

Process and Status of Assembly District 6 Community Councils Involvement in Anchorage's Homeless Crisis – Focus on Rabbit Creek Community Council

Homelessness has been the subject of many debates, plans, actions, and inactions between the Assembly and the Municipality's (Muni) Administration over the past couple of years. After closure of the Sullivan Arena which provided winter shelter and a navigation center for many of Anchorage's unhoused the past couple of years, efforts began anew this past spring for a more permanent solution before winter of 2023-24.

Background for Assembly District 6 Involvement in Homelessness Issues

Assembly Member Felix Rivera emailed Assembly District Community Councils (CC), April 25th, asking each Assembly District to coordinate in selecting one representative to the Muni's Housing and Homelessness Committee (HHC). This followed Assembly establishment of a [Clean Slate Strategy](#) (AR 2023-97) to develop a process for the Assembly to solve the problem, "Where will we put a new permanent year-round low-barrier shelter?" Representatives from the Anchorage Board of Realtors, Coalition to End Homelessness, and Chamber of Commerce were also added to the HHC.

The [Clean Slate Strategy](#) website includes links to definitions of [shelter types](#) and the [Anchored Home Plan](#) "to support public health and safety by helping community partners add affordable housing to the market and ensure that adequate emergency shelter exists."

Listening sessions with the public were held, June – August. Informed by this community feedback, the Assembly approved AR 2023-211, July 11, establishing site-selection criteria for a new permanent year-round low-barrier¹ shelter: the property must be zoned Public Lands and Institutions or B3 (General Business); space for each individual (50 sq ft) staying in the shelter in addition to space for administration/services; property is available, in fair condition and Americans with Disabilities Act compliant; and costs to acquire and renovate the property must be presented to the Assembly. Buffers to locations with children (500 ft), proximity to public transportation (within ¼ mile), and ability to establish visibility barriers and be activated as a shelter between November 1 – December 31 were identified as preferred characteristics.

Assembly District 6 represented by Randy Sulte and Zac Johnson encompasses nine CCs (Bear Valley, Glen Alps, Huffman/O'Malley, Hillside, Old Seward/Oceanview, Rabbit Creek, Turnagain Arm, Girdwood, Portage) and parts of Abbott Loop and Bayshore/Klatt CCs) (see maps). Please note, previous research by Rabbit Creek CC (RCCC) found earlier important work summarizing research and engaging hundreds of business, agency, and community members. These have addressed community impacts and documented **the desirability to spread facilities through the city, rather than have them concentrated** (e.g., the Municipality's October 2018 report, "Anchored Home - Strategic Action Plan to Solve Homelessness in Anchorage: 2018-2021").

District 6 Follow-up on Providing Input to the HHC

CC chairs/representatives from District 6 met in May and June, developed questions for selecting a representative, and then voted, selecting Rachel Ries, Hillside CC, to represent District 6 on the HHC. Subsequent monthly meetings of CC chairs/representatives with Rachel included discussion of five dispersed, sanctioned camps recommended by the Sanctioned Camp Task Force in May and how they might best be managed. Those sites were later reduced to one site, but the effort fell apart with the homeless settling into large camps on 3rd Ave, in Davis Park, and scattered around other locations over the summer. Ideas and recommendations discussed by District 6 CC representatives are in Attachment A.

¹ 'Low-barrier shelter' is defined as a location that has minimal requirements and expectations for entry.

'High-barrier shelter' is a location that places requirements on guests such as sobriety, curfews, church attendance, program participation, identification. [from Assembly Fact Sheet, 9/26/22]

District 6 CC representative agreed that CC areas such as Rabbit Creek, Bear Valley, Hillside, Turnagain Arm, and Girdwood could not support any type of sanctioned camp or low-barrier shelter due to lack of services (e.g., social, medical, mental health, VA, transportation) and lack of city sewer and water, as well as topographic features such as steep terrain and substandard roads. Additionally, no areas were identified within District 6 as being suitable for a low-barrier shelter, due to limitations in services listed above.

Discussion focused on determining the most appropriate category of homeless that District 6 could best serve with the least impact on our residents. Identified were teens transitioning out of foster care, families trying to escape domestic violence, high-functioning people actively engaged in or completing treatment, and people trying to get back on their feet after losing a home due to illness or job loss. Small group home(s) where needed services could be transportable or provided by a service provider were considered feasible, not a full shelter.

Positive ways in which District 6 residents could assist with the homeless were identified, including volunteering time at a shelter, donating food and clothing, or setting up service programs at schools to help highly functioning homeless individuals. Muni-wide, we saw a need to emphasize hiring the homeless to help service and staff shelters, and create a pipeline from homelessness to workers. This also means working with community business owners, asking them to hire people who have gone through a homeless camp/shelter, held jobs at a shelter, gained additional responsibilities and started to receive wages in addition to lodging and food.

We acknowledged that funding is a huge issue and there is an overwhelming need for more treatment beds.

The representatives agreed to survey residents in each of their CCs about areas and criteria for any shelters in District 6, lightly modifying a survey developed by Abbott Loop CC and considering criteria and agreements the group reached at the June 28th meeting.

A link to the subsequent survey was provided on the Rabbit Creek CC website and at our July 13th meeting. Survey responses (20) for RCCC are summarized in Attachment B. Similar to Abbott Loop CC, we found: about half of the respondents oppose any type of shelter in their specific CC area, and most of those also oppose any shelter anywhere in District 6. For RCCC, the other half agreed that transitional housing or halfway houses for highly functioning homeless individuals could be acceptable with appropriate security, management, services and transportation (e.g., individual homes for 8-10 survivors of domestic violence, those fully recovered from substance abuse, or those needing a hand after losing their housing due to job loss or medical issues).

An Old Seward/Oceanview CC resident developed a Draft 'District 6 Position Statement on Housing & Homeless Shelters' distributed a day before an August 30th meeting that RCCC missed due to not receiving a timely email. This Draft did not present ideas discussed and agreed upon at the June 28, 2023, meeting; it provided no solutions or positive options. Rather it focused on preventing any District 6 CC from recommending or supporting establishment of a homeless shelter or low-income public housing within their own or other District 6 CC without consent from their own or that other CC, or any CC within 1.5 miles of such a site. It recommended that each CC develop an individual, brief position statement.

RCCC is developing an alternative position, articulating findings and information discussed above.

Attachment A

Ideas and Recommendations from Assembly District 6 on Homeless Camps

Early in the summer, the Assembly considered setting up sanctioned camp(s)¹ for the homeless. Five potential sites were identified, spread throughout the Muni. None were ever set up, but the District 6 group discussed considerations for such facilities:

- The homeless need to be involved in drafting rules for a given camp/shelter, keeping their camps clean and policing themselves. This will increase residents' buy-in and ideally, following those rules.
- Suggest that representatives of an encampment (e.g., 4-6 people) meet weekly with Muni officials and develop:
 - Rules for staying there (look at rules from Sullivan Arena).
 - Establish separate places in a low-barrier shelter for single men, single women, families, couples, etc.
 - Establish a 'safe' area for kids to play.
 - Farther from that, could establish a place for smoking; possibly drinking if confined to an area?
 - Muni should provide essential services that are regularly serviced: toilets, hand-wash stations, showers, trashcans.
 - Work with non-profits/private partners to provide meals (e.g., Beans Cafe).
 - Figure out rules for safe food storage and delivery – bear-safe containers, personal & group.
 - Provide picnic tables under a tarp or other coverings.
 - Ask residents what they need – e.g., should medical personnel visit weekly? Can urgent care and hospital facilities donate a day/month and rotate that assistance?
 - Weekly visits by social workers/ reps of social service agencies to provide counseling and navigation services.
 - How to involve safety officers?
 - Look at what other cities have done to be more successful in serving the homeless and keeping other residents safe and happy.

ATTACHMENT B

Summary of Homeless Survey results for Rabbit Creek Community Council

NOTE – this was not a statistically valid survey. It was announced and available on our Rabbit Creek Community Council (RCCC) website and at our July 13th in-person and Zoom monthly meeting. However, it is a snapshot and resulted in both hopeful comments and suggestions about our homeless situation, and negative comments from people who want to keep the homeless far away from RCCC, or anywhere in District 6. These results are compatible with results from a similar survey for Abbot Loop/Midtown Community Council. We have not received results from other Community Councils in Assembly District 6. Thanks to all who responded!

There were 20 responses, all respondents either live in or own property in RCCC (Question 1). Responses to the other questions are summarized below.

2.a. Do you support having supportive housing of some kind (managed camp, building, transitional housing, group home, etc.) for people experiencing homelessness in (Check all that are acceptable to you):

- 4 (20%) RCCC area
- 10 (50%) Other location in Assembly District 6, SE Anchorage
- 10 (50%) I do not support supportive housing in District 6

2.b. If you do not accept any type of supportive housing in District 6, where do you believe it should be located? (11 responses) (# of people providing a similar response)

- Closer to other services (social, medical, transportation) where there are buses or can walk (3)
- By Alaska Native Hospital where Mayor Bronson suggested (2) or in old "Northway Mall" (1)
- Victor Rd between Dimond and 100th or in vicinity of Dimond Center
- Fire Island or Downtown
- 3rd Ave. by Beans
- By specific Assembly member homes [nasty comment]

3.a. If answered yes to 2.a., what types of supportive housing could be appropriate in RCCC recognizing that we have no public transportation or other services, check all that apply: (9 responses)

- (9) Housing for women/children escaping domestic abuse
- (8) Halfway/transitional home for fewer than 10 clients
- (4) High-barrier shelter for homeless
- Low-barrier shelter for homeless
- Sanctioned camp

3.b. Maximum number of adults acceptable for each supportive housing type you could support in RCCC or specify if/where you could support such housing elsewhere in Assembly District 6. (15 responses)

- (5) None in RCCC
 - (3) 10; 10-20; 10-12 housing, 10-20 camping
 - (3) small groups/8 with case managers/staff, transportation
- Other comments: Would need transportation to get person to work/school in RCCC area; Would support high barrier, domestic violence, or transitional shelter/home for fewer than 10 in area of Huffman and Old Seward;

Decide based on local need and nationwide shelter experience/CDC data/Anchorage experts;
NW corner of District 6 with small businesses, health clinics, bus – 20/shelter or pallet homes

3.c. Suggestions for ensuring safety and well-being of residents of supportive housing:
(17 responses)

- Social service and mental health professional support, supervised caring, empathy and path to housing
- 24-hour staffing
- Security, fencing, police patrols
- Keep locations unobtrusive and generally unknown to public
- On public transportation/bus routes
- Alcohol free and drug testing for residents
- Vetting tenants, willing to work

3.d. Suggestions for ensuring safety and well-being of residents in surrounding community
(14 responses)

- Clients: No drinking, no drugs, have successfully completed substance abuse programs
- Fencing, 24-hr management staff, security/security entrance
- Supervised caring/empathy with focus on mental health, pathway to housing, no tents
- Evict anyone who breaks rules, trespasses, or threatens locals

3.e. For those who objected to any supportive housing, what measures would need to be in place to address your concerns? (12 responses)

(8) Nothing would satisfy their concerns

- Noted availability of large mental hospitals in the 1970s where people received medications/counseling, shelter, meals. Today, homeless consist of two groups: those who prefer to be on their own; those with temporary needs who will get back to independence with appropriate assistance
- Availability of 24-hr staff, understanding what leads to conflict/disruptive behavior and a plan to prevent/address those issues
- A true process: entry into housing leading to a path of betterment

4. Suggestions for locations in RCCC or elsewhere in District 6 for housing of some kind, what types? (17 responses – some were negative and did not answer question)

In RCCC:

- Large house that could be a half-way/transitional home for highly functioning, formerly homeless clients

Elsewhere in District 6:

- (3) Locations along Dimond Blvd/Dimond Transit Center, including from Victor Rd & 100th/Dimond, Dimond/88th between Lk Otis and King St;
- (2) Any available site on bus route or otherwise have ready/reliable access to transportation
- (2) Close to Huffman/Old Seward/New Seward where clients can walk to obtain groceries, transportation, work, or multi-family units south of Huffman between Old and New Seward Hwys
- Former Christian Health Ministries building near Vanguard and Seward Hwy – potential high-barrier housing for up to 60 people

5. Other comments/suggestions? (14 responses)

Responses expressing concerns for the homeless:

- This is a humanitarian issue crying out for resolution
- Deep concerns, may have recommendations after April 2024 election
- Individuals in need require sanitary facilities, clean water and adequate food along with mental health evaluation and drug and alcohol treatment
- Not opposed to supportive housing for victims of domestic violence or veterans, but it needs to be near services, within walking distance of ample bus service – not available in RCCC
- We need to focus more on preventative actions so people don't end up homeless; provide aid, resources, funding to at risk individuals BEFORE they become homeless
- All of us need to not make this a political problem. We elect people who talk big solutions but rarely can they solve the problem. Elected officials need to learn to compromise and keep the end goal of resolving this complex issue of homelessness at the forefront.
- Permanent housing (with management & services) is known to be far more successful than temporary shelters. It allows sense of permanence and community, would provide an address, showers, internet, medical/mental help – all basic needs for finding a job.
- Do it now – delays/extension of long-term inhumane circumstances is unconscionable

Responses expressing frustration and negative impacts of homelessness on others

- Enabling homeless people will only increase their numbers
- Don't enable aberrant behavior
- Don't place homeless in residential areas, they are not safe; build a shelter away from everything where people can get clean and sober
- Caring about the homeless is a luxury provided to wealthy communities. When that community places the homeless before maintaining and growing the wealth, that community will lose their wealth without improving the homeless situation – see San Francisco, Portland, Seattle
- Dispersing the problem will only lead to division and worsen the situation

There were several suggestions for improving the survey itself (e.g., should have defined terms like 'low-barrier' and 'high-barrier' shelters; should have clarified, 'if you checked yes on 2.a., then skip to 3.a., if you checked no on 2.a. then answer 2.b. and skip to 3.e. and skip 4).