

## OPINION

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Snout houses

Anchorage has had enough; it's time for better design

Snout houses, the houses where the front is mostly a blank, boring, garage door, are still legal to build in Anchorage.

That's a big reason for the city to finish up a rewrite of the zoning code that's been six years in the making.

Anchorage is filled with look-alike subdivisions of snout houses. Besides the garage, sometimes there's only enough space left on the front ground floor of these houses for an entry door.

Such designs make for monotonous, dull neighborhoods.

The proposed changes to the zoning code are no means dramatic. They won't get us to the quality of residential design required in many cities Outside. But we're starting from a low level with our design rules. We need to upgrade in phases.

Here are some of the changes proposed for new single and two-family residences:

- \* The front yard can't be all driveway -- the driveway can cover no more than 40 percent of the room.

- \* A subdivision with five or more houses has to mix up the house plans, with different floor plans and exterior design. Builders get a menu to choose from. For example, they can create different-shaped roofs, or put the garages and windows in different places on each house.

- \* Front entrances need to be visible from the street. If there's a covered porch, the entrance can be set back a ways.

- \* Garages can take up no more than 65 percent -- that's almost two-thirds -- of the length of the front of a house. If they take up more than half, the builders must pick from a list of choices to make the front of the house more appealing. The choices range from a balcony over the garage to special paving patterns in the driveway.

These standards are a compromise from what was originally proposed in 2002. The original version by Clarion Associates from Denver would have required garages to take up no more than half of a house's façade, and a garage that prominent would have had to make other changes in the design.

Because the designed standards have been watered down from the original, we asked Clarion

vice president Matt Goebel whether they look like they will still do the job: improving the design of Anchorage houses, resulting in more distinctive neighborhoods.

Goebel and his associates create plans like this around the country.

His answer: Yes.

"It's going to really carry the ball forward significantly from where you are now, but I think it's going to do it in a common sense way."

Instead of mandating that every house have a porch, for example, builders have a menu of choices for giving each house a little character, to make it different from the house next door.

City planning director Tom Nelson said builders are already changing in anticipation of the new standards.

The West Park Subdivision in the old Sand Lake gravel pits off Sand Lake Road is an example, said Nelson. Some houses there have separate garages around the back, allowing the designs to feature front porches and creative roof lines on the house itself. The better design is still affordable by Anchorage standards; the houses sell for prices in the low \$300,000s, according to the developer, Greg Rumsey of White Raven Development and Hultquist Homes.

Rumsey said that doesn't mean the residential design standards in the zoning code rewrite pose no problems.

"You continually fight the age-old fight of trying to have affordable housing, yet getting curb appeal."

Hultquist has built plenty of snout houses through the years too. Hultquist snout houses in Seclusion Bay, near Southport and Bayshore, were used in a city planning study a few years ago as an example of designs that would not hold up under the revised Title 21. Those houses were on small 4,000-square-foot lots, Rumsey said. If you were building a house with a two-car garage, the garage had to be the dominant element.

There's no question that creating houses that people with low incomes can afford to buy will remain a challenge. But it's time for our city to grow up, and start building more appealing neighborhoods.

**BOTTOM LINE:** The new city zoning code should call a halt to building unattractive snout houses.

More information

The zoning code revisions have been moving to the Assembly for approval a piece at a time. The Planning and Zoning Commission has not yet acted on residential design standards, in Chapter 7.

Next up: Progress on the revisions has been held up, waiting for an economic report of how much it would cost developers to meet new commercial, multi-family housing, and industrial zoning standards. The report is just out. Find it at [muni.org/planning](http://muni.org/planning). The report will be discussed in public meetings including one at 6:30 p.m. March 20 at the city Planning Department, 4700 Elmore (formerly Bragaw) Road.

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MARC LESTER / Anchorage Daily News A home on Solitude Circle in South Anchorage exemplifies a garage-front design.

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