

New rules could give city a fresh face - DESIGN: Regulations on land use and zoning would affect the look of buildings and roadways.

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City planners have proposed a sweeping set of land-use and zoning rules that could change the face of Anchorage.

After decades of growth under an old set of regulations, the city and its consultants have rewritten the code, recommending stricter standards of all sorts, from designing buildings to hiding trash bins.

The revision has just been released, and a series of meetings to discuss the draft code with different citizen groups, city boards and commissions is scheduled this week.

The new rules would bring to life some of the ideas of Anchorage 2020, the city's comprehensive plan, city planners say.

They include mandates for architecturally appealing storefronts. For example, if a Barnes and Noble bookstore like the one on Northern Lights Boulevard were built under the new rules, the sides of the building could not be blank walls and the parking lot would have to be landscaped.

The proposed rules would also change, over time, the appearance of residential neighborhoods. For example, they call for subdivisions with varied house designs and less prominent garages, for sidewalks, and for trash bins to be moved off the street or at least screened from view.

The land-use rules include a new type of zoning district meant to result in a mixture of housing and businesses next to each other, so it would be easy for people walk from homes to shops.

"It will be a much more attractive cityscape than what you see right now," city planning director Tom Nelson said. The improved looks will be due to the whole raft of new regulations on different aspects of development, he said.

Tom Davis and Erika McConnell, two other city planners who have worked on the changes, think the new zoning districts where business and residential uses are side by side will change the kind of town we live in. It will create "the opportunity to have these vibrant areas where people can live near where they work," McConnell said.

The mixed-use areas are called town centers in the comprehensive plan. One is being developed at the intersection of Muldoon and DeBarr roads.

The proposed revisions cover development and design standards in Title 21, the zoning code. The proposals touch on landscaping, sidewalks, and the aesthetics of businesses and residences, such as how to get the most sun and the least wind in and around a building and how to save the old trees when land is cleared.

This is the third and final part of the zoning and land use rules that are being revised to match the city code more closely to its long-range development plan. Two sections released earlier laid out zoning procedures and defined zoning districts and land uses.

But the final section deals with the specifics of what would be different.

For example, there would be clear pedestrian walkways across the parking lot of a new Barnes and Noble, connected to any sidewalks. Only half of the parking could be in front of the building, and the rest would have to be on sides -- an attempt to create smaller lots. New-style lights would provide strong white light over the parking lot but decreased glare compared with older lights.

Many of these changes would apply to smaller stores as well.

A separate set of design rules would cover residential areas.

Sidewalks, now required only along major roads in new subdivisions, would have to be installed along both sides of all new streets and cul-de-sacs except in rural districts with large lots. This applies to new roads in commercial districts too.

The development and design standards make up a thick stack of paper, and that's just the third section of Title 21.

Drafts of the first two sections have been out for months. Consultants Clarion Associates are reworking the first section, and city planners are still reviewing comments and suggesting revisions to the second section before sending it back to Clarion, Nelson said.

Several groups have been closely watching the process, some warily and some enthusiastically.

The Anchorage Chamber of Commerce has set up a committee to study the changes. While the chamber supports the idea of overhauling the code, it hasn't taken a position on the proposals, chamber chairman George Vakalis said.

"It's awfully hard to visualize what it looks like until you see it in total and see a map of it," Vakalis said.

The Associated General Contractors submitted detailed comments on the first two sections but so far is not happy with the way the project has been handled, executive director Dick Cattanaugh said.

"We've given input on the first two modules, spent a lot of time, and you don't know if you're having an impact," he said. "It's a major effort, and there hasn't been good communication."

The Anchorage Citizens Coalition, which champions the city comprehensive plan and pushes for transit and pedestrian facilities, is trying to involve ordinary citizens in reviews of the changes.

City consultants will make one presentation this week just for the coalition, which welcomes everyone to attend.

"The process only works if you have a variety of people from different places in town and with difference experiences," said Susanne diPietro, president of the group. Later in July, the coalition will sponsor a series of small working groups to review and discuss the proposed changes.

Nelson, the city planning director, said nothing in the proposals is firm. "We are putting out here new ideas for discussion," he said.

The proposed code is lengthier and more complex than existing zoning and land use rules because the city is trying to provide alternatives for different types of development, Nelson said.

The consultants are expected to produce a new version early next year of the entire code, which would take into account the public and staff review of each section. Then a more formal review will begin, with public hearings and debate at city commissions and ultimately the Anchorage Assembly.

The schedule for that is not set.

The next step after the code is adopted, Nelson said, would be to amend the actual zoning of parts of town to match the new code, which created some new zoning districts and eliminated others.

Daily News reporter Rosemary Shinohara can be reached at rshinohara@adn.com or 257-4340.

Proposed regulations also cover trees, trash

Here are examples of proposed revisions to Title 21, the city's zoning and land-use code:

- * Waterways: New development adjacent to streams would have to be set back from the waterways 50 feet in rural and industrial zones. The existing requirement is 25 feet. New development would have to stay 15 feet or more from the edge of lakes.

- * Trees: The rules would encourage developers to keep old trees instead of clear-cutting property and then planting new vegetation to meet landscaping requirements. Regulations are based on canopies, or the widest circumference of branches on a tree. In residential districts, builders would have to retain 30 percent to 40 percent of the existing canopy. In industrial, business and public districts, the requirement would drop to 10 percent to 15 percent. The retained trees would count toward landscaping.

- * Wind: The stories of high buildings would be terraced down to the street, like stairs, to prevent the cold, fast winds that blow down the face of some tall buildings in downtown Anchorage today, freezing pedestrians below. Also, awnings and balconies would be encouraged for the purpose of sheltering walkers.

* Garages and housing variety: Garage doors facing the street on single- and two-family homes could take up no more than half of the front of the house. For townhouses, front-facing garages would have to be recessed and take up no more than 45 percent of the front facade. Also, subdivisions of 50 or more units would have to mix at least five different models. Townhouses in clusters would be distinguished from one another through colors, materials, roof lines or features like porches.

* Trash bins: Containers would have to be set back from the front of a residential building and screened on all sides.

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TO READ the proposed new rules and public comments, visit www.adn.com/links

Planned meetings

Here are public meetings with various groups and Clarion Associates, the consulting firm hired by the city to draft new planning and zoning rules:

* The project's Citizens Advisory Committee, 7-9 p.m. today at the city project and development office, 4700 Bragaw St.

* Anchorage Citizens Coalition, 7-9 p.m. Wednesday, City Hall, first floor.

* City commissions and boards, noon-2 p.m. Thursday, City Hall, first floor.

* Anchorage Assembly work session, 10 a.m.-noon Friday, City Hall, first floor.

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