SMART GROWTH LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE

A project of Smart Growth America

CASE STUDIES IN SMART GROWTH IMPLEMENTATION

Anchorage, Alaska

About the Community

Anchorage is a combined city-county government that covers Alaska's largest and most important metropolitan area. The combined municipality covers almost 2,000 square miles and has a population of over 280,000.

Some 220,000 people live in the "Anchorage Bowl" – the urban area on the Anchorage peninsula that is cut off from the rest of the municipality by geography, military installations and a National Forest. The Bowl covers about 100 square miles but only has 11,700 acres of undeveloped land left

State of Smart Growth Implementation

Anchorage Bowl must accommodate an additional 80,000 residents by 2020 but is running out of raw land.

Recent development, both residential and commercial, has been of low quality, even in fairly central locations. Anchorage's policies had nibbled around the edges of these issues -- for example, a big-box design review policy had been adopted – but the city had not addressed core smart growth questions in its codes.

In 2001, the Municipality of Anchorage adopted the *Anchorage 2020 Comprehensive Plan*, which serves as a blueprint for development in the Anchorage Bowl for the next 20 years. Anchorage 2020 called for more focused and compact development and represented a radical departure from the traditional planning model in Anchorage.

As a follow-up, the Municipality began revising both its zoning code (Title 21) and its Long-Range Transportation Plan. Many of the municipality's previously existing standards did not offer Anchorage the tools to promote various types of infill development with higher land use densities and intensities. Also, the City's aging plans, codes, and development standards had been incrementally amended over time, resulting in a mix of standards with varying purposes and uses.

Smart growth leadership in Anchorage emerged primarily from a nonprofit citizen group, the Anchorage Citizens Coalition, and Mayor Mark Begich. The Citizens Coalition includes a wide range of activists concerned with both quality of life and environmental issues. Mayor Begich, who was first elected in 2003, is especially focused on revitalizing Downtown Anchorage, which received a large amount of high-rise development during the oil boom of the 1970s.

Anchorage's Municipal Assembly (the city council), which is more conservative than Mayor Begich and includes representatives from outlying areas, has not been at the forefront of smart growth advocacy. Similarly, the development community, which did not play an extremely active role in Anchorage 2020, began active resistance to smart growth ideas when the city's zoning ordinance revision began. In particular, they argued that the implementation of Anchorage 2020 ideas in the zoning code would be expensive and would drive up the cost of development.

SGLI's Technical Assistance Team reviewed the current smart growth policies contained in the Anchorage 2020 Plan; reviewed the draft land use code being developed by Clarion Associates; and, reviewed the draft of the updated *1991 Long Range Transportation Plan*.

The Anchorage 2020 Plan conformed to smart growth principles and is one the best smart growth planning documents SGLI's team has seen. The team recommended that the Municipality focus its efforts on downtown (the plan had identified several activity centers in the city, all as high-priority focus areas); and find catalytic projects to leverage, such as the extension of the Alaska Railroad into downtown.

The municipality needed to defuse its friction with the development community before it could move forward with translating Anchorage 2020 into a revised zoning code.

This could be done by focusing on the many areas of agreement rather than the few "areas of disagreement; by looking for alternative methods to permit the off-site storage of "outdoor toys" (All Terrain Vehicles, Snowmobiles, Boats, etc.) that Alaskans often own; and, by conducting an analysis of the economic impact of the new code that takes into account the likelihood that developers will seek alternative solutions to zoning issues on their site.

Lessons Learned

Have Confidence In Your City's Urban Character

A successful smart growth strategy in any city requires confidence that the city's urban character will be appealing to would-be residents.

To successfully accommodate the coming growth, future development in the Anchorage Bowl must be of higher density and higher quality (which is essential to the future prosperity of the Municipality because of constrained land supply) but many local leaders doubt that residents would be willing to pay the price differential. They fear that the better density and better standards required to accommodate increased densities in the Bowl will increase the cost of new development so much that more and more people will choose to leave the municipality and move to outlying areas.

SGLI's Technical Assistance team calls this "The Anchorage Conundrum" and see it happening in many older cities where urban character has historically not been valued.

Create Geographical Priorities

The Anchorage 2020 plan calls for a focus on three large employment centers and seven town centers. But Anchorage's projected growth is only moderate and therefore there does not appear to be enough demand in the next 20 years to fully implement this idea. Furthermore, intense retail pressure (created because Anchorage is the retail and service center for the entire Alaskan "bush") appears to be outrunning the Municipality's capacity to implement the plan in all of the seven town centers.

In Anchorage, as elsewhere, it is important to create focused geographical priorities so that smart growth can succeed on its own terms in selected locations, thereby creating successes that will build on each other.

Focus on Strategies Appropriate to the climate

It is a widely held view in Anchorage, as in other northern cities, that a development strategy based on alternative transportation patterns cannot work because of the extremes of the Anchorage climate – cold, snow, and darkness. In fact, cities throughout the Northern hemisphere have considerable experience in dealing with this problem by creating what some urban designers call "the grammar of the north."

The most obvious step would be to create a walkway system connecting key locations. Models today include colonnades, arcades, glazed-over alleys, atria, galleria, winter gardens, and "glass houses." There is little doubt that Downtown Anchorage is the most obvious place to start with such walkway systems. Although some urban planners say walkway systems discourage streetlife, it was our experience that residents readily choose outdoor activities during periods of nice weather no matter what the alternatives are.

Understand the Financial Impact of Code Changes

It is important to test a new code's financial impact on different densities and designs, as well as modeling the possible impact on the revenue side of the ledger as well as the expense side.

Anchorage 2020 will be implemented through a revision of the city zoning code, known as "Title 21". When Title 21 changes were proposed to conform to the plan, developers and some elected officials feared that costs would increase and demanded that these costs be calculated by practicing engineers.

There is no question that Title 21 changes will increase costs if developers seek to build exactly the same kinds of projects they had been building previously, because Title 21 contains higher standards. However, the goal of the Anchorage 2020 plan was not simply to apply higher standards to the same development patterns but, rather, to create different development patterns.

Focus On Achievable Consensus

In reviewing community comment on the proposed Title 21 code revisions, we found that the most divisive and controversial issues were not ones that were, in the overall scheme of things, vitally important. Business and development concerns revolved around things like screening cell towers and dumpsters. Such provisions would clearly enhance Anchorage's aesthetic quality but they are not central to the goal of altering land use and transportation patterns. Better to fall back on these items in order to gain consensus on 95% of the revision.

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About the Case Studies

Communities across the country are facing tremendous opportunities to shape their future and provide solutions to the most pressing local, national and global challenges of our time. Community leaders, serving as stewards of the future, have the power to change previous patterns of unsustainable growth and realize the benefits of smarter growth.

The Case Studies present the key findings and lessons learned about smart growth implementation from the Smart Growth Leadership Institute's four-year technical assistance program that was funded by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

The Case Studies are meant to help communities that are committed to (or are exploring) smart growth but struggle with implementation. The cases highlight successful strategies in building support, in identifying the most problematic policies and in other issues that typically accompany a major change in development practice. The case studies also showcase the use of the tools included in the Smart Growth Implementation Toolkit.

*Visit **www.sgli.org** for more information about the Smart Growth Leadership Institute.*

*Visit **www.smartgrowthtoolkit.net** for more information about the Smart Growth Implementation Toolkit.*