

Opinion

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Where would you live?

Bring on design standards to brighten bland townhouses

First Anchorage was overtaken by ugly site condos, those plain, boxy duplexes and single family condos packed in tightly on strips of vacant land.

Then site condos fell into disrepute, and the site condo building boom died down.

Now, another version of bland building is proliferating here and needs to be reined in: rectangular, beige and grey townhouse buildings, rows and rows of them all looking very much the same, from Bragaw Street to Jewel Lake Road.

Here's what stands out when you look at the front of many of the recently built fourplex and larger townhouse buildings:

Double car garage, door; double car garage, door; double car garage, door; double car garage, door. Is this getting monotonous? Some fourplexes don't even have a blade of grass between parking lots and the building.

The city is more than four years into a major rewrite of the zoning code. The working version so far includes some design standards for multi-family housing. Anchorage sorely needs these standards. They'll save us from continuing a fall into nondescript, unattractive neighborhoods.

The planning department is still refining proposed standards for building design, landscaping and the like, but they are due out in mid-September, says city planner Erika McConnell. After that, there will be public hearings.

So far, developers of townhouses and other multi-family buildings would be asked to design in some features that distinguish one section of a building from another, such as painting them different colors or using different materials.

They would need to add touches like bay windows, balconies or porches to relieve the flat look of so many townhouse fronts.

They would be required to leave some open green space, or another feature like it such as a playground.

While the fourplex, lookalike townhouses are not pretty, they do fulfill some legitimate goals for Anchorage. They provide housing more efficiently than if single-family houses were built in their place.

And they are providing less expensive housing for those who want to buy their own place, but have limited income. A three-year-old townhouse on Meadow Street in South Anchorage was advertised last week for \$185,000, for example.

It's always been a balancing act, producing houses that people of modest incomes can afford, while not letting Anchorage fill up with dull neighborhoods with no personality, trees, grass or sidewalks.

But if the residential areas aren't attractive, it hurts the entire town.

BOTTOM LINE: Anchorage needs to grow up and agree to design standards for townhouses and other multi-family housing.

ON THE WEB: Go to muni.org/Planning/ to look up the Title 21 zoning and land use code rewrite. Find building design standards in Chapter 7, public review draft No. 2. Look for this chapter to be revised by mid-September.

Caption: Photo 1: 18edit pg1_color_081807.jpg Photo 2: 18edit pg1_RGB_081807.jpg Photo 3: MultiFamily1_081807.jpg Photo 4: MultiFamily2_081807.jpg

Photos by BOB HALLINEN /Anchorage Daily News Beige townhouses with flat exteriors like these are going up all over town. The Admirals' Cove buildings off DeBarr Road are still affordable, but are designed with some imagination.

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