

Land use rules undergoing review - Rewrite: Denver company outlines set of proposed new laws.

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Unprotected lake fronts. Industrial zones used for other purposes. An Anchorage invention called "site condos" that leads to private roads not built to any standards.

These and other land use weaknesses have come to light as Anchorage has matured from a frontier town to an urban community, say national experts hired by the city to redo its land use code.

Guided by the city planning department, Clarion Associates of Denver has begun a sweeping rewrite of land use and zoning rules, from the kinds of lights a business can have in its parking lot to design standards for subdivisions.

The firm started with a critique of the status quo that concluded, for example, that Anchorage needs to corral commercial districts now spattered all over the city and that it has few rules protecting its natural environment, such as streams and wildlife habitat. The firm has outlined a set of proposed new laws.

The current code, developed in 1969 and amended regularly since, is at cross purposes with many policies that have been adopted, city planning supervisor Tom Nelson told the Anchorage Assembly recently. New policies not reflected in the city's laws include Anchorage 2020, the comprehensive plan adopted in 2001.

Clarion executives Chris

Duerksen and Matt Goebel said Anchorage 2020 provides an excellent guide. The plan lays out community values and goals to guide Anchorage's growth. It calls for better protection of streams, lakes and neighborhoods, and for higher-quality commercial and residential development.

"We think it's one of the better plans we've seen around the country," Goebel said.

"We go to towns without comprehensive plans to rewrite the code, and that's very difficult to do,"

Duerksen said.

Not that making wholesale land use changes in Anchorage will be easy. It's all about finding balance among competing interests, they say.

In interviews, they've learned that some Anchorage residents support the comprehensive plan and want such features as residential design rules put into place as quickly as possible. An example might be requirements for open space in new subdivisions.

Many business people, on the other hand, have told them they oppose new regulations that would hurt business and don't agree with all aspects of Anchorage 2020.

Community council representatives have said they want more time to review big development proposals. Yet developers say they can't slow down, because of the short building season, says the initial Clarion report.

Duerksen is managing director of Clarion. Goebel is a lawyer and vice president of the firm.

They say they've written many development codes around the country and have a process that works.

They critique the current code. They interview many residents, including builders, neighborhood representatives and city officials. They write an outline of what they think should happen and show that to decision makers and the public. Then they start drafting laws.

In Anchorage, they have written the critique and the outline. Public meetings are scheduled for Thursday and Friday to lay out the plan and get reaction.

While the project was started under Mayor George Wuerch, Mayor-elect Mark Begich, who takes office in July, says he's eager to complete the rewrite of Title 21, the land use laws.

"We are going to be aggressive about solving and getting it resolved," he said. "Otherwise, you get development by default."

Here are some observations from the Clarion Associates initial critique:

* Neighborhoods -- Title 21 contains "only very modest provisions" to ensure that any new development near existing residences will be compatible with the neighborhood. People in residential areas need confidence they will be protected with "better building and site design standards, buffering and landscaping requirements and lighting restrictions," the consultants said.

Yet, they say, "for a city that is relatively young, Anchorage has grown up with many close-knit neighborhoods and a strong sense of community." One sign of that is the number of people who are actively involved in changes to Title 21.

* Subdivisions and site condos -- Anchorage's subdivision standards are "relatively weak," but even so, some developers are leaping through a loophole to avoid them, the experts said. Developers are building something called site condos, which Duerksen said he's never seen before anywhere. In Anchorage, site condos are single-family houses erected together on one large lot, in which there are no lot lines and the buyer buys only the house, not the land.

"Many site condos are created without any sort of review. There is no connection to surrounding properties since only private streets are created; each site condo development becomes, in effect, its own island," the Clarion critique says. There's rarely open space included, and the roadways

are often not up to public standards, the consultants say.

* Green areas -- The city could adopt incentives or requirements for setting aside open space when subdivisions are created. There are no rules preventing development right up to the edge of lakes, and minimal setbacks of 25 feet for streams, whereas 100 feet is common in other cities.

* Streets and sidewalks -- While the new plan proposes neighborhood streets be gridlike, with multiple ways to get in and out, subdivisions tend to be built with cul-de-sacs and limited access. The city should figure out how to make sidewalks, trails and paths connect to one another.

* New zones -- The existing law doesn't allow the city to put into play some new design ideas, like town centers, which are meant to allow and encourage people to live near recreational facilities, restaurants and other businesses so they can walk to them. A town center district that allowed a mix of businesses and residences might be used, for example, to shape a livelier downtown in Eagle River.

* Business and industrial districts -- The general business district zoning used outside the city center, B-3, "might be characterized as a 'Wild West' commercial district because it allows a wide-open list of office, retail, wholesale, business services and institutional uses." B-3 districts have been created all around town. They should be reined in for several reasons, including to conserve the supply of land available for building houses.

Districts intended for industries such as warehouses have been usurped for all kinds of commercial and business uses. That's created a concern that industry could be choked off for lack of space.

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For more information: Clarion Associates, a consulting firm, will outline proposed changes to Anchorage land use laws: Thursday, noon-2 p.m., at a work session with city boards and commissions, and 7-9 p.m., at a meeting with a citizens committee, both on the eighth floor of City Hall; and Friday, noon-2 p.m., at an Anchorage Assembly work session, first floor, City Hall. The project Web site is at

www.muni.org/planning/prj_Title21.cfm

Caption: Photo 1: LandUseOceanBreeze_051203.jpg Photo 2: LandUseOceanPoint_051203.jpg

Photo 3: heritage2_051203.tif Photo 4: heritage_051203.tif

ERIK HILL / Anchorage Daily News Residences back up to each other in the Ocean Point development off Johns Road in South Anchorage. Tightly packed single-family houses characterize the Ocean Breeze development off Johns Road in South Anchorage.

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