FROM: MAYOR


INTRODUCTION AND PZC RECOMMENDATION

The Planning and Zoning Commission (PZC) held a public hearing on PZC Case No. 2021-0119 on December 6, 2021. The PZC closed the public hearing and conducted a deliberation on the merits of the public hearing draft Our Downtown: Anchorage Downtown District Plan 2021 (Exhibit A). PZC discussion included such topics as the Fairview/East Downtown Tax Abatement Zone, certain action items, and the proposed Chapter 3 – Revitalization Map. The PZC voted unanimously to recommend approval to the Assembly with several findings included in PZC Resolution No. 2021-038 (Exhibit B). The next step in this plan update is to bring the public hearing draft plan before the Assembly for an Assembly public hearing and Assembly approval.

CODE AND PLAN DIRECTION

Anchorage Municipal Code (AMC) - Requirements
AMC 21.03.070 Comprehensive Plan Amendments directs procedures and review criteria for amendments to the comprehensive plan. All district, neighborhood, and comprehensive plans adopted by the Assembly are elements of the comprehensive plan. Updates and amendments are recommended at certain intervals. The Planning Director may initiate a “targeted review” of a comprehensive plan per 21.03.070B.2. at 10-year intervals. Thus, a targeted review of the 2007 Destination Downtown: Anchorage Downtown Comprehensive Plan (2007 Downtown Plan) was initiated in early 2020 pursuant to code.

2040 Land Use Plan - Action Items 3-2 and 3-9
The plan update was also identified as Step 2 in a three-step process (Action items 3-2 and 3-9) in the Anchorage 2040 Land Use Plan. The three steps will (1) reformat the Downtown Zoning Districts (completed in April 2020); (2) update the 2007
Downtown Plan, and (3) update Title 21, Chapter 11: DOWNTOWN, the Downtown Zoning Districts, with research, analysis, and recommendations compiled from Step 2.

PURPOSE AND NEED

Purpose
The Planning Department initiated a targeted review of the 2007 Downtown Comprehensive Plan pursuant to code directives and procedures. The purpose of this planning process was to reformulate and update the 2007 Downtown Plan based on existing conditions. An overview of the current economic and demographic trends, recent or proposed land use decisions, and adopted plans and studies were reviewed in addition to a full summary of the action items from the 2007 plan, with a report out on whether the actions were completed or ongoing. This research and information were compiled into a Trends Report published online at the project website: ourdowntownanchorage.com. The Trends Report information was used to create public outreach materials including presentations and an online survey. Economic and demographic information came from reports published by the Anchorage Economic Development Corporation and a housing study completed for this project by Agnew::Beck.

Need
An updated Downtown plan is needed now more than ever to assist our community in focusing our efforts and limited resources into the Central Business District, to enable our community to overcome impacts from the recession and the COVID-19 Pandemic. Downtown is the center of Anchorage’s historic, cultural, and tourism opportunities. Downtown is also the center of operations for many of our largest employers, including federal, state, and local government; the oil and gas sector; native corporations; and many non-profits.

Economic Growth
Forecasting in job growth, business retention, and new services for Downtown remains positive despite the pandemic shutdown according to Anchorage Economic Development Corporation forecasts used for the plan update. A gradual rebound of our economy is expected. Downtown specifically, and Anchorage as a whole, has hundreds of open employment positions that when filled will greatly contribute to growth in our economy.

Demographic Growth
An existing housing study was completed for the plan update. The study included Downtown demographic information from a recent American Community Survey managed by the State of Alaska. The data review included the cost of housing and population statistics. The latest demographic information indicates we are losing residents due to many factors including job loss, retirements, and an aging population. However, the long-term projections show Anchorage’s population will rebound and grow.
Land Use Decisions
Several land use decisions were made by the Assembly including approval of the Fairview/East Downtown Tax Abatement Zone, updates to Chapter 12.35 Deteriorated and Economic Development tax abatement, and the 4-unit Downtown Housing Tax Incentive. The Step 1—Downtown zoning district code reformat and adoption of several plans were also accomplished. These include three different tax abatement ordinances to help stimulate new housing and businesses. Assembly-adopted plans include the Ship Creek Framework Plan (2014), Anchorage Original Four Neighborhoods Historic Preservation Plan (2013), and the Fairview Neighborhood Plan (2014).

Contributing Plans or Studies
Contributing plans or studies are those efforts not adopted by the Assembly but were completed to provide direction to the use and development of an area. The Former Native Hospital Site Master Plan, the Gambell Street Corridor Study, and the Anchor Home Homeless Plan were completed and contributed to the Downtown plan update.

Since 2007, in addition to the several important tax incentive programs, a Federal Opportunity Zone was also declared for a portion of East Downtown, Fairview and Mountain View. Additionally, public/private partnerships have been pursued by municipal departments and the Anchorage Community Development Authority to bring new housing Downtown. These new tools and plans are available to assist our community and developers with revitalizing Downtown in ways that were envisioned in 2007 but are now just recently being used in projects such as the new Elizabeth Place and former Duke’s Hotel renovation.

The Downtown District Plan 2021 brings elements of each of these efforts together to support implementation of the community’s commitment and hard work in formulating programs and projects to revitalize our Downtown.

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT
Public engagement included a focused workshop and monthly presentations and discussions with the Downtown Community Council. One-on-one interviews were held with developers and Downtown agencies, including Anchorage Downtown Partnership, Anchorage Economic Development Corporation, Anchorage Community Development Authority, the municipal Parks and Recreation Department, and others.

Subcommittees
Two subcommittees (Utility and Urban Design) were formed to discuss issues related to utility service capacity and urban design issues. Recommendations from the subcommittees are included in the plan and the appendix.

Online Survey
An online public survey garnered over 1,200 comments from over 350 respondents. Many comments were directed toward pedestrian and bicycle connectivity and housing.
GAP Funding Working Group

The GAP funding working group was initiated and is still working on research and recommendations to assist in filling the financial gap for construction of market-rate housing. A housing capacity study will be completed and vetted with this group in the coming months. This is already a living plan due to the ongoing support and participation from Downtown agencies, property owners, State of Alaska, business partners, and residents.

Comments Received after the PZC Public Hearing

A comment-response table (Exhibit C) is included to address the few comments received after the December 6, 2021, PZC public hearing. The Planning Department will make edits as noted in the table. The comments are mostly related to formatting and text edits and are consistent with the comments received prior to the PZC public hearing, which are included in the PZC staff packet information (Exhibit D).

APPENDIX

The appendix (Exhibit E) to the plan includes several recommendations for updates to the Title 21.11: DOWNTOWN, Downtown Zoning Districts Code. These recommendations were derived from the buildable lands capacity analysis, subcommittee input, and one-on-one interview comments.

SUMMARY OF PLAN ACTION ITEMS

The plan update carries forward several of the action items from the 2007 Downtown Plan that remain relevant today. Several new action items present projects or programs to be enacted immediately and over time in support of Downtown revitalization. The action items were vetted with the various municipal departments and Downtown agencies to ensure their commitment to the implementation of this plan.

The action items address five different focused elements, including Revitalization, Land Use, Quality of Life, Urban Design, and Transportation and Circulation. The resources and funding to implement the actions will come from several municipal departments and downtown agencies. Some actions will require funding. Many actions may be accomplished through established programs, including local marketing, tourism, and recreational programming. Several of the Transportation and Circulation actions will be addressed with the completion of a Downtown Streets Engineering Study. Several of the Land Use and Urban Design action items can be addressed with the update to Title 21 Chapter 11: DOWNTOWN, the Downtown Zoning Districts update. Proposed actions to upgrade streets, including pedestrian and bicycle connectivity and safety, can be funded through AMATS. Utility and other infrastructure upgrades could be accomplished through capital improvement programs that are usually updated on an annual basis by the utility and infrastructure providers.

A VISION FOR NOW

Our Downtown: Anchorage Downtown District Plan 2021 is focused on actions to be accomplished now. Our Downtown is in the throes of revitalization with several new
projects in planning. There are other large projects coming soon or already underway. Adoption and implementation of this plan will continue to bring economic recovery to our Downtown. This plan is intended to give the present and next generations a Downtown where residents and visitors will want to live, work, and play.

THE ADMINISTRATION RECOMMENDS APPROVAL.

Prepared by: Kristine Bunnell, Long-Range Planning Manager
Planning Department

Approved by: Craig H. Lyon, Planning Director
Concur: Adam Trombley, Community Development Director
Concur: Cheryl Frasca, OMB Director
Concur: Patrick Bergt, Municipal Attorney
Concur: Amy Demboski, Municipal Manager
Respectfully submitted: Dave Bronson, Mayor

Attachments: Exhibit A—Our Downtown – Anchorage Downtown District Plan 2021
Exhibit B—Planning and Zoning Commission Resolution 2021-038
Exhibit C—Planning Department Edits in Comment-Response Table
Exhibit D—Planning and Zoning Commission Staff Packet
Exhibit E—Appendix

(Planning and Zoning Commission Case No. 2021-0119)