

## **Affordability trumps aesthetics, survey respondents say - HOME BUYERS: Builders group says unscientific report should inform land-use code.**

Anchorage Daily News (AK) - Monday, May 30, 2005

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The Anchorage Home Builders Association has gathered hundreds of answers to a questionnaire about housing and plans to use the information to bolster its arguments against some proposed development standards.

For instance, according to the association, people buying houses said they are not much concerned about sidewalks or whether the garage faces the street. But a new city land use code may require sidewalks and limit street-facing garages, among other things.

People care less about how a house looks than about how much it costs, and proposed design standards would boost home prices, according to the association.

Association president Harley Sudsbury says he wants developers to be able to build homes that buyers want and can afford.

The builders association will use the collection of comments to influence the Assembly as the city revises its land-use code, Sudsbury said. Planners are updating the code, called Title 21, to enforce the city's comprehensive plan.

The plan, adopted in 2001, seeks to make Anchorage more attractive and more walkable.

But it seems like Anchorage home buyers care more about a home's cost and square footage than aesthetics, and they care more about driving than walking, Sudsbury said.

He draws that conclusion from the 787 responses that came back after an Oregon-based consultant, Integra Realty Resources, and the association produced a 51-question survey and mailed it to 10,000 randomly selected addresses.

The builders association is selling copies of the final report from its Schoon Street headquarters.

The report, because of the survey methods and sample size, cannot be seen as an accurate measure of public opinion, local professional pollsters said. But the hundreds of responses do give an interesting look at people's attitudes.

Respondents said they had based their current housing choices on price, housing type, proximity to work, a particular school, recreation opportunity, shopping and family, in that order.

They ranked the most important household characteristics: location, construction quality, cost, size, private yard, neighborhood density, nature of garage, aesthetics, unique design, availability of open space, sidewalks on both sides of the street.

Different interest groups could interpret the feedback differently, said the city's real estate

director, Robin Ward.

For example, 87 percent of respondents said they commute by automobile. And, of the 85 percent who said they never walk to the store for groceries, 17 percent said it was because there are no sidewalks.

That means the city needs more sidewalks and better bus systems, Ward said.

High-density, mixed-used developments, called for in the comprehensive plan, are designed to encourage alternatives to driving. Ward said the home builders' information illustrates the need for that. Plus, 30 percent said they would use public transportation if it came to their house, and that's "great," Ward said.

Sudsbury said the collection of comments proves that Anchorage residents prefer to drive, so requiring sidewalks may not be necessary. People want to park where they live, and they want to live in single-family homes with private yards, he said.

But, in today's expensive real estate market, most people are going to have to compromise on what they want from their homes, Ward said. The association should have asked respondents to rank what they would be willing to sacrifice.

Ward said that if the builders really wanted to help revise the land-use code, they should have asked different questions. For example, she suggests: If you had a grocery store with a sidewalk a quarter mile away, would you drive or walk?

The questions, she said, also illustrated the association's "heartburn" about one particular issue: garages.

"The number one issue is garages," Sudsbury said.

The city proposes outlawing front-protruding garages, known to detractors as "snout houses," and limiting street-facing garages to less than 45 percent of the front of a house. Sudsbury said the association might argue against this.

The questionnaire asked residents whether they believed homes with garages in the back created better neighborhoods and whether they would be willing to pay more for that. Most of those replying to the association's questionnaire said no.

Builders say it costs more to put garages in alleys behind a home.

The questions did not address how front-facing garages look or how people valued the character of a neighborhood. Susanne DiPietro, president of the Anchorage Citizens Coalition, which champions the city comprehensive plan, said that if people had been shown pictures of garage-front houses compared to garage-in-alley neighborhoods, the answers probably would have been different.

Besides, she said, the provision about garages was suggested by Anchorage residents to the city consultants drafting the new land-use code.

"The consultants (who drafted the proposed Title 21) ... heard complaints about how they look," DiPietro said. "They are unwelcoming and impact the social fabric and interaction of neighborhood."

Another prevalent style of development, site condos, are often criticized for their boxy appearance and lack of public open space. The city is trying to avoid more of them in the future through design standards.

But Sudsbury said site condos are less expensive and provide more square footage. People spend a lot of time indoors during Anchorage's long winters, so big rooms and windows, at an affordable price, are more important to those who want to own their own home than what the exterior of a house looks like, he said.

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Edition: Final

Section: Alaska

Page: B1

Record Number: 781110505/30/05

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