

Opinion

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Biz districts

How about some rules for commercial zones?

One of the most positive changes proposed for Anchorage's way-out-of-date zoning code is to strengthen the rules for business districts.

B-3, the existing classification for commercial areas outside of downtown, covers everything from high-rise office buildings to mom and pop stores. It's Midtown. It's Dimond Center. It's the corner of Jewel Lake Road and Dimond Boulevard.

There are no height limits or rules about what size building can go on a given lot. There's no distinction between whether the businesses are in a neighborhood shopping area or a huge commercial district.

City consultants Clarion Associates of Denver in 2003 described Anchorage's B-3 classification as a "Wild West commercial district" because it covers a wide range of uses -- and because B-3 districts are established all over town.

That needs to change.

City planners, in the midst of rewriting the zoning code, have proposed creating new commercial district zones intended to replace most of the B-3 areas.

These new zones are key to making the goals for commercial areas that are set out in Anchorage 2020, the city's comprehensive plan, come true.

For example, instead of being B-3, areas like that around Jewel Lake and Dimond would be in a zone for suburban "town centers," designed to include a mix of townhouses and apartments within walking distance of attractive commercial developments.

Midtown, which has more jobs than any other part of town, would have its own set of rules to guide development, such as where to put future office buildings and how to squeeze in some new housing for all the people who work there.

Downtown would also have its own plan.

Future B-3 zoning would be limited to some strip commercial areas such as the Old Seward Highway south of Tudor Road.

And even the B-3 zoned areas would have more rules, such as a three-story height limit.

The business districts described in the latest revision of Title 21, the zoning code, would help bring order and design to a messy, free-wheeling set of rules.

BOTTOM LINE: The revision of zoning codes for business districts is moving in the right direction.

READ THE FINE PRINT: On Dec. 3, the Planning and Zoning Commission will consider a recommendation on changing the rules that govern the city's commercial districts. To read a draft of the new rules online, scroll down to "Title 21 Land Use Code Rewrite" and click on "project page," then "Documents for Review," then "Public Hearing Draft." The rules are described in Chapters 21.04, 21.05 and 21.06.

www.muni.org/planning

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