

Opinion

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At last, city gets serious about setting development standards

For most of its history, Anchorage has had permissive standards for urban development, and it shows. Not for nothing do we have the nickname "Los Anchorage."

The city has matured some since its days as just another sprawly boomtown, which writer John McPhee derided as "condensed, instant Albuquerque." During the oil boom, city leaders used generous state aid to build attractive public improvements. They also let private development run wilder than it should have. Strip malls proliferated; so did cheap condos and other quick-buck buildings.

As Anchorage ended the 20th century, residents said they were ready to set a higher standard for the 21st century. They agitated for and got a progressive comprehensive plan to guide the city's growth for the next 20 years.

If that plan is going to be more than just a dreamy vision, the mayor and Anchorage Assembly have to make some subtle but profound changes in the nuts-and-bolts rules shaping the city's growth. The pending update of the city's zoning and development codes is how they do that. It is a make-or-break point in the city's evolution. With strong rules, Anchorage can continue to grow into a bigger, more attractive, more vibrant city. Early signs are encouraging, though the process so far has been convoluted.

The new code would promote mixed-use developments, so people can live closer to where they work and shop and not need to drive everywhere. New projects would have to preserve a certain amount of the natural vegetation. Housing developments would need more architectural variety, instead of endlessly repeating the same cheap, boring design. Ugly snout houses -- where the ground floor facing the street consists of little more than the garage and a front door -- would be a thing of the past. Developers would have incentives to lay out subdivisions with more open space. Streets would routinely have sidewalks on both sides.

It's certainly important to argue about how detailed and demanding the city's standards should be. Is the no-snout-house rule practical? Does the draft require leaving too much or too little vegetation? Are setbacks along waterways too wide or too narrow? Those and many other questions will be hashed out as work proceeds through the public comment stage to a final ordinance adopted by the Assembly some time next year.

It's also important that the process be open, understandable and meaningful. So far, the city has broken the code rewrite into three different stages, or modules, even though all three parts are interconnected. That has caused some confusion, since it has been hard to make sense of how everything fits together. It is also unclear whether key factions are sincerely participating or just

lying in wait until they can cut a backroom deal more to their liking later in the process.

Mayor Begich says he won't stand for that. He has directed staff to move ahead with the first "module" of changes, since they are relatively noncontroversial. He also has commissioned a group from the more progressive elements of the development community to offer advice. That may help allay concerns in some quarters that grass-roots activists have dominated the process to date.

City planners, the mayor and the Assembly need to work as quickly as possible on the changes without shortchanging the public's chance to be heard. Between the mountains and the water, Anchorage has limited room to grow, and that space is rapidly filling up. The faster new standards get into the books, the more Anchorage will become a 21st-century city worthy of our spectacular surroundings.

BOTTOM LINE: Anchorage definitely needs new development standards, soon. Every voice needs a fair chance to be heard.

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