

When high costs bring no benefit - COMPASS: Points of view from the community

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The process being used in the rewrite of Title 21, Anchorage's land-use code, is flawed, and the mayor needs to intervene to get it back on track. Many important issues have been suggested that require public dialogue, but when offered, these suggestions are typically ignored.

Is it important that all large trash bins be enclosed in a roofed building? The drafters of the Title 21 rewrite think it is.

Should the size of parking lots be increased by 20 percent to accommodate snow piles? The drafters of the Title 21 rewrite believe they should.

Should parking lots be screened from the street to enhance beauty, potentially at the cost of personal safety? The drafters of the Title 21 rewrite believe this is a worthwhile trade-off.

These are just a few of the many changes suggested as a result of the massive redrafting of Anchorage's land-use code. In spring 2002, the municipality undertook an ambitious project to rewrite Title 21 because the existing code was considered outdated and inadequate to deal with the issues regularly facing city officials and developers.

To assist in the rewrite, the municipality hired Clarion Associates, a Colorado consulting firm, and created a Citizens Advisory Committee. The initial schedule called for final rewrite and adoption by Feb. 15, 2004.

At this time the best estimate is that project completion will be delayed by more than a year. Instead of one advisory committee, at least three now exist. It appears that the direction of the rewrite is determined largely by municipal officials and Clarion without input from or dialogue with the advisory committee.

The original advisory committee is being used in a perfunctory, rather than advisory, manner. The draft modules are presented as faits accomplis to the committee. Written comments are collected with no clear indication of how, when or if the comments might be considered. Serious issues are advanced in the rewrite with little time for committee dialogue or consensus.

The attitude seems to be: "We know what we're doing. This has worked elsewhere, and it will work here." The impression seems to be that our vision for Anchorage should mirror that of other cities despite our unique location and natural elements. No reason is offered to support the sweeping changes proposed.

Missing from consideration in the rewrite is the cost to the community. Anchorage has more than 7,000 large trash bins that must be enclosed under the current proposals. The enclosures must be compatible, in architectural design and materials used, to the principal buildings on the location. It is unclear whether the code would require that the new enclosures be sprinklered for fire

protection.

One estimate suggested that the cost per trash-bin enclosure would approach \$30,000 without sprinklers. This would cost Anchorage businesses approximately \$200 million with no economic benefit to the business or community. While most of the new provisions apply to new projects, this section requires all current trash bins be brought into compliance within two years of acceptance of the revised Title 21.

Not addressed is the issue of what happens to businesses that cannot accommodate the requirements without encroaching on required parking, thereby violating other provisions of the proposed Title 21.

Other requirements concerning parking lots will inevitably lead to smaller buildings on developments that in turn will lead to higher lease rates for businesses and higher costs to consumers.

At this point it's difficult to determine the final outcome, but the one fact that seems clear is that the Title 21 Citizens Advisory Committee is advisory to no one. Bureaucrats and consultants drive the rewrite process with little regard for costs to the community. In the final analysis this approach may be appropriate, but then why the facade?

The issues involved are serious and deserve the attention and involvement of the public. At this point it seems appropriate for the mayor to weigh in and put the process back on track. Ignoring input from the public is not in the best interests of anyone and is offensive to those who have participated for more than two years.

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