

2021 Mayoral Runoff Election Candidate Questionnaire



AEDDC
Anchorage Economic
Development Corporation

The Anchorage Economic Development Corporation submitted these six questions to the Anchorage mayoral election runoff candidates to inform our membership, the business community and Anchorage residents about the issues important to AEDC. Below are the answers the candidates submitted to our organization. Responses are presented without edit or comment. AEDC does not endorse political candidates, but we encourage everyone to vote.

Candidate Questions

1. What do you think the municipality could do to grow and sustain economic development in Anchorage over the next three to six years? What funding sources and incentives would you consider?
2. Would you support a sales tax dedicated to economic development and revitalization projects? If not, what other strategies could the municipality employ?
3. In recent years there has been an increasing trend of outmigration from Anchorage to the Lower 48, including a growing trend of outmigration by new retirees. What steps would you take to combat this outmigration as well as retain and attract qualified skilled and semi-skilled workers to Alaska?
4. Development in downtown creates jobs, expands the tax base, and improves the quality of life in our city. How would you foster investment and development in downtown? What is the culture you want to create?
5. How would you balance life/safety requirements of building codes with the need to provide an efficient and streamlined building permitting process that fosters investment and commercial/residential development projects?
6. Redevelopment of the Port of Alaska is critical to the future of the Anchorage and Alaska economies. How will your administration move this project forward to a successful completion during your term in office?

Q1:

What do you think the municipality could do to grow and sustain economic development in Anchorage over the next three to six years? What funding sources and incentives would you consider?

A: Dave Bronson

The Anchorage economy has been relatively stagnant the past few years, exasperated by the past years COVID mandates that have severely impacted small businesses. To bring back the Anchorage economy it will take the combined efforts of a variety of organizations. While The Municipality of Anchorage has a significant role to play in this economic recovery, the numerous non-government and semi-government organizations, like the Anchorage Economic Development Corporation, Anchorage Community Development Authority, Anchorage Chamber of Commerce, and many others must work with the Municipality to develop economic stimulation programs and incentives for improving our economy. One of the first actions will be to establish the Anchorage Economic Recovery Advisory Taskforce.

The MOA should provide tax abatement to businesses that were economically hurt by the excessive COVID emergency mandates and shut-downs. We will launch a supply chain and a new business recruitment effort in conjunction with the private sector to capitalize on shifts in the Alaskan economy. We will launch a remote work initiative to connect prospective job seekers with jobs. We will divest unused city lands and properties that are not planned for future government activities to create a broader private sector tax base.

We must make development more affordable, whether for housing or business investments. The municipality can decrease the time and cost of development by consolidating efforts, streamlining rules and regulations, improving Title 21, and removing red tape from the development process.

The Municipality of Anchorage does not suffer from a lack of funding. Over the past few years our local government has expanded and spent large amounts of money, including wasting millions of CARES Act funding, on non-essential programs. This will stop under my administration and funding will be prioritized towards essential government services and providing development programs to diversify our economy.

A: Forrest Dunbar

I believe an economic boom is coming for Anchorage should we seize the opportunity. However, even as we begin to recover from the worst of the pandemic this summer, we'll face economic headwinds from the State's unresolved fiscal crisis. As Mayor, I will provide certainty for businesses by delivering reliable services with a balanced budget, protecting the Municipality's AAA bond rating, and completing

vital infrastructure projects such as rebuilding the Port of Alaska.

On the Assembly I have been an advocate for diversifying the Municipality's revenue streams and decreasing our reliance on the State. I supported the motor fuel tax and generating interest revenues by depositing the revenues from the ML&P sale. The people of Anchorage voted in 2020 to pass an alcohol tax that goes to fund child abuse and domestic violence prevention, drug and alcohol treatment, first responders, homelessness services, and more. Other revenue sources included removing the tobacco tax exemption for vaping products, but the largest upcoming discussion around alternative revenues will be the proposed Stormwater Utility, which is designed to reduce our overreliance on property taxes.

Ultimately, our growth will be driven by the individuals and businesses who choose to invest in Anchorage. As we compete with the rest of the country for a workforce that can work from anywhere, we need to make Anchorage the obvious choice to retain and attract human capital. That means incentivizing affordable housing development, leveraging Federal infrastructure money to create transportation and construction jobs, jumpstarting the local innovation economy, investing in our world-class trail and parks system, cultivating the independent visitor economy, revitalizing our downtown, fostering a sense of Indigenous place, partnering with our universities to provide world-class educational resources for our students, and going to bat for every opportunity that will bring jobs of the future to Anchorage.

Q2: *Would you support a sales tax dedicated to economic development and revitalization projects? If not, what other strategies could the municipality employ?*

A: Forrest Dunbar

Due to Anchorage's unique tax cap system, a general sales tax would require a vote of the people. Our population has never gotten even remotely close to passing a general sales tax. That was one of the reasons I introduced an alcohol tax dedicated to public safety, substance misuse treatment, child abuse, sexual assault and domestic violence prevention, and homeless services: because it actually had a chance to pass.

That being said, if a sales tax was designed the right way, with sufficient protections against regressivity, and was dedicated to a specific project (or set of revitalization projects), I would consider supporting it. But it will need to be led by the business and nonprofit community, similar to the partnership of Recover Alaska and Brown Jug with regards to the alcohol tax, and get broad public buy-in if it is to have a chance of passing.

Fortunately, there are other steps we can take to revitalize our neighborhoods. The Municipality, through its own departments and through collaborative leadership at ACDA, can work with organizations like the Anchorage Downtown Partnership to revitalize downtown. Our community should also continue the conversation on a Stormwater Utility, which builders and developers have identified as an important step towards improving our infrastructure and reducing overreliance on property taxes. I will furthermore work with our entrepreneurial networks to empower local talent, and will direct Planning and Permitting to lower up-front hurdles that stymie the opening of new storefronts. I believe we can only have long-term economic development and revitalization if our commercial, nonprofit, and government actors are all “pulling on the same end of the rope.” I believe Anchorage is at a place where we are ready to do so, and recent efforts like the RSVA speak to that shared understanding.

A: Dave Bronson

No. Residents and businesses of the Municipality of Anchorage already pay a combined premium tax rate and should not be burdened with increased taxes, especially during this period of an economic recession. Instead of increasing the tax pressure on residents, the local government must restructure to lower both the size and cost of government. Some of these savings can be redirected towards economic incentive programs that create new businesses and jobs in the city, thereby increasing the tax base. By selling excess properties, like those purchased for homeless shelter and treatment centers, funds will be generated to support revitalization projects. To resolve the homeless problem, my administration will establish a Homelessness Advisory Committee, composed of non-government, religious, and social service agencies to present solutions that are not heavily government financed.

Q3: *In recent years there has been an increasing trend of outmigration from Anchorage to the Lower 48, including a growing trend of outmigration by new retirees. What steps would you take to combat this outmigration as well as retain and attract qualified skilled and semi-skilled workers to Alaska?*

A: Dave Bronson

The out-migration from Anchorage is caused by a number of factors; loss of jobs, high cost of living, high crime, and inadequate public education. To mitigate this out-migration, Anchorage must bring back a vibrant economy, based on both large and small business opportunities and provide a safe and inclusive society that meets the basic needs of our residents.

The municipality must lower the costs of development and the tax burden placed upon our residents. Titles 21 and 23 must be revised to streamline building requirements and the development process to result in lower investment costs for those seeking to create job opportunities in Anchorage.

We must also address the high crime rate in Anchorage. Anchorage ranks as one of the most dangerous cities in the country. People do not want to live in a dangerous place. My administration will bolster law enforcement and concentrate on the most serious crimes of gangs, illegal drugs, and domestic violence.

Additionally, out-migration of younger families is partly driven by the quality of education being provided by the Anchorage School District. Since the role of the municipality is only to approve the ASD budget and not to manage the programs within that budget, my administration will work directly with the school district and school board to identify areas where improvements can be achieved without creating new and expanded programs or costs. ASD is already one of the most expensive in the nation. Therefore, better allocation of the funds already being collected is the key to success in the school district.

Part of this education adjustment includes an improved focus on trade skill training. To bring new businesses to Anchorage we must have a skilled workforce trained to meet the requirements of new businesses. This starts in our public school system.

Finally, my administration will connect with the new University of Alaska – Anchorage Chancellor to support programs that bolster new business development in Anchorage. One of the focus areas must be in healthcare. Healthcare is a rapidly growing industry. Anchorage is the healthcare center for the state and provides the majority of healthcare services for senior citizens. Without adequate programs, seniors are leaving the state at high rates. This can be slowed, and maybe reversed by having a broad-based, affordable healthcare system with professionals trained at our local university.

A: Forrest Dunbar

As a Millennial, I know first-hand the challenge we face in preventing young professionals from moving out of Anchorage and the state. I've heard time and time again that people love our community, but cannot find suitable housing that meets their needs, or feel there is a better quality of life in another city. But the threat of outmigration involves every generation. For retirees especially, we need affordable housing that allows them to age in place and live independently if they wish to do so—like ranch homes, intergenerational living, and co-ops which we've seen successfully offer unique, accessible housing tied to community engagement. On the Assembly I participated in the AEDC's Live.Work.Play Housing subcommittee, and was a champion of the 2017 Accessory Dwelling Unit Ordinance, also called "mother-in-law apartments," which are another solution for both young residents and seniors. My Administration will continue to look for those types of regulatory reforms to facilitate housing construction, and will furthermore leverage the property holdings of the Municipality, including the Heritage Land Bank, to do so.

Retaining and attracting workers to Alaska is a critical part of securing Alaska's future, and one of the priorities outlined in my 10 Point Plan for Jobs and Economic Growth. To do so we must offer that aforementioned high quality of life, through investment in parks, trails, public safety, public education, and everything else that goes into making a city feel vibrant. It also means investing in re-skilling and upskilling efforts, which I hope to include in our next round of American Rescue Act Funds. Finally, the Municipality itself can promote skilled labor by including apprenticeship requirements in our construction projects, and by partnering with the Anchorage School District and our universities to match training programs with the gaps in our own labor force.

Q4: *Development in downtown creates jobs, expands the tax base, and improves the quality of life in our city. How would you foster investment and development in downtown? What is the culture you want to create?*

A: Forrest Dunbar

Downtown should be the premier location in Alaska for live entertainment, convenient shopping, and award-winning art. My administration will seek to transform 4th Avenue and E Street into pedestrian promenades, working with the nearby businesses, as these have been successful in other cities in increasing commerce and safety. We can also showcase existing trails, murals and shops with a better wayfinding system — one that incorporates Indigenous places and language — and work to improve the brand of both downtown and Anchorage for visitors by completing the Mushing District, supporting facade improvements, and improving pedestrian facilities between 4th Avenue and the Ship Creek area. In addition, making downtown feel safe and vital means having “eyes on the street” and folks actually living downtown. Regulatory changes, incentives and leveraging the Municipality's own property holdings can make affordable downtown housing a reality. With the ongoing change-over in both the ACDA's staff and board, I am also hoping to foster more of a sense of cooperation between the organization and the Anchorage Downtown Partnership, Visit Anchorage, the AEDC, and even with other departments within the Municipality. We have seen downtown revitalization in other cities, and it is eminently achievable in Anchorage.

That being said, Downtown is only one of our great neighborhoods, and the investments and projects we seek there should also be implemented, where appropriate, in places like Midtown, East Anchorage, Mountain View, Spenard, Dimond, Eagle River, and Girdwood.

A: Dave Bronson

Downtown has suffered tremendously with a loss of business, loss of population, and a general sense of malaise. Anchorage must have a vibrant downtown. The first priority is to clean up downtown with a strong police presence to curb crime and implement an aggressive program to remove the

vagrancy blight that has taken over the downtown area. If people don't feel safe, or have to deal with panhandlers and homeless issues when visiting downtown, they will not come into downtown. One of my staff told me of a recent event in front of a restaurant on Fourth Avenue, where a homeless panhandler was squatting and asking for handouts. When the restaurant owner was asked if this was a problem, the response was that it has become a serious problem on a daily basis and is driving customers away. We cannot tolerate that kind of activity if downtown is to recover.

There have been many attempts to revitalize downtown over the past decade. Most have not been successful. My administration will form an Economic Recovery Advisory Taskforce to present new and creative ideas for revitalizing downtown. This will include a focus on the tourism industry, as well as bringing in more office business to fill the empty spaces. Retail sales is another serious concern. Downtown cannot be turned into a "summer-only" activity. Year-round businesses must remain downtown in order to bring people into town year-round.

My administration will reach out to existing retail sales companies to develop an innovative program to retain business. This may include tax abatement programs, joint business marketing programs, a review of the current parking program and parking garage capabilities to determine ways to increase activities, and implement a specific improvement zone incentive program authorized by federal law (such as the SBA HUBZone program) which has proven successful in other municipalities to revitalize underutilized business zones.

Q5: *How would you balance life/safety requirements of building codes with the need to provide an efficient and streamlined building permitting process that fosters investment and commercial/residential development projects?*

A: Dave Bronson

The Anchorage building code is one of the most comprehensive in the nation. However, recently, actions have been attempted to include revisions to the building code that go beyond reasonable life/safety requirements. Case in point, the proposal to require indoor fire suppression systems in single-family homes. While installing such a system may reduce the amount of damage to a structure and provide limited additional time to vacate the structure, the installation costs would significantly increase construction costs when the focus must be to find ways to reduce construction costs in Anchorage. Anchorage needs more affordable housing to provide for the needs of trade workers to live in the city. Without these trade workers in Anchorage we will never be able to attract new businesses. Therefore, our building codes must reflect a reasonable level of life/safety protection while also providing the ability to construct properties that meet the economic threshold for the job market. Right now Anchorage is pricing itself out of the market.

My administration will conduct a comprehensive review of Title 21 to develop lower cost alternatives for development, thereby using the planning, zoning, and building code process as an incentive for new development in Anchorage.

Anchorage must also resist the efforts being suggested by the Biden Administration in the Infrastructure Stimulus Package to overhaul local zoning processes to eliminate the single-family home zone. As proposed, Biden wants to use a federal grant program to entice municipalities to weaken or eliminate its single-family zoning. By opening up single-family zoned areas to multi-family uses, property values will decline and people who want to retain the single-family atmosphere will out-migrate from Anchorage, exasperating our current problem. My administration will retain a variety of zoning options in Anchorage that attract businesses and give homeowners affordable options.

A: Forrest Dunbar

While I will not compromise the safety of our residents, there are other parts of Title 21, Title 23, and other portions of the code that can be updated to encourage development and affordability. We should be looking at reducing or eliminating parking minimums, at increasing mixed use and medium density housing, and encouraging redevelopment of existing structures and abandoned buildings. The Muni needs to work with builders to ensure that we aren't making any specific type of development impossible or unprofitable to build. This came up recently with a proposed revision to our fire code, which would have required sprinkler systems in new single-family homes. A majority of the Assembly and I voted against it because we felt it would have made those homes prohibitively expensive.

My Administration will also work with the users of the Planning and Permitting Departments to find opportunities for cultural change and organization restructuring to make the Municipality more customer-service oriented. Part of that will be giving the Building Official more unified authority, and allowing for "one stop shopping" for users. These kinds of changes are not easy, and will take the time, attention, and buy-in of the mayor. But it will be a personal priority for me and my senior staff.

Q6:

Redevelopment of the Port of Alaska is critical to the future of the Anchorage and Alaska economies. How will your administration move this project forward to a successful completion during your term in office?

A: Forrest Dunbar

There is no single infrastructure project more crucial to our future than the Port of Alaska. The Port is a critical hub for consumer goods, petroleum products, construction materials, national defense readiness, and more. The centrality of the Port to Anchorage's economy and our quality of life is why it is so important that the Port of Alaska Modernization Program (PAMP) is funded and proceeds in a

thoughtful manner, in concert with our Port User Group and State and Federal Partners. During a recent visit to the Port, I learned that new research now indicates that the Port may be forced to close sections of dock within as little as five years, due to corrosion and reduced load-bearing capacity in the pilings. I was therefore disappointed to see that the Governor did not include the Port in his proposed statewide General Obligation bond. Instead, we need our Anchorage legislative delegation to work with the Municipality and see that the Port is included in any statewide infrastructure investments related to the American Rescue Plan Act or the American Jobs Plan. Anchorage will do our part by looking for efficiencies in the project, pressing forward with our lawsuit against MARAD, and lobbying the new federal Administration ourselves to include the Port in any nationwide infrastructure bill. Any difference between the funds we receive from those efforts and the needed funds for repairs will be primarily made up by increased cargo fees, within a finance plan that is currently being developed. Again, my Administration will work closely with the Port User Group, JBER, the State, the federal delegation, and other stakeholders in order to build and rebuild a Port that will last long into the future. It is vital that we maintain and improve this economic lifeline for Anchorage residents and all Alaskans.

A: Dave Bronson

We must make Anchorage a place where people of all ages want to live, work, and play. Right now, we are failing in this effort. Too many of our children who go Outside to attend school choose never to come back. This is because our streets and parks are filled with vagrants who misbehave, our downtown is a shell of its former self, our schools perform well below what they should, and the cost of housing is far too high. All of these things must improve. With our current political leadership...they will not.

Furthermore, we have significant structural issues which must be dealt with. The Port of Alaska is an integral part of the State's economy. The port is in need of critical repair, expansion, and improvements. This project is one of the highest priorities for my administration. First, we will hire a professional port director with experience in managing a complex operation that includes state, local, and private interests. Under the new leadership, the port will complete a comprehensive review of future needs, as well as a review of the past expansion and improvement efforts that have been exceptionally expensive and did not meet the operational or safety requirements of the port. My administration will partner with the Alaska Railroad to target infrastructure improvements that maximize inter-modal transportation service between ships, truck, and rail systems.

The Port of Alaska is one of the most important transportation links in Alaska and must be structured to be competitive and successful. Without a vibrant, modern, and efficient Port of Alaska we are at risk of allowing Anchorage to a place where our children do not want to live, work and play.