

New rules

Zoning update means big changes

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After more than three years of work, the municipality has produced a first draft of new rules for development. Running roughly 500 pages, the zoning and urban design standards revamp an antiquated code first crafted in 1969.

The draft code would drive significant change in Anchorage. It aims to make good on the grand vision in the city's comprehensive plan, adopted in 2001. That plan, Anchorage 2020, calls for more efficient development of Anchorage's shrinking supply of open land. If followed, the 2020 plan will produce development that is better suited to our winter climate, is more friendly to pedestrians, promotes stronger neighborhoods and enhances the quality of city life.

The overhaul has provoked understandable resistance. But Mayor Begich has rightly made it clear: The city's zoning and design code, known as Title 21, will be modernized. Meaningful change will have to be significant, because existing rules are lax. To take just a few notable examples:

- Anchorage is one of few places that lets Dumpsters sit out in plain, ugly view.
- Anchorage doesn't require any buffering when housing is built next to industrial or commercial sites like junkyards or gas stations.
- Commercial buildings don't have to screen mechanical systems that stick out on rooftops.
- Tot lots or pocket parks are not required in new housing developments.
- Sidewalks are required only on one side of most residential streets. City codes don't consider whether a project's sidewalks are linked to the rest of the area's walkways.
- Anchorage's setback for development along streams is just 25 feet. In many cities, 100 feet is common.
- Many city rules for housing developments can be bypassed if a developer builds a project as a condominium.

Some developers naturally complain about the scope of proposed changes. The city's consultants keep pointing out how modest the proposals are -- at least compared to rules commonly found in other cities.

Meaningful update of Title 21 will bring big changes. That's the point. Anchorage is no longer a vast bowl of empty land waiting to be filled by suburban sprawl. For the city to keep growing, the city's zoning and design codes have to change to provide for a modern, thriving city.

BOTTOM LINE: Anchorage's 1969-era zoning code badly needs the overhaul that's now in the works.