

A livable city is a safe, productive one - Compass: Points of view from the community

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From the lack of access to natural sunlight to sidewalks made impassable by snow berms, our personal choices in Anchorage are limited by poor winter city design. However, it does not have to be that way. We have the tools to transform Anchorage into a great northern community. It just takes the understanding and willingness of citizens and civic and business leaders to accept the value of high-quality urban design.

Unfortunately, the discussion under way right now on the rewrite of the Municipal Code's Title 21 is headed in the opposite direction and will burden another generation with poorly thought-out development. Our community needs to establish higher standards, not lesser, for urban design, because:

- * A well-designed city reduces property taxes. A city designed for the subarctic reduces the amount of public money spent on snow removal. More on-site options for snow storage minimize the snow trucked at considerable expense to snow dumps. Requiring sidewalks and adjacent property owners to maintain them is standard for mature northern communities. More individual responsibility for addressing snow removal reduces the need for public dollars.

- * A city designed for the north increases the productivity of the work force and is more prosperous. A healthier citizenry improves the bottom line by reducing health care expenses and improving work performance. Most health care practitioners recognize that a well-designed environment is linked to patient recovery rates. Well-designed houses tend to increase in value more quickly than average, generating more wealth. These extra dollars can then be spent on local goods and services, supporting a more prosperous small-business community.

- * A more livable winter city is safer. In an environment that is well-designed, attractive and well-maintained, people are more likely to take pride in their surroundings, have a sense of shared ownership and take responsibility for proper behavior. Studies have shown that crime is reduced in areas where the front windows of houses face each other across the street, creating a sense of mutual surveillance. Contrast this with the average snout house or blank-wall fourplex typical on most Anchorage streets. Reducing crime rates is not just about more police. It is also about good design.

- * A northern community designed for the subarctic is more sustainable. Compact neighborhoods that integrate parking and other transportation infrastructure will encourage walking, snowshoeing, cycling and skiing, which in turn reduce fuel consumption. Buildings with access to natural light have to rely less on artificial lighting, thus saving electricity. Fuel and power savings contribute to a more affordable city.

We must insist on raising expectations and providing more incentives to build structures that are better designed for our unique subarctic environment. The current rewrite of the Municipal Code Title 21, which sets the rules and standards, is key to this effort. Teachers who want more

attentive and smarter students, health care workers who want healthier patients, businesses who want more productive employees, and property owners who want a lower tax burden need to speak out. Let our leaders know that quality urban design is important to all of us.

Allen Kemplen is a longtime advocate of Winter City design principles in Anchorage and serves on the Municipal Urban Design Commission. The views expressed here are his own.

Caption: Photo 1: 22compass_kempler_022207.tif Photo 2: Allen Kemplen_022207.jpg Graphic 3: 22EditArt_pg1PDSblack c_022207.eps

MARC LESTER / Daily News archive 2007 A pedestrian walks along 36th Avenue atop a berm of ice and snow.

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