



DANIEL VOLLAND
DISTRICT 1 | NORTH

ANNA BRAWLEY
DISTRICT 3 | WEST

MEG ZALETEL
DISTRICT 4 | MIDTOWN

COMMUNITY FEEDBACK ON THE HOME INITIATIVE

DATE June 17, 2024

SUBJECT **What we heard during community engagement about the HOME Initiative [AO 2023-87(S)] and residential zoning reform**

Introduction

This memo summarizes what we heard from the community during the approximately 5-month public engagement process by the 3 sponsors of AO 2023-87(S), the HOME Initiative, to supplement the Assembly Information Memorandum (AIM) which summarizes the community engagement process as a whole.

When the sponsors prepared our community engagement plan and began outreach, we had multiple objectives: engage the community in understanding our housing shortage issues; how land use and zoning rules are a component of these problems we can fix locally; give an overview of the HOME Initiative, both as an overall policy proposal and relevant changes to Title 21 that would implement this policy; and engage the public in discussion to solicit feedback on this policy change, and recommendations to improve it.

In addition to our own engagement process, we also closely reviewed and identified areas of alignment with our 2020 Comprehensive Plan and 2040 Land Use Plan, to build on the many years of public input that crafted those plans, now officially adopted as guiding documents for future growth and change for our city, in particular the Anchorage Bowl.

Process

Between March and May, the sponsors collectively attended meetings of 24 groups, representing diverse interests and communities. From short presentations to in-depth dialogues with residents, we met with people across the Anchorage Bowl and talked about this idea, and also bigger picture about how to solve our housing issues. We met with community councils and HALO, where most participants are long-time homeowners. We met with business groups, who were focused on how this zoning change could help meet workforce needs and encourage economic growth. In meetings with groups such as the Alaska Black Caucus, the Alaska Native Sisterhood, and the Anchorage Equal Rights Commission, we explored the inequities of our current systems, and how changing zoning to allow more housing opportunities for all. We met with retirees, with young professionals, homebuilders, and attended as many meetings as we feasibly could in those 3 months.

In addition to scheduled meetings, we had many conversations over the last few months about our proposed zoning changes, and more broadly about the housing challenges we face. We also followed the robust dialogue and engagement in the opinion pages of local papers, with a variety of perspectives, generally echoing the feedback we heard in meetings, as well as being a mix of demographics, political persuasions, and beliefs about how to best solve our housing shortage.

We also set an intention in the beginning to provide regular updates about the status of HOME as it moves through the process, including public hearing opportunities. We sent regular updates to the public about the progress of the ordinance: notice and registration information for the March 4 webinar; highlighted milestones like publication of our web page and other materials; shared updates when the Planning and Zoning Commission would hold public hearings, and gave brief next steps following those hearings.

What We Heard about Housing, Zoning, and HOME

(Almost) everyone agrees: Anchorage needs more housing. From rising home costs to lack of rental units, from young professionals struggling to afford a starter home to older residents unable to find a small condo or one-story place to downsize to, residents acknowledge we have a housing shortage. Not only that, but we must take action to address the issue. People recognize not only that we have an affordability problem, but lack of supply in our market that impacts anyone looking for a home.

Zoning is an obscure, technical topic, complicated even for those using it regularly. Some people who engaged in the HOME process are well-versed in reading zoning code, either because they work with these rules in their professional or business life, such as designing buildings, or because they have been regularly engaged in community processes about land use, follow and attend public hearings about proposed developments, and have been deeply involved in creating plans the city adopts to guide future growth. The majority of the community, however, has limited knowledge of or experience in thinking about land use, property rights, and how these impact the built environment. Community engagement on complex technical topics is, and should be approached as, an education opportunity to help people understand, so they can make informed decisions.

Balancing property rights and the community's best interests is complex. Zoning, and land use regulation generally, is all about property rights: these rules define individual property rights, but also address how land uses create impacts, and even sometimes encroachments, on neighbors' rights. Some argue that zoning infringes property rights, and rules should be minimized; others argue neighbors should have a direct interest in what happens beyond their property lines, and constrain others' rights. Many zoning rules are intended to protect both a homeowner and their neighbor, as well as the community as a whole, but can also be perceived as government overreach if people can't use their land.

Process is important. Much of the feedback, particularly from people opposed to the changes, focused less on the content of the proposal, and instead on how it interacts with our plans, and past planning processes the community has engaged in before making change. Questions were raised about Assembly sponsors' ability to initiate an ordinance changing Title 21; whether this proposal is compatible with our already-adopted plans; whether changing zoning code should result in mailing postcards to all property owners; and whether the timeline for this ordinance, initiated last August, should slow down to match the pace of planning engagement the community has been used to in the past.

Perspectives often differ depending on a person's life stage and housing situation.

Opinions about housing policy, land use, and zoning are diverse, like our community. Generally speaking, however, views tend to track with demographics, housing situation, and in particular length of time someone has owned a home and/or lived in a particular neighborhood. Longtime homeowners are most likely to oppose policy change, regardless of specifics, when that might result in changes to the built environment around their own home or neighborhood. People with lived experience of struggling to afford housing, find a new house to fit their life stage, or who feel priced out of home ownership tend to support changes to increase their access to housing in neighborhoods where they want to live.

Discussing zoning changes brings up frustrations with current impacts, and worries about future impacts.

Much of the feedback was focused on concerns about future impacts of additional housing units (meaning, additional households) living on a person's street or in the neighborhood. Biggest worries include: more cars parked on the street, more cars driving local streets, worse snow removal service, taller buildings that create shade over existing back yards, and (in areas like Hillside, with steep slopes and no water or sewer pipes) downstream problems of failed septic systems and poor drainage control. Most problems identified were not specifically related to future housing, but long-standing issues that city residents often get frustrated about, such as traffic and parking. Most commonly mentioned were issues managing public streets, or inconsistent enforcement of existing rules, which could be addressed in other ways than restricting new development. People also worry that their home may either gain, or lose, value when the zoning rules change and a property nearby has multiple units, or is more desirable to develop.

The community does not agree on what, or how much, changes we should make to zoning.

Zoning reform, and the need to reduce the cost to build, has been discussed for many years, including during the last rewrite of Title 21 (2002-2013). However, public opinion is split over how much changing our zoning laws would make a significant impact on our housing issues, as well as what specific changes we should make. Even some of the people who recognize the need for changes in housing types, density (units per acre of land), and more walkability, do not believe that changing residential zoning can increase housing supply. Additionally, many people are most concerned about how zoning changes would personally impact their own homes and neighborhoods.

Some believe HOME doesn't go far enough. Many in the building and design professions continue to call for changes to zoning code, but point to other parts of Title 21 that add the most costs: residential design standards for multi-unit housing, and requirements in the permitting process that add cost, uncertainty, and risk that the project will have to be significantly changed in order to get approval. Residents and businesses point to ongoing frustration with determining what they can do with property, and at what costs. And people who strongly support more housing, especially young adults, urge that Anchorage takes more ambitious steps to make housing abundant.

We need to focus on affordable housing. Some have expressed opposition to HOME because it would make incremental change over time through the overall housing market, and it does not address more immediate needs for affordable housing, particularly for houseless and vulnerable people. While HOME (and zoning code change) is focused on rules for market-rate development, the need for affordable housing units remains.

Not every area will, or should, have the same level of new development. Whether supportive or skeptical of the HOME proposal, residents agree that having diverse Anchorage neighborhoods, from urban living to quiet neighborhoods to large-lot rural areas, is important. Many people noted they want to see more housing in specific areas of town, such as areas already zoned for dense housing; some of these neighborhoods, such as Mountain View and Muldoon, already have the greatest housing density in the city. Others want more opportunities to live in neighborhoods close to transit, parks, shopping, and other amenities, and more options in areas built with detached single-family homes.

Focus on improving areas that already have access to infrastructure. Residents agree that we should focus our energy, and potentially more public resources, on adding units to existing homes, building infill and redevelopment projects on vacant lots near the center of the city. People want to see walkable areas with better transit access, but recognize it is not possible to upgrade or expand infrastructure everywhere across the city at once. This could mean policies to de-prioritize new development on the Hillside, where it is mostly infeasible to extend city water, sewer, and upgraded roads for existing residents or new homes.

We should pursue multiple solutions to fix our housing problems. Residents brought up many other ideas to make housing easier to build, or otherwise increase supply of housing, instead of or in addition to HOME: paying for public infrastructure for development projects, subsidizing affordable housing, regulating short-term rentals, fixing vacant and abandoned properties, etc. The HOME Initiative, and changing zoning overall, is one of several actions members are working on in the Assembly's Housing Action Plan.

Sponsor Contacts

Daniel Volland, District 1
daniel.volland@anchorageak.gov

Anna Brawley, District 3
anna.brawley@anchorageak.gov

Meg Zaletel, District 4
meg.zaletel@anchorageak.gov