



3. STRATEGY FOR NEIGHBORHOOD SUSTAINABILITY

This neighborhood plan focuses on assuring that Government Hill retains a high degree of sustainability, in that it conserves built resources that are part of the city’s cultural heritage, makes efficient use of land, provides jobs for those who live nearby, and reduces dependence upon automobiles. This chapter presents overarching concepts that will help to assure a sustainable neighborhood with an emphasis on the neighborhood center.

A. PLANNING WITH FLEXIBILITY

The neighborhood’s future will be shaped by a complex set of variables, some of which are difficult to predict. The plan, therefore, must remain flexible, while providing clear direction.

These key principles help define planning with flexibility:

1. Plan Constructively with the Uncertainties that Exist

Encouraging investment in the neighborhood center is directly tied to expectations about the KAC project, its timing, the geographic extent of construction disturbance, and the logistics of construction phasing. These factors place a cloud of uncertainty around some parcels in the neighborhood center.

In a different frame, there may also be opportunities to expand the neighborhood center into the current edge of JBER properties that lie adjacent to the northern and eastern edges of the neighborhood center. Securing agreements to expand the neighborhood center along these edges could take several years. Thus, some uncertainty exists here as well.



A pedestrian bridge that provides marginal access to Government Hill Elementary School



Sourdough Lodge

2. Provide for Phased Redevelopment

Because there are substantial areas in the neighborhood center where the final disposition of the land is presently unknown, opportunities for investment must be planned so that redevelopment can be phased. More specifically, some parcels must be established that would attract development in the near future, where the long-term future is not complicated with uncertainty or by the possible disruption that construction of the KAC project would cause.

That means looking for an initial redevelopment phase on land that is farther east, out of the immediate path of the potential KAC project, and yet west of the JBER edge.

3. Design the Potential Cut-and-Cover Lid as an Asset

In an early planning workshop, participants were asked to envision a neighborhood center in two alternatives: First, one without the bridge project and, second, with the bridge project. What resulted were concepts that were the same for both conditions. Both alternatives expressed a single vision for a revitalized neighborhood center, with a western edge that supports more intensive uses extended farther to the east, regardless of whether or not the cut-and-cover project occurs. They found that in both scenarios the area considered for the lid should be an amenity for the community, and it should serve as a compatible transition from eastern to western areas of the residential neighborhood. The lid should help reduce noise, exhaust fumes, and visual impacts resulting from KAC traffic.

The lid should also not divide the park. The lid design should be extended under Sunset Park to maintain the viability and use of this valued park element.

Ultimately, the surface (lid) should be a visual asset, helping to connect the neighborhoods and providing civic uses. If the KAC tunnel is constructed, it should be designed to allow light-weight construction to be feasible on its surface after completion.

Potential improvements should include:

- Open space or park land (such as an ice rink or skate park)
- Landscaped parking “pods” (designed to serve a mix of uses that would be constructed on properties abutting the lid)
- Community facilities, such as a light structure for a community meeting room, a warming hut, etc.
- Community gardens



An overview image of a model that depicts how the proposed KAC project would bisect the Government Hill neighborhood along Erikson Street.

4. Mitigate Constraints of Existing Parcel Configurations

While a modest market for redevelopment exists today and is likely to improve in the future, the arrangement of the parcels in the neighborhood center significantly constrains the opportunity for investment. Several blocks are irregularly shaped, limiting the amount of land area that would be required to accommodate the scale of development that would be needed to justify proposed redevelopment.

5. Mitigate the Potential Loss of Developable Land

If the KAC project does proceed, the land area with potential for commercial and mixed use will be reduced, placing additional limits on the already constrained commercial space in the neighborhood center. In response, the plan shifts the focus on the neighborhood center to the east and proposes seeking additional lands along the edge of JBER.

B. CREATING A CLIMATE FOR INVESTMENT

A vital element of Government Hill’s continued and future success as a desirable neighborhood in which to live and work is the ability to draw investment for commercial and residential development. This section discusses the factors that currently limit investment within the community and suggests approaches to facilitate investment.

1. Investing in Lands Slated for the Tunnel “Lid”

The plan seeks to establish a climate for investment by identifying areas where redevelopment can occur with relative stability. One factor is the uncertainty that the potential “cut-and-cover” project associated with KAC causes. While construction of the cut-and-cover tunnel may still be a few years out (assuming the project moves ahead), it leaves the lands in its path in limbo.

It will be difficult, if not impossible, for a private developer to invest in improvements in that zone. First, KABATA is already negotiating to acquire lands for its project in that area, which ties up those parcels for the near term. And, second, if the KAC project is delayed, those properties could be tied up for an unknown period.

In light of this factor, the best approach is to craft a development scenario that uses this uncertainty to its advantage. This means focusing potential redevelopment on land that is not on the lid, farther to the east, and then applying development concepts for the lid that can occur at a later date.

To facilitate this strategy, the neighborhood center scenarios that are presented in subsequent sections of this plan show uses on the lid that could occur after other improvements have been established in the area to the east of it. It focuses on creating a critical mass of redevelopment farther east of the lid area.

2. Development in the Cut-and-Cover Area

A portion of land along the western edge of the neighborhood center may be impacted directly by construction of a cut-and-cover tunnel. The neighborhood center plan concepts are conceived to function with or without the Knik Arm Crossing project. Uses assigned to this area are consistent with those that could be supported by the cover.

These include:

- Parking
- Streets and walkways
- Landscaping, parks, and open space
- Low-impact civic facilities and activities



One of the original Quonset hut structures

3. Planning for Mutual Benefits

The plan includes concepts that can benefit neighborhood residents, as well as the businesses and institutional members of the community. JBER, the Port, Alascom, and the Railroad are among the key partners, whose own needs are, to some extent, addressed in the plan.

4. Investment Opportunities

Preliminary market evaluations indicate that there will be opportunities for additional housing and commercial space in the Government Hill neighborhood. This is based on general growth projected for the city at large and also growth related to JBER, the Port, and the Alaska Railroad yards.

Buildings of two and three stories will be feasible. A mix of uses, often in joint development projects with “horizontal” mixes, are likely. In response to this opportunity, the neighborhood center parcels are proposed to be re-configured to yield sites that will be more attractive to investment. These are shaped to accommodate higher-density buildings and to provide sufficient parking as well.

5. Security

Some areas of the Government Hill neighborhood have operations that require special security. An example is the edge of the Port land at the base of the hill. Others exist as well. Along some of these edges, the plan proposes introducing pedestrian trails, and, in some cases, service roads. These actions would be designed to respect the security requirements of these neighbors. These needs are accommodated with landscaped buffers and other devices that limit access where appropriate.

C. BUILDING IN PHASES

Phasing the implementation of the plan is essential because of the range of “moving parts” that exist in the planning environment. This includes the coordination of infrastructure improvement with private development. Infrastructure such as water, sewers, and streets, will be influenced by capital improvement schedules and public funding mechanisms. Private development will be influenced by market opportunities and property lease and purchase agreements.

Each phase needs to ‘stand alone in that it should function well and be viable economically. At the same time, each phase must be conceived to set the stage for subsequent ones and not preclude flexibility for later projects.

More specific recommendations for phasing are presented in the implementation strategies section of the plan, but the basic concept of phasing shapes the plan concepts, which are described in the next section of this chapter.

D. KEY CONCEPTS OF THE FRAMEWORK PLAN

A set of key principles establishes a framework for the specific plan recommendations. Many of these elements are identified on the map “Neighborhood Plan Framework” and are described here:

1. A Neighborhood Center with a Mix of Uses

The heart of the neighborhood is reconfigured to accommodate more efficient circulation and redevelopment opportunities. Parcels are assembled in new ways that offer more opportunity for compact, mixed-use development. This also allows streets to be realigned for safe and convenient access and facilitates intersection improvements that enhance pedestrian safety.

**Note that the term “neighborhood center” as it is used in this plan denotes an area of several blocks with a concentration of activities that serve the community. This is not to be confused with the concept of a building that includes a neighborhood meeting space, which is referred to separately as a “community hall” in this plan.



Government Hill residence in winter

The neighborhood center combines a mix of these uses:

- Civic uses, perhaps a community meeting room, an outdoor skating rink, community gardens and plaza, as well as a place for a farmers' market and similar outdoor functions that are shared by community residents
- Commercial uses, including retail, dining, grocery, perhaps a hotel, and professional offices
- Residential, including apartments and condominiums above commercial uses, as well as townhouses
- Institutional facilities, including clubs, daycare centers, youth activity centers, churches and other places of worship

2. A Pedestrian-oriented Neighborhood Center

As properties redevelop in the center, they should be designed to enhance streets as places for pedestrians. As such, new buildings should have store fronts built close to the sidewalk edge, with goods and services visible to the passerby. Other buildings may be designed to provide visual interest to pedestrians at the street level by using display cases, decorative architectural treatments, and artwork.



Wintertime view of an alley in Government Hill



Newly renovated Alaska Railroad buildings



Street light on Erikson Street

3. Inviting Streetscapes in the Neighborhood Center

As streets are improved, new sidewalks should be constructed. These should be buffered from street edges with a generous planting strip, which is planted with grasses and trees that are green in warm months. In snowy months, these planting strips would serve as snow storage areas. The sidewalks themselves should be wide enough to encourage walking.

A distinctive palette of streetscape elements should be established to yield a distinctive character for the neighborhood center. This includes uniform street lights, benches, waste receptacles, and directional signage.

4. Commercial Uses

A mix of retail, dining, and professional services should be concentrated in the neighborhood center. Many of these will be located at the street level, but professional offices and some service businesses may also be located on upper floors.

Some specific commercial uses:

- A small grocery store, bringing back a historical use
- Restaurants, including those that exist there today
- Professional offices, especially those that can serve the neighborhood, and for those who live in the neighborhood and wish to work nearby
- Service-type businesses

5. Employment Centers

Key employers should continue to thrive in the neighborhood, offering job opportunities for residents. Employees at these centers will patronize neighborhood businesses and contribute to the diversity of the area.

Key employment centers are:

- JBER
- Port of Anchorage
- Alascom
- Alaska Railroad
- Businesses in the neighborhood center
- Industrial uses along Ship Creek Road



Entrance to Government Hill Elementary School



Tank farm at the Port of Anchorage



Trailhead at Al Miller Park in Government Hill

6. Public Facilities

In addition to preserving existing facilities and parks, new civic facilities should add to the variety of amenities in the neighborhood and provide needed services.

These new public facilities are proposed:

- A central plaza in the neighborhood center
- An ice rink with warming hut in the neighborhood center
- The curling club in Harvard Park
- A community meeting hall, either in the neighborhood center or in Harvard Park
- A sports field, located west of the Government Hill Elementary school
- Community gardens, located in the area of the potential KAC lid

7. Residential Areas

The heart of the Government Hill neighborhood should continue to be its traditional neighborhood residential blocks, which are characterized by alleys that provide improved access to houses, encourage garage placement in the rear of the house while allowing for more aesthetically pleasing streetscapes,

increase the safety of pedestrians and bicyclists from vehicles, and act as service lanes for the community. Single-family residences as well as multi-family apartment buildings and townhouses should offer a range of options and price levels. Existing housing stock should be well maintained, and those properties of historic significance should be preserved. Where the few vacant lots exist, compatible infill should occur.

In the Neighborhood Center, new housing is introduced to moderately increase density in support of regional planning goals that make the best use of land throughout Anchorage. In Government Hill, this occurs as living units above commercial uses as well as townhouses and apartment buildings.

** Note that in each of the alternative development scenarios that are presented in Chapter 5, land at the southwest fringe of JBER is proposed to be redeveloped as housing. This would increase the resident population of Government Hill, as well as support the commercial uses and services in the center, and perhaps offer housing opportunities for personnel or visiting parties at JBER.



Apartment complexes in East Government Hill



Bus stop in East Government Hill



Government Hill residence in winter

8. Historic Resources

Historic resources should be preserved throughout the neighborhood. Among these are blocks identified as being eligible for listing as historic districts, as well as several individual properties of historic significance.

Some of the noteworthy historic resources are:

- Row of houses on the bluff
- Wireless cabin
- Water tower
- Remaining Quonset hut residences
- Brown's Point cottages

9. A Ring of Parks and Open Space

The hill itself is to be ringed with parks and open space that are connected by a continuous trail loop. This provides hiking and biking opportunities for residents, employees and visitors. Along the way, view overlooks should be improved to provide vistas of downtown, the harbor, and mountains. These viewpoints should be regularly maintained to assure they continue as a signature feature of the neighborhood. The existing parks are preserved and enhanced for the continued enjoyment and use by the community.

Several neighborhood parks should contain play equipment and other amenities for active use, while other parks and open space are designed for passive enjoyment.

Some specific improvements:

- Playing fields are included in newly designated parkland along the northern edge of the hill.
- A pedestrian connector links the two (east and west) portions of Harvard Park.
- A plaza, located in the heart of the neighborhood center plaza, is a focal point of the community for festivals and events.
- An improved bluff trail (designed to respect security requirements for the Port) leads along the western edge of the hill.
- Open space along the railroad is enhanced with plantings to enhance the trail there and to provide a buffer.

10. Improved Pedestrian and Bicycle Systems

Government Hill has a strong heritage as a walkable place, one of the few neighborhoods in Anchorage with that distinction. This tradition of accommodating pedestrians and bicyclists should be further enhanced by adding new sidewalks and trails that provide connections to key destinations, including those within the neighborhood and to others nearby.

Pedestrian and bicycle improvements should include:

- New sidewalks in the neighborhood center that are buffered from traffic with landscaping strips that offer 5-7 feet of separation from roads.
- A new trail along the bluff's shoulder and base providing a continuous neighborhood loop
- A new trail connecting to the school from the residential areas
- Improved intersections with crosswalks in the neighborhood center
- A new trail connecting the neighborhood with Ship Creek and the Port



Government Hill residence in winter



Government Hill residence in winter



A deserted AEC transmitter site

11. Access to Water

Along the southern edge of the neighborhood, pedestrian systems should link the hill area to key waterfront amenities, including Ship Creek and Knik Arm. Overlooks should be provided that allow one to “touch the water,” sometimes symbolically in some cases and literally in others.

Specific water access points include:

- Connection to potential improvements at the mouth of Ship Creek
- Connection to the Ship Creek Trail

12. Automobile Connections

While Government Hill retains its sense of being a quiet enclave with relatively low traffic volumes, automobile circulation should be enhanced. New road improvements in the neighborhood center would ease traffic flow to and from other Anchorage destinations and within the neighborhood. The extent of these improvements varies with the different redevelopment scenarios that are presented in Chapter 5 and also by the timing of phased improvements.

Some specific automobile circulation improvements:

- An east-west connector between the two sides of the hilltop neighborhoods
- An improved and celebrated intersection that serves as an attractive gateway from downtown into the neighborhood center
- An improved and celebrated entrance into JBER
- An improved primary access to the Government Hill Elementary school
- A new secondary access to the Government Hill Elementary School

13. Parking in the Neighborhood Center

Parking should be reorganized to make more efficient use of buildings and to better support the range of activities found in the neighborhood center. A set of surface lots should be shared by groups of buildings in the neighborhood center.

These lots should be located to support redevelopment of reconfigured parcels, usually to the side or rear of the buildings, so that storefronts, porch stoops, and other desirable features immediately abut the street. Also, on-street parking should be provided along new street configurations.



Government Hill residence in winter