BOK Center, assuming arena management

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would let them in the door.

[Walkscore.com](http://Walkscore.com) gives the Downtown YMCA a rating of 89 -- "very walkable."

The I-244 and Yale location gets a 45 -- "car dependent." Sonic and QuikTrip are nearby, and it's about three-quarters of a mile to the Piggly Wiggly, just past a gun and ammo store. The nearest library is a mile away in Maxwell Park, a small branch in the middle of a neighborhood. There's a bar two blocks away, right across the street from a plasma center. That's about it.

Moving residents of the Downtown Y to I-244 and Yale will make them more isolated than they are now, not less.

Also sorely misplaced, but for a different set of circumstances, is the Diocese of Tulsa's new Catholic Charities' campus at Apache St. and Harvard Ave., the groundbreaking for which was last March. The project is scheduled for completion by summer 2009.

Located far from the homeless, transient and public transport-dependent poor who rely on walkable downtown services, this far-flung, north Tulsa facility will consolidate several locations along the city's downtown fringe.

Indeed, relocating social services far from downtown and the people who need them is something of a trend. Federal facilities, like the VA clinic and the Social Security office, used to be concentrated downtown but are now scattered all across town.

But since most of these clients are on fixed incomes, have limited access to transportation--and, with the cost of gas so high--how will they get there?

Helping the Homeless?

So what's the real reason for moving mentally ill, indigent, and homeless people out of downtown? Because downtown property owners and the BOK Center management and Downtown Tulsa Unlimited are the real NIMBYs. They don't want these people in their backyard.

It says so plainly at [www.buildingtulsabuildinglives.org/buildingtulsa/](http://www.buildingtulsabuildinglives.org/buildingtulsa/):

"The opening of the BOK Center and other Vision 2025 projects are important components in securing the economic future of downtown Tulsa. But before downtown can become the vibrant destination it has the potential to be, developers and investors must be assured of its inviting and family-friendly environment.

"Eliminating homelessness will attract further development and investment to downtown."

But it's OK for BOK executives and BOK Center management and downtown property interests to be NIMBYs. If your place cost \$178 million, you're allowed to say, "There goes the neighborhood," even if that \$178 million came mostly from the taxpayers.

You're not allowed to complain if you have only a little 1,000 sq. ft., \$60,000 house that you paid for yourself.

You know: Quod licet Jovi, non licet bovi.

What's sardonically funny is that the "neighbors" whom the BOK Center regards as a problem were already there when that site was selected for the arena. Many people (including this writer) pointed out that back in 2003 it wasn't very smart to put an arena in the midst of the jail, the bail bondsmen, the homeless shelters, the Y, the Sheriff's Office, and the Courthouse.

Is it fair for you to be a NIMBY about neighbors who were there before you moved in?

Of course, but only if you're wealthy or connected. Quod licet Jovi, non licet bovi.

While the Council had no power to stop the Admiral and Yale facility last Thursday--Mrs. Nelson said private donors would fill the gap if the Council didn't pass the resolution allowing state funding--councilors didn't need to be condescending to the citizens who came to express their concerns.

According to the daily paper, "After listening to the protests, Councilor John Eagleton said people can try to push such a project out of their neighborhood out of fear, but that doesn't make it right." Shouldn't he have been saying that to the downtown interests who want to clear the homeless out of downtown?

At least Eagleton was there. Councilor David Patrick, whose district borders the I-244 and Yale site, wasn't. And White City residents are wondering when their councilor, Eric Gomez, first knew about the facility, and why he didn't bother to let them know about it.

From what I gather from the City Council meeting, if you're a working-class homeowner, you deserve scorn for not wanting the homeless in your neighborhood. But if you want to shoo the homeless away from the \$178 million arena, you're a progressive, civic-minded philanthropist.

Quod licet Jovi, non licet bovi.

Neighbors were told that their fears were unfounded, abhorrent even, a sign of moral inferiority. They were told that the residents of this new facility will not pose a threat to their safety or their property values, thanks to new programs and new methods for helping these people become productive citizens again.

As anxious as downtown interests and BTBL leaders are to drive the homeless out of downtown, one has to wonder if they really believe these new methods work.

If you really wanted to help the homeless to rebuild their lives, and had a new way to do it, wouldn't it be more effective in a remodeled facility downtown, with the added bonus of keeping the homeless and indigent in familiar surroundings and connected to job opportunities and services and transportation?

A support program that will work at Admiral and Yale will work even better at 6th and Denver.

In fact, there is a successful model for providing "supportive housing" for the chronically homeless in the midst of a popular entertainment, shopping, and tourism district.

In the early '90s, New York's Common Ground Community took the old Times Square Hotel at 8th Ave. and 43rd, then a squalid flophouse for hundreds of transients, and renovated the building into more than 600 efficiency units.

Nearly 200 of the old residents were allowed to remain. The building's mix was to include former mental patients and the working poor, along with a staff of social workers to help residents learn the life skills needed to stay off the streets.

The program has been a great success. Common Ground's aggressive "Street to Home" program reached out to the

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toughest cases, those who had been on the streets the longest. The result was an 87% reduction in the number of homeless in Times Square in a two-year period, as these people have been given housing and a hand up.

The building's ground floor includes a Ben and Jerry's Ice Cream store which partners with Common Ground to provide training and job opportunities for residents. The rooftop terrace is rented out for catered corporate functions.

The Times Square is a good neighbor to expensive hotels and Broadway theaters. A block from the Port Authority Bus Terminal, gateway to New York for many low-income arrivals, it's right where it's needed.

Common Ground's success has been repeated in other buildings around New York and in other cities. They even bought and renovated the old YMCA residence in the Chelsea neighborhood.

It's claimed that Tulsa's YMCA residence has to be demolished because of the new sprinkler regulations. But don't you suppose the Y could be brought up to code for much less than building a new facility at I-244 and Yale?

But Building Tulsa Building Lives backers don't have to be consistent or logical or reasonable to get their way with city government.

Quod licet Jovi, non licet bovi. They can be NIMBYs if they want to be, and no one will call them on it.

Except us, and now, our readers.

On a Related Note

Nobody has been promoting a downtown ball park longer and more enthusiastically than your friends at UTW. But how the stadium is brought downtown, is another question. It seems that quod licet Jovi, non licet bovi applies to exclusive negotiating periods, too.

If you're Mayor Kathy Taylor, of course you should expect Tulsa Drillers owner Chuck Lamson to honor his exclusive negotiating period with the city, and even to extend it if need be. As teary as she was at last week's Tulsa Development Authority meeting, she'd have had a conniption if Lamson had terminated the exclusive negotiating period with Tulsa a month early so he could flirt with Jenks Mayor Vic Vreeland instead.

But how dare lowly entrepreneur Will Wilkins expect the TDA to honor their commitment to an exclusive negotiating period! How dare he rally public support to try to discourage the TDA from breaking their word! Only wealthy and connected and powerful people have a right to expect such commitments to be honored.

The daily wrote of the latest Drillers extension, without a hint of irony: "Exclusive negotiations preclude the team from entertaining other offers...."

Where the TDA is concerned, an "exclusive negotiating period" isn't exclusive, doesn't require negotiating in good faith, and doesn't have to last the full period.

The old pagans of Rome would have understood the double standard. Quod licet Jovi, non licet bovi.

But Tulsans, the vast majority of whom profess to serve the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, should remember that He commands a single standard for all:

"You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor." (Leviticus 19:15.)

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diane

9/ 2/2008 - 1:33am



I live about a 1/2 mile from the new site and am looking forward to a volunteer opportunity near home. I have a BA in Special Education and am interested in finding out if there will be children in recidency. I would be interested in starting an after school tutoring program and assitance in raising reading levels.

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bcuzofgrace

8/19/2008 - 12:43pm



Look at Leviticus 25:35 for the answer to the problem at hand. "If one of your countrymen becomes poor and is unable to support himself among you, help him as you would an alien or a temporary resident, so he can continue to live among you."

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theUprisingTulsa.org, Downtown

8/14/2008 - 2:02am



Michael,

Bravo for your article! As a local pastor who serves the homeless, one of my greatest concern is their access to services and transportation. I am thouroughly disgusted with the NIMBY attitude of the elitists in this city.

As a small church our congregation spends much time on the streets downtown with the homeless who are drug addicted, alcoholics, and mentally ill. I can honestly ask those who are afraid to come downtown because of the homeless, "What are you afraid of?" We generally bring our kids with us downtown as we minister on the streets and we have never had a problem. As a matter of fact our kids (usually numbering around 5 to 10 of them ranging in age from 3 to 15 years old) have a great sense of compassion for the needs of those who are less fortunate, or who are struggling in life. The homeless actually enjoy having the kids around because in some way it brings a sense of normalcy into their lives.

What I find profoundly amazing is that this city seems to want to sweep under the rug those who are the most vulnerable in our society instead of looking for real solutions to the problems of homelessness. For example,

there are many "mega churches" in this city that have the resources available to have a serious impact on homelessness, but to their shame don't see these people through the eyes of the One whom they profess to follow. They don't see any reason to get involved because it would cost them something and the homeless don't give into the Church. Yet the Christ whom they follow paid the ultimate price for them so that they could walk free of the things that bind them. Many are so rapped-up in their prosperity messages that they fail to actually see themselves in the homeless and say, "except for the grace of God, there go I". Yes, there are churches in Tulsa trying to have an impact, but much, much more could be done.

And to the "powers that be" in Tulsa, when are you going to follow the lead of successful cities that have centralized services for the homeless, and begin to provide real solutions to the problem instead of trying to shuffle them around the city like spreading the peas out on your plate that you didn't want to eat so it that looks like you did? These are real human beings, not peas! Many have been forced to live on the streets because they have been kicked out of mental health services due to lack of funding. Many are out there because of bad choices in their lives. (Let those who have not sinned cast the first stone!) Many are living under bridges or on the streets because of a bad string of events in their lives due to sickness or some other unfortunate event. No matter what the reason, these are PEOPLE! They have the same desires and dreams as the rest of us. You are holding the homeless of Tulsa in bondage to your whims and your political asperations. All I want to say is, just like Moses said to Pharaoh, "Let my people go!"

Might I also take this time to suggest to Mayor Kathy Taylor that instead of alienating the faith community in Tulsa as you have, that you begin to work with us in helping provide the services needed for the homeless to get off the downward spiral they are on. Our little church has a vision to help provide basic services for the homeless, like a free laundry for them to go wash and dry their clothes, instead of wearing the same old dirty clothes everyday until they have to go to the Salvation Army for something clean to wear. How about a decent place to take a real shower, a place where they don't have feel degraded or worry about all their belongings getting stolen while they are in the shower. These are fudamental and basic human needs that are not available to Tulsa's homeless.

And while you are at it Mayor Taylor, please stop using the TPD as a private security force to uproot the homeless from under bridges and tearing down their homes in the tent city on the river just north of downtown. It is illegal in my book to take their belongings away from them and throw them in the trash without a warrant or some type of due process. What you are throwing away is all they have in this world, and they feel violated and raped by your gestapo tactics. Again, these are real people living tragic lives who have real emotions and suffer real losses because of your policies.

Instead of kicking the homeless when they are down, let's all work together to help bring them some dignity and assistance in getting the help they need to break free from the cycle of despair. Basic human services and health care in a more centralized environment would be a good place to start. For those of us in the faith community, we must love our homeless neighbors as ourselves and begin to lay our lives down for our brothers and sisters living on the streets. The ministry of Jesus was summed-up in Luke 4:18 when He said: "The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed." Aren't we supposed to be more like Him?

Rev. Richard L. Jones, pastor  
the Uprising  
Tulsa, OK  
918.770.0000  
www.theUprisingTulsa.org

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