

Background and Recommended input from RCCC on proposed ordinance to allow homeless shelters in B-3 zoning with specific restrictions

On March 1st, the Planning and Zoning Commission is scheduled to hear a proposed ordinance which would amend AMC 21.05.010E, Table of Allowed Uses of zoning districts to allow "Homeless and Transient Shelter" in the B-3 (general business) district as a conditional use (currently such shelters are only allowed in Public Lands and Institutions (PLI) districts). The proposal includes three use-specific standards:

- (1) homeless shelters under different conditional use permits are to be separated by a minimum of 500 feet so as to prevent the concentration of such shelters on one block;
- (2) homeless shelters would have to be located within one-quarter mile of a non-commuter public transit route, unless alternative transportation is provided, in order to provide accessibility to the homeless; and
- (3) secure storage for personal belongings, including bicycles, would have to be provided to the residents of these shelters.

Note, each proposed homeless or transient shelter would be subject to a public hearing and multi-agency review as part of a conditional use permit process. The Planning and Zoning Commission could deny a conditional use permit, or could approve it with specific management conditions, and the permit would be revocable if those conditions were not met.

A Rabbit Creek Community Council (RCCC) resident recently proposed a resolution for consideration by the RCCC opposing this Title 21 amendment. The RCCC Land Use & Transportation Committee (LUTC) reviewed this resolution at their February 4, 2021, meeting. The LUTC does not support this resolution; however, the LUTC agrees there are substantial issues associated with the process for determining homeless facility location and conditional use actions.

Here are the points the LUTC proposes be submitted by the RCCC to the PZC on this issue:

This zoning proposal is intended to implement a needed social service function. As such, we can agree with the recommended zoning change and associated requirements, as long as additional points are included to ensure further planning and involvement of neighbors as future homeless facilities are proposed.

Planning – Goals and Metrics: A provision supporting the Assembly in identifying a Homeless and Transient Housing master plan with goals and objectives specifying the required facilities, as well as timelines and an action plan would be helpful. Some of this planning exists, such as the October 2018 report, "Anchored Home - Strategic Action Plan to Solve Homelessness in Anchorage: 2018-2021"³ that summarized research into this issue and "engaged over 700 community members, businesses and agency representatives through a community engagement and public review period." This report addressed community impacts and the desirability to spread facilities through the city rather than have them concentrated.

Steps that have been completed include the Housing First¹ and Home for Good² initiatives that have been implemented, detailed surveys of our homeless population, and individualized consultations to identify needs for housing/treatment/other services as was done when the homeless were being housed at the Sullivan Arena and Ben Boeke during the first many months of the pandemic. Those consultations were a critical step in providing detailed information regarding the population served and scope of services.

Community Engagement and Notifications - While we recognize that the proposed amendment merely sets in place a framework within which additional homeless facilities may ultimately be permitted, we also recognize the concerns of neighbors to know more about the process and ultimate conditions for these facilities. Points made in the “Anchored Home” report about the importance of community dialogue and involvement, as well as ways to measure progress and success should be requirements of any conditional use permits eventually proposed for homeless facilities. Another step that needs to be incorporated is to tie future potential real estate acquisitions to the categories (social goals and framework) described in that report. Given the long term consequences to existing neighborhoods, purchases should not be based on lowest dollar cost.

It would be helpful if the proposed amendment laid the groundwork for expanded public notice and public hearings about the purposes and scope for its implementation, including about the process and criteria for conditional use permits for new facilities. Information should be required in the permitting process about how a specific proposed facility helps meet overall objectives to decrease homelessness and meets the needs of those with mental health and addiction issues. The LUTC stresses a need for adequate communication and community engagement as follows:

- 1) The affected community council(s) should be invited to send two or three members to the applicant’s pre-application meeting with MOA agencies.
- 2) Notification of any conditional use proposal should be: to those within one-half mile; via postal mail, postings on the subject property, and notices through community councils; and provided at least 60 days prior to public hearings. Notifications should clearly state why this property was chosen, what segment of the 'homeless' population would be served and what services would be provided at the facility.
- 3) Early in the 60-day notice period there should be a pre-hearing community presentation or work session with the affected community council(s), prior to the public hearing. It should be led by Muni Planning staff, with representation from the applicant. Detailed information on the plans should include: type of facility, services to be provided, minimum and maximum number of clients, proximity to public transit routes or alternative transportation provisions, how and when safe storage facilities for residents will be accessed, rules for clients to check in and out of the facility, and a continued plan of engagement with the involved community councils and neighbors (business, resident, etc.).
- 4) The neighborhood around a proposed facility should have citizen representation during planning, implementation and operation of a facility. Community councils provide a reasonable partner for helping to disseminate information and identify individuals who could responsibly and knowledgeably participate in this process.
- 5) Any conditional use permit request should be clearly linked to the “Anchored Home” strategic plan and a masterplan for engagement with issues and populations identified as pertaining to a 'homeless' condition.

The RCCC recognizes the tragedy of homelessness. In response to pleas from Anchorage residents, the Municipality and Assembly have been working hard to understand and address the causes of homelessness, and provide safe shelter and treatment options. While several programs initiated in recent years have had some successes, our homeless population has been growing, is more and more visible to Anchorage residents in more areas, and has, at

times, created conflicts, becoming unappealing neighbors for some businesses and homeowners. The tragedy of homelessness has only been exacerbated by the continuing COVID crisis of the past year. We appreciate the Assembly and Municipal agencies work to date to address this complicated and difficult issue.

Footnotes:

¹ Institute for Circumpolar Health Studies, University of Alaska Anchorage. 2017.

Evaluating Housing First Programs in Anchorage and Fairbanks, Alaska: Final Report Prepared for: The Alaska Housing Finance Corporation, The Alaska Mental Health Trust. Anchorage, AK

<https://alaskamentalhealthtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/EvaluatingHousingFirstProgramsInAlaska-May2017.pdf>

² <https://www.liveunitedanc.org/improving-lives/what-we-care-about/homelessness/leading-social-innovation-pay-for-success/>

³ Anchored Home - Strategic Action Plan to Solve Homelessness in Anchorage: 2018-2021. 2018.

<http://www.muni.org/Departments/Mayor/Documents/Anchored%20Home%201004018%20FINAL.PDF>