

City has good blueprint for growth but doesn't follow it - COMPASS: Other points of view

Anchorage Daily News (AK) - Thursday, October 16, 2008

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Imagine waking up to new snow and icy roads and not worrying about diving into the ditch. How about not worrying whether your car will start so you can get the kids to school? Can you imagine Anchorage with smooth-flowing traffic any day of the week?

It won't happen with the transportation system we're building now. We need to take a look at what other places are doing and try to build on their successes.

Anchorage produced an award-winning comprehensive plan eight years ago with the help of thousands of its citizens. This visionary document, Anchorage 2020, calls for building an efficient transportation system that offers affordable, viable choices among various modes of travel that serve all parts of the community.

But for the last eight years, implementation has been left up to the preferences of each succeeding administration. Our strong mayor form of government does not necessarily lend itself to accountability for implementing even the city's most important blueprint. Even now, some departments carefully link their work and capital investments to Anchorage 2020's vision, while others don't.

Even though the municipality's planning department is understaffed, they do a remarkable job. Municipal planners are working overtime to complete their rewrite of the city's land use code, Title 21, this winter. Title 21 is the critical step toward achieving the goals of Anchorage 2020. The lynchpin chapter on Development and Design Standards is currently under review by the Planning and Zoning Commission. The Anchorage Assembly expects to adopt it this winter.

Anchorage's land use planners get it. They understand the importance of Anchorage 2020 and strive to achieve it through district and neighborhood plans that protect neighborhood character while providing for infill and redevelopment. Planners are proposing design standards tailored for our northern climate with landscaping and overhangs that protect us against snow and wind, lots of sun inside and rooflines that allow sunlight to reach nearby buildings. Parking lots would be safer for pedestrians and businesses will have windows that front the street.

But where is the "efficient transportation system that offers affordable, viable choices among various modes of travel that serve all parts of the community," called for in Anchorage 2020?

We are still waiting to see the city's big transportation investments implement Anchorage 2020's vision. While we substantially expand our road system, our transit system languishes. People Mover's bus service today is less than it was in 1982.

True, it's hard to change direction when decades of common practice and big money steer us into cars. The lavish proposal to connect the Glenn and New Seward highways continues this trend. It is time for Anchorage to shake that bad habit and build a modern transportation system that does

not require us to drive cars.

Reliance on car travel imposes huge land costs on all of us. The municipal traffic department calculates that we have .88 passenger vehicles per person, and 4 to 5 parking spaces per vehicle. Since outdoor lots cost \$8,000 per parking space, surface parking infrastructure for every person in Anchorage costs \$32,000! Using the much higher cost of \$30,000 or more per spot in a parking garage, costs go up to \$118,000 per person. This is crazy.

The really sad thing is, when road planners tell us that streetcars, light rail and commuter rail are not economical alternatives to car travel, it's partly because they do not factor in the full costs of driving and parking. Their flawed cost estimates do not include our vehicle maintenance, fuel or other costs. Transportation's share of the family budget was climbing, even before the recent run-up in fuel costs. In 2006, transportation cost 19 percent of the average family budget, second only to housing.

Anchorage Citizens Coalition can help. We are celebrating our 10th anniversary this year and hope you are interested in learning how Anchorage can take steps toward building a balanced, multimodal transportation system our children will be proud of.

Peter Mjos is president of Anchorage Citizens Coalition. The group is hosting national transportation expert Grace Crunican, who speaks tonight on "Building a Sustainable Transportation System," at 7 p.m. in the Marston Theater at the Loussac Library. The public is invited.

Caption: Graphic 1: 16edit_Pete Mjos_101608.eps

Edition: Final

Section: Nation World

Page: B7

Record Number: 1803016410/16/08

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