

Make your voice heard on updating land-use code

Anchorage Daily News (AK) - Sunday, November 21, 2004

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The municipality of Anchorage is two years into a massive and much needed rewrite of its land-use regulation, contained in Title 21 of the Municipal Code. Land-use regulations guide every aspect of real estate development and use, largely defining what Anchorage will look like and how its real estate will serve the needs of the community.

The current code was developed 35 years ago and is woefully out of date for Anchorage today and for our future needs. Anyone who works in real estate or a related field will attest to the inadequacy of the current code.

The portion of the rewrite addressing design standards for new development came out last summer, and I have heard a lot of complaints and concerns about it. Some in the real estate trade think the Lower 48-based consultants to this project are not sensitive to Anchorage's unique characteristics and have caused the released design standards to be based on Lower 48 models. As a consequence the standards are overambitious, with many requirements that are impractical and unnecessary and that could be met only with great additional cost.

Recently, I talked with Tom Nelson, director of the city's Planning Department, who is in charge of the rewrite. He said the rewrite is far from complete. In fact, the date for final approval of the rewrite was extended for two years, to September 2006, to allow for more review and public input.

The released design standards of concern are not for implementation but for discussion and public input. I came away from our talk impressed with the thoroughness of the process, the significant opportunity for public input and the Planning Department's desire to be sensitive to public input and get it right.

There has to be balance between how aggressively the rewrite requires changes in current practice and what is practical for Anchorage. While we need to update our code and do a better job of enhancing real estate development, we must not require drastic changes we cannot afford or that don't work here. The consultants can provide valuable information and suggestions but do not have all the right answers.

Portions of the rewrite, particularly the zoning changes and new design standards, are going to be contentious at best. There are strong differences of opinion on what changes should, and can, be made. There are also substantial vested interests. While the process allows for public input and adjustment in the rewrite, it is certain that the city Assembly will have to make some tough decisions in reaching its final approval. The Assembly is going to have to be equally sensitive to what makes sense for Anchorage.

Here is a description of the rewrite process.

The first task for the prime consultant, Clarion Associates, was to critique the current code and

outline a new code. Its critique suggested the code be reformatted to be user-friendly, consistent, efficient and understandable. It needs to incorporate new policies the Assembly adopted in the city's Comprehensive Plan (20/20 Plan) and accommodate innovative types of development.

The new schedule provides a lengthy review with a series of draft rewrites for discussion, public input and revisions. Input is being made by local advisory groups that include citizen participation, government officials, municipal boards, real estate professionals, architects, planners and others. There is also a "testing" process where recent development projects are being analyzed to see how they would have been affected by requirements in the current draft.

The new schedule has testing and public input for the current version of the rewrite through January. A rewrite of the released version, called Public Draft No. 1, will be available in early May for review and public comment through mid-September. A revised Draft 2 adjusted for those comments will be available in mid-November for more review and public comment through January 2006.

The public hearing draft will be available for review during March and April 2006. Joint Planning and Zoning Commission and Assembly public hearings will follow during the balance of April through May 2006. The Planning and Zoning Commission will have deliberations during June and July 2006 with a recommendation to the Assembly by early August 2006. The Assembly will deliberate the new Title 21 during September 2006.

With the Title 21 rewrite, the Anchorage Bowl Land Use Plan Map, which defines land uses and is the foundation for zoning, is being redrawn with public input for completion by early 2006. The Chugiak-Eagle River Plan Update will also be completed with public input by early 2006.

Mayor Mark Begich and his staff have established a thorough process that provides professional consulting, testing, advice from local experts and substantial opportunity for public input. This rewrite will have a profound affect on the future development of Anchorage. If you have a vested interest, I strongly recommend you take the time to become informed and have your voice heard.

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CODE WORDS: A pair of Web sites have more information on the city's Title 21 rewrite. Visit

www.adn.com/links

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Edition: Final

Section: Money

Page: H1

Record Number: 650248311/21/04

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