

10-Year Review of Community Council Boundaries

White Paper #1: Boundary Review Criteria (Draft)



Municipality of Anchorage
Planning Department

December 28, 2022

Project Information:

<https://www.muni.org/Departments/OCPD/Planning/Projects/Pages/CommunityCouncilBoundariesReview.aspx>

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10-Year Review of Community Council Boundaries: White Paper #1

INTRODUCTION

The Municipality has initiated a 10-year review of community council boundaries, as required by Anchorage Municipal Code Section 2.40. This *White Paper #1* lays out these code requirements, the public participation process, and the boundary review criteria for this 10-year boundaries review project.

White Paper #2, forthcoming, will list boundary study areas that have been identified by public comments and responses to an online questionnaire. *White Paper #2* will apply the boundary review criteria from *White Paper #1* to lay out options for any boundary changes in those study areas.

These White Papers are each initially provided as drafts for comment by community council members and representatives. They provide a foundation for evaluating potential boundary changes in a *Report and Recommendations* to be submitted to the Planning and Zoning Commission (PZC) and Assembly.

COMMUNITY COUNCILS IN RELATION TO NEIGHBORHOODS

Neighborhoods. Anchorage is a city composed of neighborhoods. The *Anchorage Municipal Charter* established community councils at the founding of the Municipality in 1975—granting official recognition and representation to neighborhood associations in government and local affairs. The *Municipal Charter* provides for community councils “to afford citizens an opportunity for maximum community involvement and self-determination.”

The word “neighborhood” describes the social and physical building blocks of Anchorage. The *Municipal Charter* reflects that Anchorage is naturally broken into a mosaic of neighborhoods, each with its own identity, character, and appeal. People benefit from belonging to their identifiable part of the city. Residents, businesses, and property owners should be able to relate to their neighborhood and understand its boundaries.

The goals and policies in the Municipality’s *Comprehensive Plan* promote neighborhoods, developments and public investments that build on each neighborhood’s strengths, along with *neighborhood and district plans* that guide the future uses and characteristics in each part of the city. Creating and carrying out these area-specific plans and participating in the development process requires sustained, long-term neighborhood commitment and efforts.

Therefore, strong communities are prerequisite to neighborhood planning and development. They are also essential to resilient neighborhoods, by enabling groups of residents, businesses, and property owners solve problems and realize opportunities for their areas.

Community Councils. Anchorage’s Municipal Code establishes the functions of community councils. Community councils are forums for neighborhood residents, property owners, and business owners to work together for expression and discussion of opinions and needs—and to do so in a way that will impact their community’s development.

Public agencies and officials rely on councils for citizen input. In Anchorage, community councils are recognized by code as a primary means for citizen participation in the planning and development of neighborhoods. Community councils that reflect and represent Anchorage’s natural, geographic communities are essential to strong neighborhood communities.

Community councils are voluntary, independent membership organizations. Any resident or owner of a business or property can be a member of their community council. Although a part of the government process, they are separate from the municipal government.

The Municipality is currently divided into 38 community council districts. There are six in Chugiak-Eagle River, 29 in the Anchorage Bowl, and three in the Turnagain Arm including Girdwood.

The Federation of Community Councils is an independent organization with a Board of Delegates made up of representatives from the 38 community councils. The Federation operates the Community Councils Center, funded by the Anchorage Assembly, to provide staff support services to community councils.

10-YEAR REVIEW OF COMMUNITY COUNCIL BOUNDARIES

Every 10 years the Municipality reviews all community council boundaries and seeks input as to whether any boundaries between neighborhood community council areas should be adjusted. These 10-year reviews are required by code to ensure that the geographic boundaries of community councils continue to reflect their neighborhoods, and that all citizens continue to have representation by an active, engaged community council for their area. This in turn supports the success of community councils as forums for citizen participation and organized neighborhood advocacy.

The Municipality last conducted comprehensive boundary reviews in 2003 and 2014. Examples of relatively recent boundary changes include the creation of Midtown Community Council, the merger of Mid-Hillside and Upper Hillside into Hillside Community Council, and the incorporation of a parcel near the Port of Alaska into Government Hill Community Council.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PROCESS FOR REVIEWING BOUNDARIES

The Anchorage Assembly reviews any proposed boundary changes and makes the final decision. Changes to community council district boundaries are adopted by ordinance as amendments to the Anchorage Municipal Code Chapter 2.40, *Community Councils*.

The municipal Planning Department first seeks comments from community councils and their members regarding any boundaries that may need adjusting. A [project web page](#) is posted and an online questionnaire is distributed, and other inquiries are made to identify any boundary study areas for consideration.

In early 2023, after consultations a Boundary Advisory Committee (see next page), the Planning Department will release a draft report and maps with options and recommendations for boundary adjustments. There will be a two-month public comment period, during which community councils will be encouraged to submit formal comments as written Resolutions.

The Planning and Zoning Commission (PZC) will then hold a public hearing and forward its recommendations to the Assembly, which will hold its own hearing and take final action.

Following is an outline of the public review process:



BOUNDARY ADVISORY COMMITTEE

The Planning Department will work with the Federation of Community Councils to organize a *Boundary Advisory Committee* for this project. The Department will seek a geographically representative group of volunteers from among community councils' membership and officers.

Purpose. The Boundary Advisory Committee will serve as a sounding board to discuss and provide feedback to the Planning Department and PZC regarding the boundary review criteria in *White Paper #1*, the list of boundary study areas identified in *White Paper #2*, and the *Report and Recommendations* to the PZC and Assembly as to proposed boundary changes.

Process. The Committee will meet several times with Planning staff and potentially in a PZC work session. The Committee's role is advisory. It may also choose to supplement the Planning Department's report with its own recommendations to the PZC and Assembly.

CODE CRITERIA FOR DETERMINING COMMUNITY COUNCIL BOUNDARIES

Code Standards. Anchorage Municipal Code Section 2.40 establishes the standards for delineating community council district areas. The Anchorage Assembly must define community council districts to (1) group residents within natural communities, and (2) recognize community desires regarding boundaries. Population is not to be used as a criterion for establishing boundaries.

The code defines "natural communities" as:

- Areas divided one from another by physical or traffic barriers; and
- Areas having common interests; and
- Areas having or are achieving a distinct identity by reason of geography, history, population, transportation, and other factors.

Other Districts. Community council districts are not determined by legislative districts, taxation districts, or service districts such as road service areas. Although the review of boundaries may consider service areas as factors that contribute to a common interest (e.g., school attendance areas), council boundaries should be determined primarily by "natural communities" and "community desires as to boundaries."

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR REVIEWING POTENTIAL BOUNDARY CHANGES

The following *guiding principles* for evaluating potential boundary adjustments elaborate on the municipal code standards for establishing community council districts. The *guiding principles* are intended to translate the code language into more specific criteria that can be more easily applied to individual boundary study areas. They also provide a consistent, equitable, and transparent set of criteria to weigh options for boundary adjustments in each case.

Not every community council boundary needs to meet every *guiding principle*. The principles may vary in relative importance depending on the area and situation. No one factor overrides.

1. Preserve existing boundaries unless there is a reason to change. Prioritize stability and continuity unless other *guiding principles* (below) indicate there is merit in adjusting boundaries. Any boundary changes should strengthen rather than disrupt the function of community councils and should change the districts no more than optimal for to meeting the *guiding principles*.

2. Ensure community council representation for each resident, landowner, and business. Each resident, business, and property owner should have the opportunity to be a participating, voting member of a council. All areas with residents, property owners, and businesses or other private organizations should be located within an active, engaged community council for their area.

3. Set council boundaries that strengthen neighborhoods and natural communities. Neighborhood participation thrives where there is a strong and distinct identity and shared common interests—a community of *place*. Examples of shared characteristics and interests include:

- A shared geographic focus, activity center, or anchoring institution, such as a commercial district or main street; a town center; a park or a prominent civic institution.
- A distinct pattern of physical features or historic development patterns that define the neighborhood's character and identity, such as the kinds of residential areas, mix of uses and activities, sizes of buildings and lots, the scale and character of streets, city blocks, and street network.

- A shared history of experiences, traditions, and endeavors that continues to the present, although diverse attitudes and opinions are welcome.
- An elementary school attendance area, improvement district, or community-oriented service area.
- Achieving through common endeavor a shared focus center, neighborhood plan, street system improvements, creek corridor improvement, or park.
- Shared issues and challenges to overcome or resolve through collective deliberation, advocacy, and effort.
- Sufficient interest and ability among neighbors—from all segments of the community—to support a council.

4. Use easily identifiable boundaries that are physical barriers between neighborhoods. It should be relatively easy for people to know what council they live in or do business. Residents should be able to easily identify their council area boundaries. Therefore, council boundaries should be *physical features* evident in the landscape that people can relate to, such as:

- An arterial street that is a physical and traffic barrier more than it is a local connector; the Alaska Railroad Corridor; or a highway.
- Breaks in street and pedestrian connectivity and interaction among neighborhoods, reinforced by local landmarks such as a stream or park.
- Creeks, creek greenbelts and valleys, ridges and significant breaks in the city's topography, and other prominent natural features.
- Large parks, greenbelts or natural open spaces or lake systems that separate or isolate neighborhoods.
- Airports and other extensive facilities demarked by clear zones and fences.

5. Align boundaries with community desires and aspirations. Where there is interest among residents, property owners, and businesses and organizations of an area to be in a certain council, those wishes should carry strong weight. Shared, common goals and aspirations are also a basis for recognizing a community of place.

6. Seek an optimal size range that facilitates citizen participation and self-determination.

Population is not a criterion for establishing a council, so long as the size of a community council district affords its citizens an opportunity for maximum participation. Therefore:

- **An active community council with a small population can be a legitimate natural community.** For example, Basher, with only several hundred residents, has a distinct community identity, is physically isolated, and has an active council.
- **A district that is majority commercial can be a legitimate natural community.** Downtown is a distinct community with common interests and an active council.

However, community councils exist to afford citizens an opportunity for maximum community involvement and self-determination. It is important for all residents, businesses, and property owners continue to have representation from an active, engaged community council for their area.

Therefore:

- **Above an optimum size for its area,** a community council may find it more difficult to afford all its members and constituent neighborhood areas an effective opportunity for involvement or representation. Reducing to a smaller size may allow such a community council to focus on core areas and maximize involvement of citizens and self-determination for all neighborhoods.

For example, this consideration led to the creation of Midtown Community Council in 2014.

- **Below an optimum size for its area,** a community council may not enjoy a critical mass of residents, businesses, or property owners who consistently meet, participate, and represent their collective interests. As a result, it may no longer give its members maximum opportunity for involvement, representation, and self-determination by an active community council.

For example, this consideration led Mid-Hillside and Upper Hillside Community Councils to merge in 2017.

7. Select boundaries that are conducive for sharing information about the neighborhood.

Neighborhood level data is a key to sound neighborhood planning and decision-making. How many people live in a community council? What are its demographic, housing, and economic trends? Questions vital to understanding public issues can be answered more easily where councils are coterminous with *Census Blocks* and *Block Groups*. Therefore:

- *Use census boundaries where they are easy and available to use for districting councils.* Census blocks are small units of area, tend to follow major physical features and traffic barriers, and accommodate most any configuration of boundaries.
- *Use census boundaries where vital neighborhood information is at stake.* A local park, school or other unpopulated area allows deviation from census lines, without impacting demographic data.
- *Where there is conflict, actual neighborhoods take precedence.* For example, where census blocks do not coincide with the way people define where they live, the census precinct should not override natural communities.

PROJECT REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

The [project web page](#) for the 10-Year Review of Community Council Boundaries at the URL address shown on the cover of this white paper provides references and hyperlinks including:

- Community council maps.
- Online survey questionnaire regarding community council districts' boundaries.
- Assembly Information Memorandum (AIM) No. 070-2022 regarding mandatory community council boundaries reviews.
- Anchorage Municipal Code (AMC) Section 2.40.040, *Establishment of Community Council Districts*.
- Project news, updates, and events.



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