

May 2-4, 2022

Connect, Catalyze, & Cultivate Anchorage

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AIA
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Anchorage, AK DAT Report



Disclaimer

The ideas represented in the following report are those of the American Institute of Architects' design assistance team, based on our observations of the City of Anchorage and its existing plans, the insights gleaned from the City's virtual public workshops and surveys, and the ideas shared with us about the area and the aspirations for it in small workshops with a range of stakeholders. This process has informed our thoughts and this report represents our best professional recommendations in the public interest. We do not serve a client in this endeavor. The report, and the process that produced it, is a public service to the Anchorage community.

The ideas captured here represent four intensive days of work (May 2-4, 2022) and the information available to us at the time of this writing. We do not expect this report to be followed as verbatim, prescriptive advice. This work represents a beginning – we hope a new beginning – for the area. It should be understood as a developmental tool, and we expect the community will expand on these ideas and amend them as you make it your own. This report serves as an opening mechanism to begin the necessary public work and we expect the ideas to evolve and change as you utilize it and as Downtown Anchorage begins to take shape through the public processes to follow.

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Executive Summary & Overview



The AIA team would like to acknowledge that we are visiting the traditional lands of the Dena’ina Athabascans. For thousands of years the Dena’ina have been and continue to be the stewards of this land. We acknowledge the traditional importance of the downtown area, Dgheyay Kaq, and including Dgheyay Leht, Ship Creek, as the traditional First Salmon Ceremony site. We offer our profound respect to the values & contributions of the Dena’ina, which have modeled sustainable living and continue to guide a vision that connects land, people and culture to a sustainable future. We are acutely aware of our responsibility as outsiders to listen to and embrace indigenous values in our work in order to both break from past colonization and to collectively build toward a more authentically aware and respectful community. We offer this report as a humble step forward in that regard.

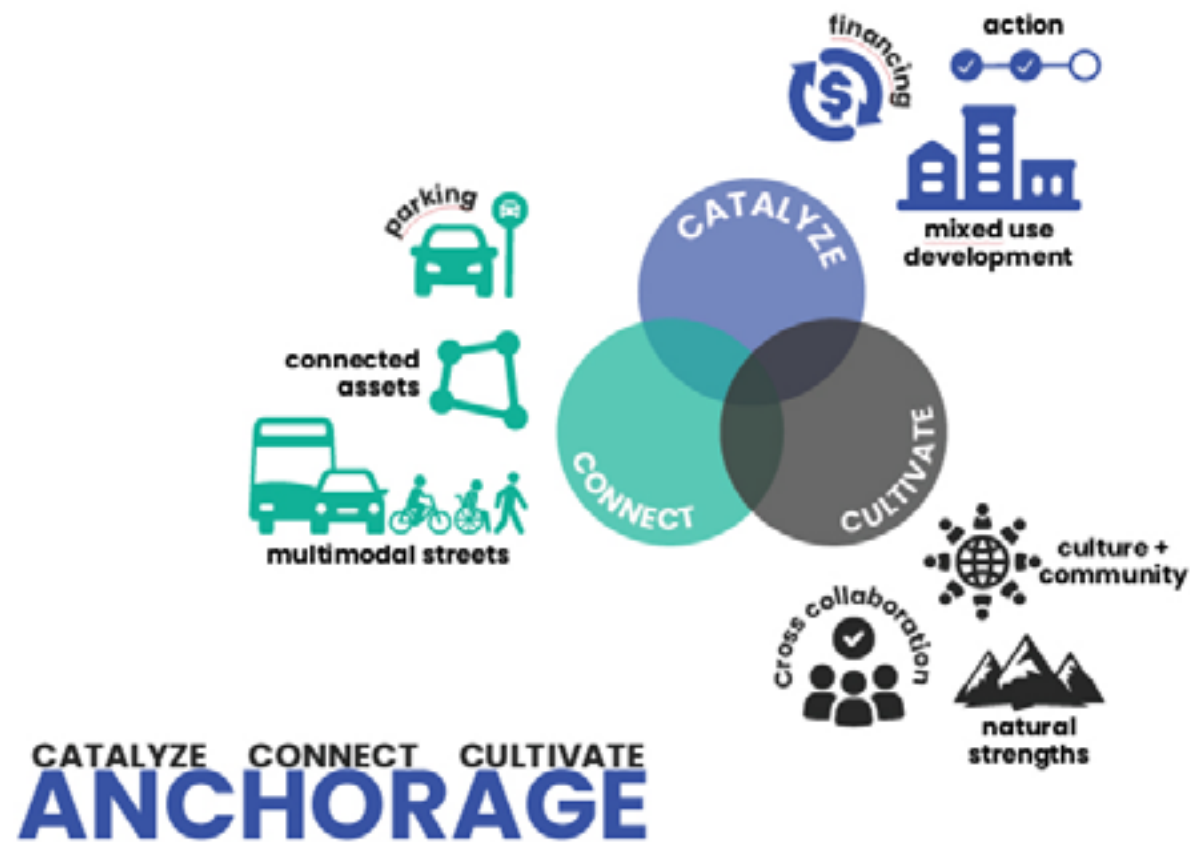
Executive Summary

Anchorage is a unique city with a physical and visual connection to nature and opportunities to play that is like very few other cities. Residents are proud to live in Anchorage and many have voted with their feet to come to live in Anchorage.

Anchorage, however, has some strategic weaknesses that limit the vibrancy and economic potential of downtown and discourage some investment and business locational and growth decisions, especially for businesses that might otherwise be more attractive to a younger professional footloose workforce. Downtown’s lack of street activation, weak walking and bicycling accommodations, very limited downtown housing, major gaps in the urban fabric from empty parking lots, and a lack of strong connective tissue can all be addressed and downtown can be transformed.

A great downtown is needed for Anchorage to living up to its potential. Downtown can be a vibrant place that supports more jobs, more housing, more economic vibrancy, and a greater tax base. It is not there yet.

Our Downtown: Anchorage Downtown District Plan creates a strong vision and action plan for most areas. Anchorage doesn’t need another plan. It needs an action agenda. We hope this report advance that action agenda to supplement the downtown district plan and create a strategic next steps focus.

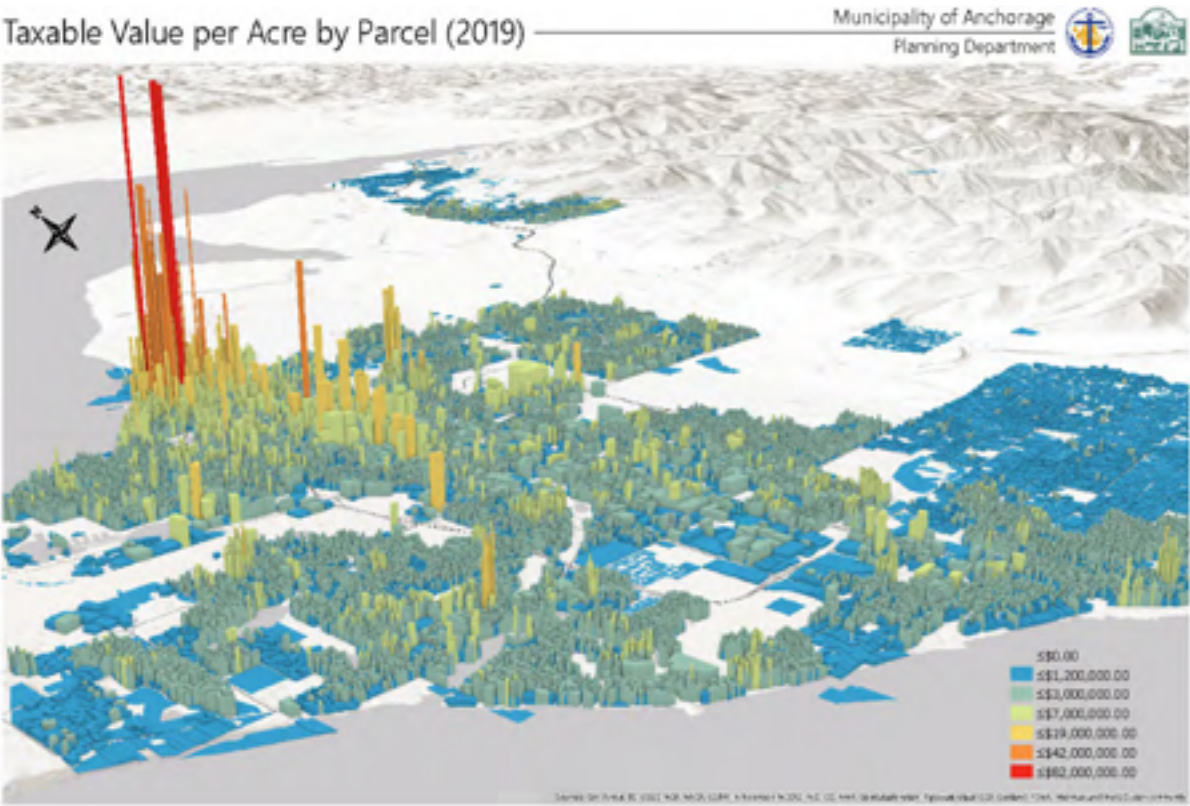


Strategically, the six most important focus areas to strengthen downtown are:

1. Create new downtown housing at all levels of affordability and land tenure to build a vibrant and economically successful downtown. There is no reason that the greater downtown area cannot eventually accommodate more than 10,000 dwelling units.
2. Reduce off-road surface parking which is not needed to support business and instead creates unproductive dead spaces that make walking undesirable and absorbs land needed for housing.
3. Strengthen the transportation network to improve safety, encourage walking and bicycling, activate streets, and encourage more economic activity.
4. Enhance the downtown retail, dining, and service economy to activate downtown in partnership with the Anchorage Downtown Partnership.
5. Strengthen the downtown urban fabric, fill gaps and activating the streets, with a focus on catalyst public and private projects and partnerships.
6. Improve the financial and institutional structures to support downtown improvements in various partnerships with the City and its agencies.

Collectively, all these steps increase economic development, housing choice, downtown vibrancy, and walkability.

Many more steps are included in the downtown district plan. We advocate that even while Anchorage moves forward on that larger agenda that there be a laser implementation focus in these six focus areas. Downtown Anchorage can be transformed into a great downtown, a stronger economic engine, and a stronger contributor to the city’s tax base.



Anchorage has documented that taxable land values are much higher downtown than anywhere else in the city. Necessary public investments to making downtown even more valuable are conservative and fiscally responsible.

The Communities by Design Program

The American Institute of Architects’ Communities by Design program represents a half-century tradition of public service to our nation’s communities, having served over 200 jurisdictions across the country. The program assembles volunteer teams of national experts who work in a community-driven process to develop strategies and action plans. They do not serve a client in this work, but observe local conditions, listen to community values and aspirations, and apply their best professional expertise in the public interest. The

Anchorage project is the first such effort in the state of Alaska for the Communities by Design program.

Project Background

In late 2021, local civic leaders from Roadmap to a Vital and Safe Anchorage (RVSA) were referred to the Communities by Design program at AIA by partners at the Mayors Institute on City Design following conversations about the desire for technical assistance around downtown planning and the future development of the area. Following some initial consultations by

Zoom, an application was submitted and accepted in January 2022. In February, a small team from the AIA conducted an initial scoping visit to Anchorage, touring the downtown and meeting with key stakeholders in person and online to assess current conditions, understand the expertise needed, and begin planning the community process.

The Community Process

The Communities by Design national team visited Anchorage from May 2-4, 2022 to conduct the full community process. On May 2nd, the team engaged in a day of listening and observation throughout the downtown area. The team walked most of the area, stopping for scheduled meetings with stakeholder institutions at key sites throughout the downtown. The team also held a public Zoom workshop on the 2nd to gather information from residents of Anchorage. The workshop included 51 participants, including students, residents, local businesses and institutions. The team spent the next two days developing a series of key recommendations for the downtown, which are captured in the following report.

Watershed Moment for Downtown

This project is happening at an important moment in the city’s history. Anchorage is facing increasing stress surrounding its workforce, housing options, and future economic prospects. The downtown is currently “swimming upstream” on housing, as a combination of factors (building material cost, workforce issues, and development constraints surrounding seismic issues) are making housing projects in the core prohibitively expensive without significant public subsidy. The Anchorage Downtown District Plan (2022) observes that “Anchorage is at a turning point in our history with unstable economic times brought on by the Great Recession and the Covid-19 Pandemic.” Anchorage has been losing population. Specifically, the city is aging and losing younger residents who are increasingly moving to the lower 48.

The city has reportedly suffered a loss of 13,000 from its workforce since 2010 and many people are feeling the pain of a growing workforce crisis with unfilled positions and its ripple effects. Particularly in a city with a seasonal tourism surge, it has put stress on the system and reinforced the need to address quality of life for younger professionals in order to stabilize the workforce and grow its economy again. Anchorage has a cost of living that is as much as 28 percent higher than the national average.

As the 2018 Housing Survey Report described the issue, “a growing economy requires investment in diverse housing that can accommodate residents’ desire for additional options and affordability. Currently, Anchorage lacks many housing options beyond single family homes. Without investment in a greater variety of housing options, Anchorage risks losing valuable members of its workforce and community. Housing is one of the key determining factors of quality of life. Satisfaction with housing options, affordability and access are all critical in attracting and retaining a talented workforce in Anchorage that will create and bring jobs and business investment.”

The local business community supports public investment as a means to catalyze economic development. According to the 2021 Annual Business Confidence Index Report, an overwhelming majority (57 percent) agreed with the statement that “The Municipality of Anchorage should establish a dedicated sales tax to support economic development projects to revitalize our economy.” Development in downtown is both complex and expensive. According to the 2012 Housing Market Study, construction costs in Anchorage are 37% higher than the national average. The analysis cites a number of contributing factors, including a “short construction season, lack of contiguous utility, street and sidewalk grids, presence of unexpected contamination on sites, presence of peat that must be removed for structural integrity, higher transport costs for materials, smaller and less flexible labor pool resulting in higher

labor costs, and less than ideal building sites, among other factors.” The report further determined that most mid-rise development models are not financially feasible in downtown without public subsidy. The [Anchorage Housing Survey Report of 2018](#) noted:

“While the percentage of total income spent on housing has increased nationally, the percentage of average income spent on housing in Anchorage borders on what the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development describes as “cost burdened.” A shortened construction season and the cost of shipping building supplies make housing in Anchorage inherently expensive, and a failure to address the concerns of our residents will have severe ramifications for our economy.”

Ironically, the Housing Survey illustrates that there is demand for downtown living as an attractive neighborhood, though it is constrained by both housing supply and affordability. According to the report, “Fifty-eight percent of respondents said that they would prefer to live downtown or in South Addition (directly adjacent to the Downtown Core), with one-third preferring to live directly within the Downtown Core.” It is within this context that the future of downtown Anchorage –and critical investments in living downtown – are seen as a lynchpin to future economic success.

The Vision

The Anchorage 2020 Vision Statement describes an aspiration for the future city:

“Anchorage is – A diverse, compassionate community where everyone is valued and children and families flourish. A northern community built in harmony with our natural resources and majestic setting. A thriving, sustainable, broad- based economy supported by efficient urban infrastructure. A safe and healthy place to live where daily life is enriched by the wealth of year-round recreational and educational opportunities. A caring, responsive government that is accessible and equitable for all citizens. An active learning community

with abundant cultural amenities.”

As the application to the AIA observes, “The following overarching goals from the 2007 Downtown Plan still reflect the dream of what the community would like Our Downtown to be. The goals articulate a Downtown that is welcoming, leverages public and private sector resources, encourages businesses and government agencies to choose Downtown, has adequate housing for those who wish to live there, provides incentives for new or redevelopment, is connected by a great street and trail system that accommodates pedestrians, bicycles and cars, provides and creates a comfortable connection between the street, sidewalk and buildings, and provides an useable land use and development code that can flex without added costs.”

An Action Plan for Reconnecting Downtown

The timing of this initiative coincides with the completion of Our Downtown: The Anchorage Downtown District Plan, which brings together ideas from multiple efforts in recent years and represents major policy updates to the city’s strategy for downtown, positioning the community to take bold action to move forward on the future downtown it has aspired to become. As the application to AIA states, “Our community has planned and planned and updated the plans. It is time to act.” The following report is therefore focused on the key priorities the AIA team identified to take advantage of the historic opportunity before Anchorage today, and to begin implementation now.

Downtown Anchorage, from downtown to east downtown, is the cultural heartbeat of and the gateway to Alaska. Amazing views, a coastal and other shared use trail network that should be the envy of every city, easy visual and physical access to the water and the wilderness, clear air and water, urban services with a small-town feel, and a constant celebration of rich Dena’ina Athabaskans, other Alaska Native Peoples,

non-native settlement (e.g., Anchorage Mushing District), and modern-day culture.

Anchorage is blessed with rich assets, good city bones. This creates opportunities to address some of the current challenges that prevent downtown Anchorage from fulfilling its potential. Downtown has both very strong anchors (e.g., Anchorage Museum, Dena’ina Civic and Convention Center, Alaska Railroad Depot, the Tony



Knowles Coastal Trail, Ship Creek Small Boat Launch Pier, and Town Square Park) and other more diffuse assets (e.g., Mushing District, mountain views).

These resources make downtown to its east end rich in opportunity. The discontinuity and gaps, however, in the urban fabric make the built environment less desirable, less safe, and less of an economic engine. Street crossings often feel unsafe, given long crossing distances and high-speed traffic. Sidewalks often run with long gaps between buildings, street trees, and sites of interest, making walking undesirable. There is little downtown housing, leaving many of the streets deserted for many hours and adding to a perception that it is not a safe downtown. There is a risk of loss of additional historic features, taking away some of the character of the city. Collectively, these challenges can make it less desirable for local residents and visitors to work, live, shop, and play in downtown. Many of Anchorage’s downtown streets, especially in the evening, feel empty, forlorn, and lacking in the activities that attract people. As a result, people will often drive even very short



Some of the streets have accessibility challenges, especially in the winter when the quality of sidewalk snow removal varies

distances because the streets are not pedestrian friendly or desirable, creating a greater demand for parking that exasperates the problem, further damages the urban fabric, and discourages investors.

Anchorage fortunately has a healthy institutional ecosystem that can support downtown redevelopment, especially if there was a greater alignment on mission and better definition of each of their roles. The primary partners include the Anchorage Office of Economic and Community Development, Anchorage Planning Department, Anchorage Downtown Partnership (ADP), Anchorage Economic Development Corporation (AEDC and their Live Work Play vision), Anchorage Community Development Authority (ACDA), Heritage Land Bank, Anchorage Museum, Roadmap to a Vital Safe Anchorage (RVSA), the Anchorage Chamber of Commerce (ACC), and various neighborhood groups (e.g., the 3rd Avenue Radicals).

The streetscape improvements (2021-2022) on 4th Avenue help make the street more desirable, but without programming and land use changes street improvements themselves may not be sufficient. The most amenity rich sidewalk environment will not be desirable for users if the streets are empty and parking lots or other gaps dominate.

The newly adopted Our Downtown: The Anchorage Downtown District Plan), the plan's zoning appendix, the MPO's Non-Motorized Plan, Anchorage Housing Survey Report (2018), and other strategic documents have set the stage for a revitalization of downtown Anchorage.

These create unique planning, regulatory, investment, city organizational, and policy opportunities. The AIA team focused on some of the strategic opportunities for short-and-long-term implementation that can help transform downtown Anchorage.

We heard community members express their love an appreciation for the access to the natural environment, whether it be the mountains and wilderness a short

distance away, city parks, the downtown coastal and trail opportunities, fishing in Ship Creek, attending music in the park, or visiting one of Anchorage's many cultural institutions (e.g., Anchorage Museum).

In our community forum and stakeholder sessions, however, we did not hear community members reporting that they like strolling on downtown streets, past empty parking lots, exploring businesses, and living within all the activity. These items, which are the lifeblood of most successful cities, are only weakly represented in downtown Anchorage. Their lack is the biggest single impediment to a successful and economically vibrant downtown. With more businesses footloose businesses, able to relocate anywhere in the world where their owners desire, the gap reduces Anchorage's overall economic potential, not just downtown's potential.

We heard community members specifically expressing the need for a more pedestrian and bicycle friendly downtown, a greater focus on downtown housing in all price ranges and housing tenure, fewer empty lots and parking, a greater focus on the needs of the most vulnerable populations, more transportation options, and the City partnering for more downtown redevelopment and housing.



Housing & Parking



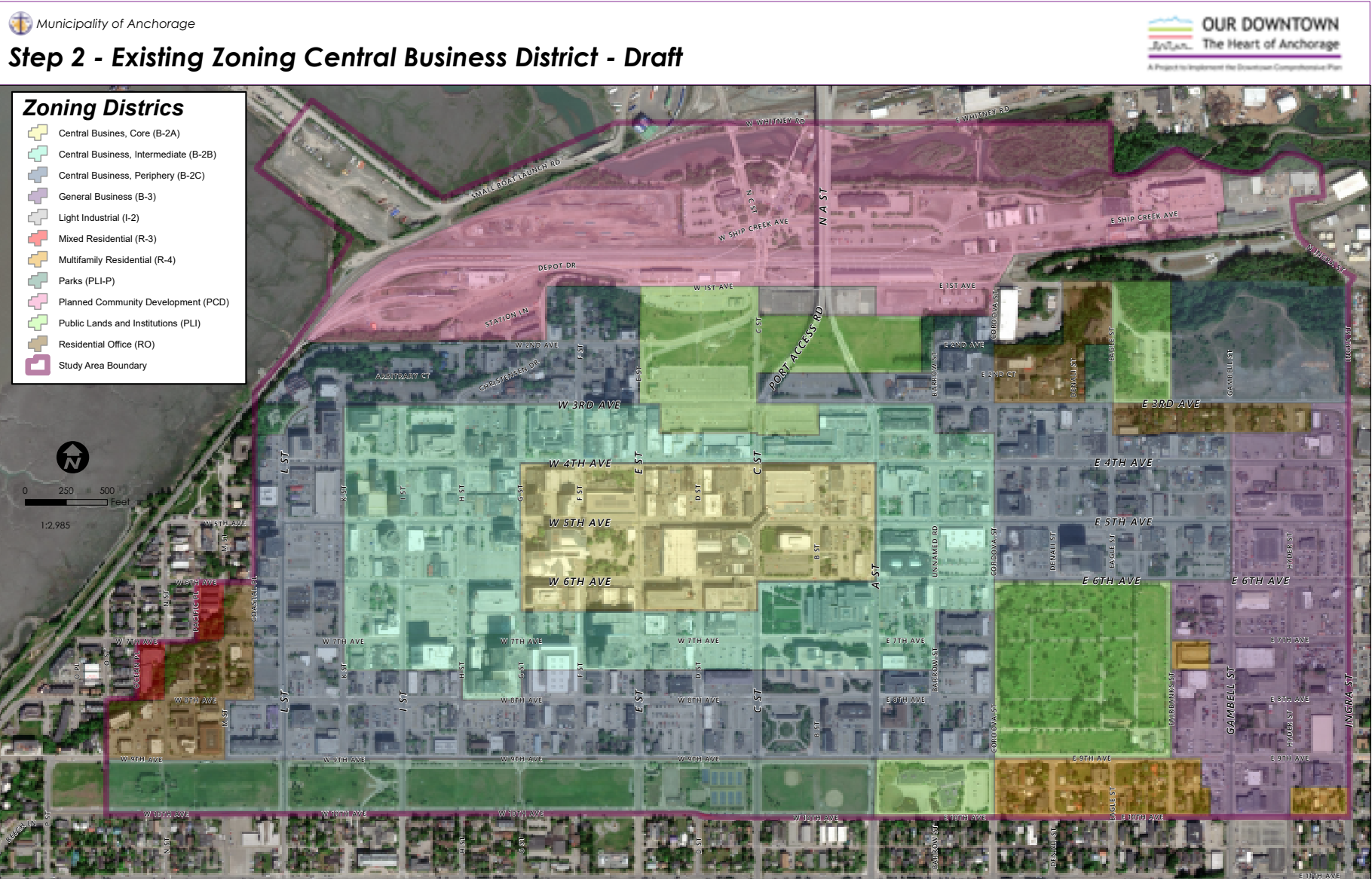
“Housing is Economic Development” –Anchorage Planning Department Presentation

Connect, Catalyze & Cultivate Downtown
Housing & Support Services

Housing in and near downtown is the life blood of most cities. With fewer than 1,000 people living in downtown Anchorage, creating more downtown housing is probably the single most important thing needed to make Anchorage more vibrant, to activate the streets, and to make the streets feel safer. Affordable and attainable housing, for rental and ownership, has been a clear focus of the City, affordable housing developers, and others. The existing conversations have helped identify the financial gaps for making market rate housing work and the potential for long term tax abatements to fund that gap.

There has been discussion about how much housing downtown can support, whether it is for the under 1,000 people who live downtown now or close to 5,000 residents that we heard in our stakeholder forums. We believe that there is no reason that downtown from the waterfront to east downtown cannot realistically support 10,000 dwelling units (~20,000 people). Such growth would make downtown more vibrant, encourage an expanded workforce, and reduce pressure for outlying growth that is more expensive to maintain and will add to traffic congestion. To grow the housing stock, Anchorage needs to expand its efforts. The Anchorage Community Development Authority has undertaken some critical steps to address the funding challenges. Fortunately, there are many additional opportunities to increase housing in and near downtown.

Regulatory reform to encourage housing is the most cost-effective action that Anchorage can take. As part of the revised regulatory code coming out of the new Downtown Comprehensive Plan, Anchorage can add new incentives and code reductions that can reduce the regulatory burden of producing housing. For example:



1. Eliminate the minimum lot size for residential and mixed use developments in downtown and near downtown business districts to encourage reuse of smaller parcels without needing to assemble property.
2. Allow and encourage mixed use (residential and other uses) in every zoning district, including the Central Business District Core, as a fully permitted use.
3. Use the same zero front, side, and rear yard setback requirements in business districts as proposed for non-residential uses. There is no reason to be more restrictive for residential than other uses. Side setback requirements in particular creates gaps between buildings which can eliminate the continuous street façade that can make a downtown interesting and more walkable.
4. Eliminate the additional open space requirements that only apply to residential uses. Using the same standards as non-residential uses is adequate, lowers the price of housing, and potentially allows future changes from non-residential uses if the market supports such changes.
5. Privatize or reduce residential parking requirements in downtown (since the private sector will provide enough parking to meet market needs). Housing developers may choose to provide parking spaces or residents may seek long term parking arrangements, hence this should be viewed as privatizing requirements not eliminating them. There is a no shortage of any parking downtown, but by far the largest oversupply of vacant parking spaces is at nights and weekends, which are the periods of the greatest residential parking demand. Encouraging more shared use of parking spaces (e.g., commercial and residential during the day and residential at night) is more cost effective than supporting the seas of empty parking lot that is nighttime in Anchorage.
6. If parking requirements are not privatized, reduce the complexity of the zoning language and approval

requirements for reduced parking space requirements for affordable housing, shared parking, senior housing, denser housing, and other reasons. Anything that lowers the cost and simplifies permit review benefits housing without taxing the availability of parking.

7. The current Downtown Comprehensive Plan conversation about zoning implementation has the benefit of simplifying the process for smaller projects, which often includes housing. Any additional steps that can help these critical projects is important. While the regulatory option for tall buildings is important for potential future hotels and office towers, if there is market demand, Anchorage does not need more disconnected towers nearly as much as it needs a focus on many smaller buildings to fill in the major gaps downtown.

8. Streamline and speed the review process for downtown housing, in particular provide one stop shopping for permit and all other government review and support.

Providing additional land is critical to support both market rate and affordable housing. Between property tax abatements (Downtown Housing Incentives and East Downtown Tax Abatement Zone) for downtown housing, providing surplus land, and providing other financing, the City has already made progress. The 50-unit mixed-income Elizabeth Place (Cook Inlet Housing Authority) and the upcoming 44-unit market-rate Block 96 (Debenham LLC., with Anchorage Community Development Authority) at the Park Strip North demonstrate what is possible in partnership with the City, albeit with significant funding challenges and the need to financially partner with the City. Likewise, the Alaska Railroad Ship Creek Development project will create additional housing. These efforts are not nearly enough, however, to fill the gap in downtown housing.

City surface parking lots (Anchorage Community Development Authority or ACDA), as opposed to parking structures and on-street parking, are serving as a land

bank, a place to park land but to convert it to more critical uses over time. Given the low parking utilization rates, especially nights and weekends when offices are closed, the city can afford to lose a significant amount of its off-street surface parking and not create any inconvenience.

The City, through the ACDA, should make additional parking and other underutilized sites available for housing (market or affordable housing) to get those parcels back into productive use that contribute to downtown instead of being a break in the urban fabric. These transactions can take any of a number of partnerships. The City can obviously donate land,

Hypothetical Gross Revenue: Parking versus Housing

Estimated*	Parking (with surface lots that detract from the urban fabric)	Housing (with huge untapped demand depending on prices)	Office Use (if there is demand)
Assumptions	\$1.25/hour, 8 hours day, 60% occupancy, 312 days, 115 parking space/acre	\$1.5/monthly per sq. ft., Floor Area Ratio of 3.0	\$30/year Floor Area Ratio of 4.0
Revenue (gross)	\$5 per square foot	\$50 per square foot	\$120 per square foot
Co-benefits and conflicts	Dead areas reduce walkability.	Housing is economic development	Office use, when occupied, generates high employment

**Notes*

1. Each project varies dramatically, on the revenue side from potential land rent to FAR and on the cost side for all costs, leading to a very wide spread between gross and net revenue. We have not tried to calculate net revenue.

2. Gross revenue is a good indicator of overall economic activity (e.g., employment and services) and the overall community multiplier. The costs (financing, capital, taxes, and other operating expenses) are obviously much higher for housing and offices, so the different in net revenue or profit is significantly less.

3. Gross economic activity does not have a linear connection to municipal and school property tax revenue, but the above numbers are still useful in terms of the order of magnitude difference in taxes expected from the different land uses.

4. Hotel use creates by far the most direct (employment and tax) and indirect (brining visitors to downtown) economic benefits and economic activity, but we did not model them.

especially for affordable and mixed income housing. The

City can also sell land at or below market prices with a long-time deferred payment until a housing project's cash flow allowed repayment.

While most of the land that the City can make available for housing are surface parking lots, there are some other opportunities. For example, there have been discussions about surplusng the Anchorage Department of Public Health building and allowing its eventual demolition for redevelopment. Before any such action is taken, however, the City or a community partner should do a detailed study of whether the building could be

converted to housing at a lower cost than demolition and new construction.

Downtown and near downtown housing at all income ranges will generate far more economic activity than a parking lot. Even from a narrow municipal revenue perspective, over time, municipal revenue directly and indirectly attributable to downtown housing will generate far greater returns than parking. At the same time, these uses generate less demand for municipal services (especially transportation congestion, parking demand, and municipal costs) than parking. Converting parking lots to housing is an investment that will pay off in downtown walkability, economic vibrancy, and municipal revenue. Even discounting for tax abatements and other incentives that might be necessary to attract downtown housing, housing is still an investment that will pay off handsomely to the Anchorage community.

Continuing to provide financial resources for housing is also critical. The city’s tax abatements for affordable and market rate housing and other grant funds (e.g., American Rescue Plan, Bipartisan Infrastructure Law), need to be continued, publicized, and expanded.

For affordable and mixed income housing projects, the City can use CDBG or HOME funds to purchase land for affordable housing and fund infrastructure improvements. Focusing those funds in these areas but not in building construction avoids both U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development restrictions and avoiding the federal construction thresholds that make building construction more expensive when using federal funds.

Anchorage is the first municipality in Alaska to adopt the Commercial-Property Assessed Clean Energy Program (C-PACE) that provides long term lower interest funding for energy efficiency programs repaid through property tax assessment surcharges (a super lien senior to other indebtedness. Buildings must be income producing commercial properties, but that covers both private and non-profit rental housing. In Alaska, PACE can only be

used for existing buildings, not new construction, but a gut rehab (e.g., converting the Anchorage Public Health Building to housing) would qualify. Such financing comes through banks, but it is likely at a lower rate, because of the super lien and long term, than more traditional financing. Although banks take the lead in the process, the City could help provide technical assistance as part of the process.

The City should expand its effort (strategic development and finance guide) to clearly its policies, procedures, and priorities for tax incentives (commercial housing, deteriorated property, economic development), property availability, and one-stop shopping.

A lead with housing strategy for downtown might just ensure that before any policy, investment, and regulatory decisions are made, the analysis includes how that action will affect the availability and affordability of downtown housing. For example, a discussion on the future of the Anchorage Department of Public Health building should start with a consideration of using the site for housing. A discussion of transportation improvements and rezoning should start with how it serves downtown housing. Not every project is about downtown housing, but housing should be at the table for every decision.

The City should reach out to the University of Anchorage to encourage a downtown presence, ideally a presence that includes university or private sector developed student housing. The University would benefit from access to downtown, especially for service learning efforts and economic development incubation, and some students might prefer to live downtown close to the heart of the City. Whether it is Arts and Sciences “Community of Discovery,” the Public Policy program, or other programs, there are some unique opportunities for a downtown satellite location.

Downtown housing support services, grocery stores, pharmacies, and the like, are virtually non-existent given the lack of downtown residents. Some services (e.g.,

supermarkets) may need to wait until there are more downtown residents or at least a store is developed closer to dense neighborhoods. Others (e.g., pharmacies, urban grocery stores) are more likely to occur with some increased residents and workers full occupancy of existing office buildings and can be encouraged with various incentives.

Improving pedestrian connectivity (discussed elsewhere in this report) can effectively shorten walking distances. Tax abatements cannot make a project pencil out by itself, but as developers get close to finding these services can work, abatements can help make a marginal project work.

The City and its partners have worked on the needs of unhoused populations, in downtown and elsewhere. To address both social needs and reduce longer term costs from rough sleeping (outdoors), the City, state (Statewide Homeless Housing Office), social service partners, and other partners (e.g., Anchorage Coalition to End Homelessness, Rasmuson Foundation) provide multiple emergency and transitional shelters, support services, and program advocacy addressing rough sleeping with a carrot.

At the same time, residents and visitors comment on panhandlers and those experiencing houselessness in City parks and sidewalks, sometimes with a sense of perceived risk from unsocial behavior. The City spends significant funds for winter homeless camp abatement and removal, both encouraging a migration to shelters and to push rough sleepers out of parks and other places.

Many communities are working on developing resilience hubs and/or day centers to provide places to attract residents who would otherwise be on the streets during the day to a place with lockers, showers, laundry, and other facilities, as well as to be resilient sites during times of disaster. This can serve an at-risk population, reduce the volume of personal belongings on the street, and provides a carrot to address a perceived problem

instead of a stick. Sticks are expensive, controversial, and not long lasting.

Anchorage can explore, though its Continuum of Care consortium (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development/McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act), explore whether this kind of hub is an appropriate priority to add to existing supportive of services efforts. (E.g., see RMI’s research on community resilience hubs in Texas.)

Transportation



Connect, Catalyze & Cultivate the Transportation Network

With a compact, gridded street system, Anchorage has the bones of a great walking downtown. In a City where most places are spread out, residents and visitors of Anchorage cherish the walkable density of downtown destinations. However, most streets don't provide an environment that makes walking enjoyable. Though there are notable exceptions, the majority of streets downtown reflect a legacy of car-centric planning and design and reinforce a perception that downtown is a space to move through instead of a place in its own right. As a result, people drive even short distances instead of walking, creating a self-perpetuating cycle.

The adjacent land uses along many downtown streets reflect this tension between pass-through and place: intermittent business clusters and street walls mix with off-street parking, vacant lots, and empty storefronts; even basic pedestrian accommodations – like frequently marked crosswalks – are missing, requiring people to navigate across two, three, or more lanes at wide, unmarked intersections; and bus stop amenities and bicycle accommodations along the street are mostly non-existent. As a result, cars move quickly through wide, one-way arterials creating a loud and uncomfortable experience for people walking, biking, or waiting for the bus.

The City's recently adopted plan, Our Downtown, acknowledges many of these challenges and identifies transportation goals that support a reformed transportation system in downtown. The plan calls for the promotion of walking, transit, and biking as downtown's primary means of transportation and identifies that changes to street design and parking management are inherent to these goals. Other recent planning efforts, including the AMATS Non-Motorized Transportation Plan, reinforce these goals with specific recommendations that would move downtown

Anchorage toward a more walkable and bikeable future.

As the physical and experiential connection between the places people want to go, transportation networks affect all facets of urban life from how the streets look and feel to how people decide to move around their communities to what kind of buildings and commercial activity are supported outside of the right-of-way. As Anchorage endeavors to achieve a wide range of housing, economic development, and open space goals, transportation will be the critical connection that enables – or undercuts – their success.

Three Projects in Three Years

Transportation investments are often seen as large, expensive, and disruptive. Indeed, there are many needed and worthwhile transportation and public realm investments for Anchorage that will take many years and resources to accomplish, and it is essential to set these items in motion. However, Anchorage cannot wait to make transportation and public realm investments if it is serious about catalyzing economic development and public space activation. Using a “lighter, quicker, cheaper” approach to physical investments and a strategic approach to policy change, Anchorage is well-positioned to take three major actions that are fully achievable within three years.

- 1. Connect the Trails:** Use quick, creative, and inexpensive methods to connect Anchorage's world class trail system to downtown.
- 2. Paint the Streets:** Harness the power of paint to mark crosswalks throughout downtown, create safer and narrower intersections, and showcase ground murals.
- 3. Freeze the Parking:** Implement a parking freeze on any new commercial parking spaces open to the general public.

These projects represent achievable and high-impact actions the City of Anchorage and its partners can take

within three years to catalyze, connect, and cultivate downtown. These projects, as well as other important but longer-term transportation projects, are described more fully below and generally fit within a framework that identifies **four key priorities** for transportation in Anchorage with short, mid- to long-term, and ongoing timeframes for implementation.

- 1. Create Urban Trail Extensions from Existing Paths into Downtown.
- 2. Design for Multimodal Priority.
- 3. Align Curbside and Off-street Parking Policies with Desired Uses.
- 4. Strengthen Connections Between Transportation Design and Policy and Housing and Economic Development.

1. Create Urban Trail Extensions from Existing Paths into Downtown

Anchorage's system of multiuse trails including the Ship Creek, Tony Knowles Coastal Trail, and Chester Creek Trail are exceptional downtown assets. Loved by both residents and visitors alike, the trails provide interesting and visually striking way to experience urban and natural habitats around Anchorage.

Though the City's trail systems connect along a large perimeter, they stop short of downtown. Existing access points to the trail system are clustered around the north and western part of downtown and fail to connect through downtown itself. These missing connections vastly limit the trail system's visibility and undercut its functionality for both recreation, transportation, and the tourism economy. With world-class recreational and transportation trail assets right on the periphery of downtown, final-mile connections to and through the heart of the City would provide a tremendous boost to Anchorage's multimodal connectivity and can help draw

people naturally into downtown for meals, events, and programming.

Where Anchorage's existing trail network showcase the best of Anchorage's natural strengths – mountain and inlet views and wildlife – an urban extension of the trail offers the opportunity to showcase the rich cultural heartbeat of downtown Anchorage, while also expanding the functionality of existing trails to serve both recreational and transportation functions. During a nice day in early May, a bike totem along the Chester Creek trailed showed nearly 800 people had traveled by on bike, with untold more on foot. With a few quick and creative investments, direct walking and biking connections from the east and south into downtown Anchorage would enable thousands of people during high season to move seamlessly between their outdoor adventures and downtown's restaurants, cultural institutions, and shopping areas. Though fully addressing the range of design challenges across all downtown streets will be a long-term and iterative process, near-term and relatively inexpensive infrastructure investments can help Anchorage quickly build out the bones of an urban trail network that will fully connect downtown to existing off-street path assets.

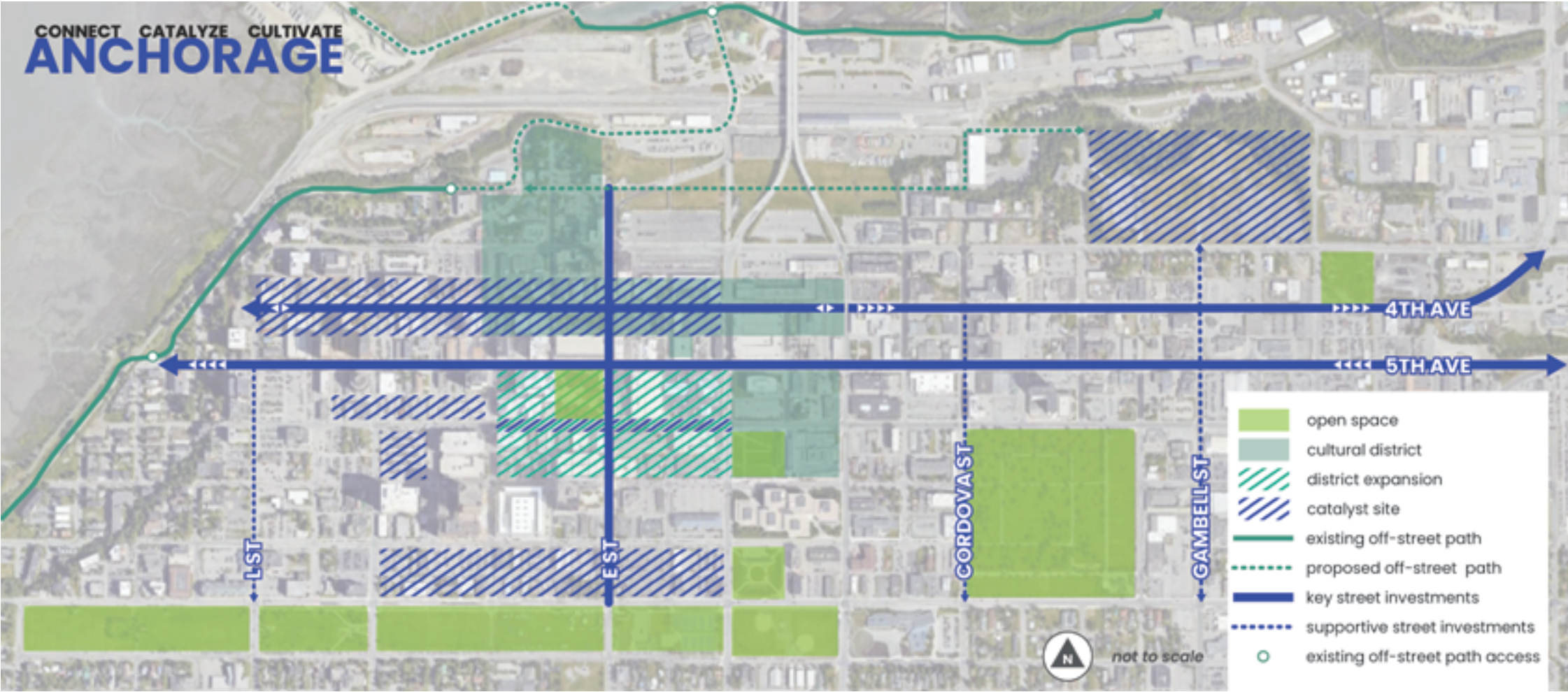
Recent planning efforts have already put this vision into motion. The AMATS Non-Motorized Plan outlines a strong vision for pedestrian, bike, and other active transportation throughout the City, including several near-term priorities in the downtown core that would help bridge the gap between trails. In particular, a strong multimodal connection along 5th Avenue and a key north/south connection on E Street are central to the goals and prioritized implementation strategy of the Non-Motorized Plan. Coupled with the completion and extension of the recent 4th Avenue lighting project, three key streets – 4th Avenue, 5th Avenue, and E Street – would form a fully-connected, urban extension of Anchorage's trail system that strategically connects key cultural sites, newly formed and envisioned districts, and catalytic development sites within and east of

downtown. Though large, capital-intensive projects offer many benefits that should be pursued in the long-term, a creative and flexible approach to street design and implementation methods on these key streets can deliver significant safety and connectivity benefits in the near term. In addition, projects implemented without significant investment offer the opportunity to learn from a design in real time and to iterate before making a large capital investment.

In addition to these three key streets, building out additional on- and off-street connections over time would support and reinforce Anchorage’s downtown multimodal network. In particular, north/south connections on L Street, Cordova Street, and Gambell Street would enable much stronger connectivity from trails to the south and would limit the need to coordinate projects across jurisdictional ownership. In addition, stronger connections to and from the Ship

Creek trail should be pursued. While seismic-stable building requirements make vertical development along the embankment between Ship Creek and downtown expensive and complex, a multiuse trail across the bluff would create a unique landscape for a trail and could make connectivity between access the Coastal Trail, Ship Creek Trail, and catalyst sites in east downtown much stronger.

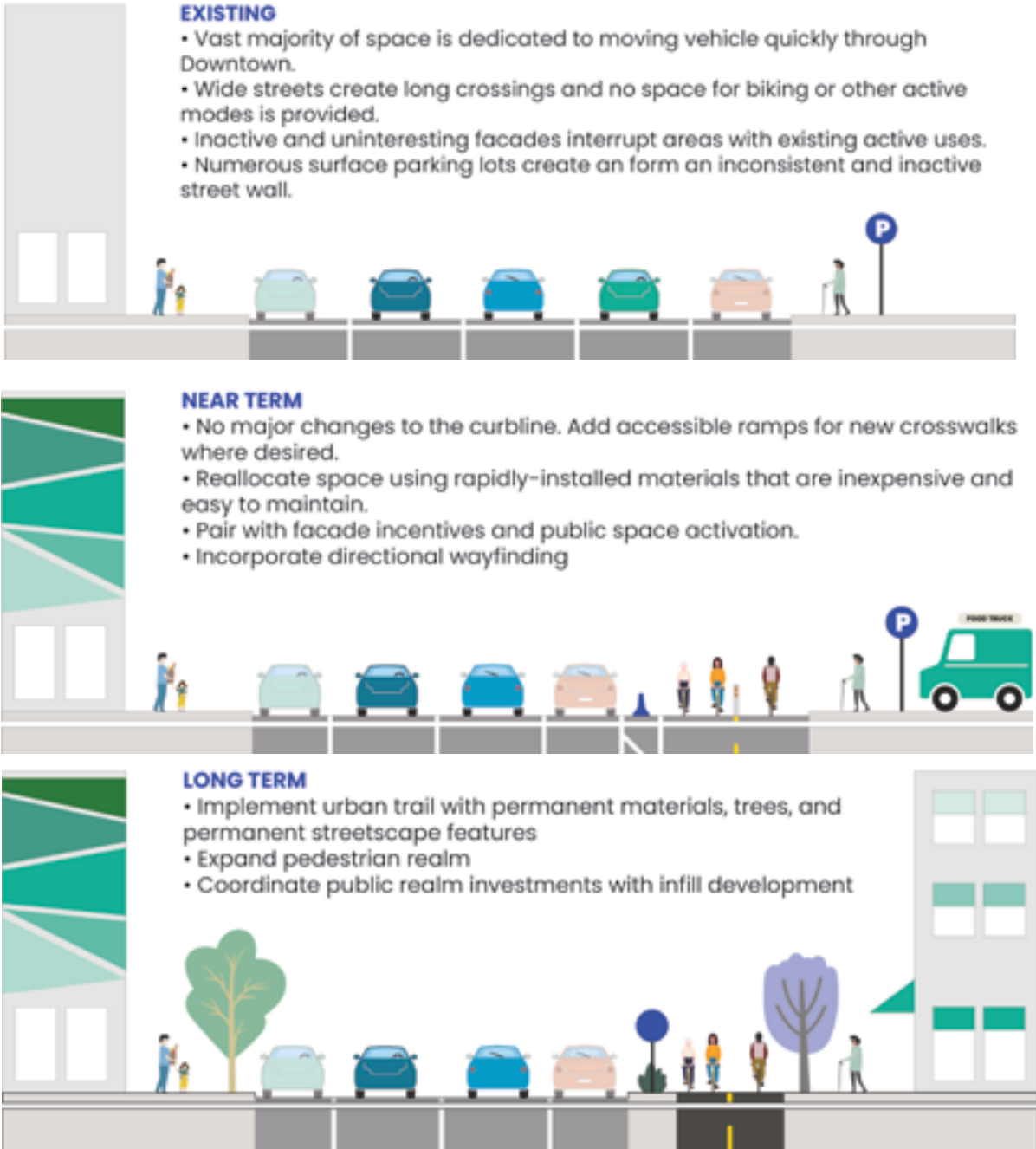
An urban trail extension through downtown Anchorage also offers co-benefits as an economic development tool. With an upfront public investment in downtown’s multimodal network, the City can foster trail-oriented development that could help catalyze private and community investment. Combined with smart policies that make downtown development attractive to funders, catalytic infrastructure investments can simultaneously achieve connectivity and economic development goals.



Summary of Recommendations

Near-Term (1-3 years)

- 1. Use quick and flexible methods to build out a spine of on-street urban trails on streets identified by the AMATS Non-Motorized Plan that extend Anchorage’s world-class path system into downtown.
- 5th Avenue: Construct a two-way urban trail along 5th Avenue using flexible, inexpensive, and easily-implemented materials such as jersey barriers, flexposts, precast curb, planters, and paint. Because 5th Avenue is under the jurisdiction of the State, strong coordination and minimization of impacts will expedite implementation. Though the existing one-way configuration introduces complications from a safety and legibility perspective, one-way streets make two-way urban trails safer and more feasible by limiting the number of conflict points at intersections. In general, a two-way facility will also more strongly reinforce the legibility of the on-street facility as a trail. Two-way urban trails are also more space efficient than a pair of one-way bikeways because the buffer space can be consolidated on one side of the street. Finally, the more generous widths of a two-way urban trail will make winter maintenance easier by ensuring a larger range of snow-removal vehicles can service the facility.



Examples of quick-build construction methods from Calgary, Denver, Houston, & Xenia (Ohio).



Access controlled and traffic-calmed streets can help create an on-street, shared environment on E Street.

- E Street: North/south connections through downtown are complicated by the existing network of one-way streets and a limited number of streets that connect through Delaney Park. Though E Street is currently one-way toward downtown, the street's natural connections to key destinations in downtown, centrality to proposed cultural districts, and existing streetscape features (such as existing curbside blocks and narrower vehicle travelway) make E Street an ideal connection for an urban trail extension into downtown. Though it would require an investment in signal equipment, a two-way conversion on E Street to a slow street would enable people walking and biking to connect through the core of downtown along a street that already has the makings of a great walking and biking street. Traffic and speed management on this street will be essential to achieve a shared space that is comfortable for all users. By creating access control points – for example, by restricting access for cars on E Street between 5th Avenue and 6th Avenue where Town Square Park opens onto the street in a curbside fashion – E Street would become unattractive for through movements to help keep traffic volumes low. Meanwhile, this section of the street would be ripe for in-street activities such as dancing, games, and outdoor first-Friday installation, and would remain accessible to vendors (such as food trucks) and people walking and biking. Because existing parking lot access from E Street is fully redundant with access points from 6th Avenue and no bus routes operate along this section of E Street, this access control concept could be implemented and tested relatively quickly by closing the street to vehicles with planters, barrels, bollards, or other movable materials.

2. Work with the downtown Anchorage Partnership and other partners to curate a cultural trail along key streets connecting points of interest and cultural districts through pedestrian and bike-oriented infrastructure, wayfinding, programming, and art installations.

Mid- to Long-Term (3-10 years)

1. Extend recent 4th Street Lighting Project to the east through the Fairview East Downtown Revitalization Area. Pair with incentives for catalytic private investment.
2. Extend trail connection from Ship Creek to the Coastal Trail and catalyst sites in East downtown. Leverage the unique landscape of the bluff between Ship Creek and downtown to create an interesting multiuse path experience.
3. Explore two-way conversions of lettered Streets west of C Street to enhance north-south connectivity, reduce double and triple-threat crossings, and general legibility within downtown.
4. Complete capital reconstruction projects to make urban trails permanent with elevated materials, wayfinding, landscaping, and streetscape amenities.

Ongoing

1. Invest in stronger multimodal connections on supportive north/south street such as L Street, Cordova Street, and Gambell Street as repaving and other routine maintenance is carried out. Separate bike and other active modes from vehicle traffic as much as possible with physically separated lanes.

2. Design for Multimodal Priority

The design of many downtown streets reflect a legacy of auto-oriented planning and design. Curb cuts are plentiful and wide. Most intersections do not include marked crosswalks. Lanes are wide and traffic speeds are high. With few exceptions, the design of streets in downtown Anchorage prioritize people in cars at the direct expense of people walking, biking, or taking transit.

The built environment downtown is often in direct contrast with the plans prepared by the City and



Examples of long-term construction methods in Indianapolis, Portland (OR), and St Paul.

engaged constituents, which call for downtown to be multimodal and oriented around people walking, biking, and taking transit as the primary users of the streets. Many of these design details are codified into the Municipality of Anchorage’s (MOAs) design guidance, making it difficult or impossible for designers to incorporate multimodal elements into the design of streets when they are resurfaced or reconstructed. Plans created by one department of the City are undercut by the design and operational standards that govern how streets are actually built. For example, the City’s Traffic Impact Assessment Policy is laser focused on vehicle traffic and suggests a limited tolerance for any delay to people driving, even during short rush-hour periods. As a result, designs that support high-vehicle throughput are prioritized, even if the space dedicated to vehicles goes mostly unused for the vast majority of the day. Though the City’s Downtown Plan calls for more biking downtown, the MOA Project Management & Engineering Design Criteria Manual suggests that bikes should operate in shared lanes with vehicles in the downtown area, regardless of how well shared conditions support people biking. In general, shared spaces – especially in environments where vehicles volumes and speeds are high – the vast majority of people will not consider riding a bike in shared traffic because it feels too unsafe to do so. The City’s Policy on Driveway Standards defaults to a design that prioritizes vehicles entering and exiting driveways over people traveling along the sidewalk by depressing the grade of the sidewalk to street level at every driveway crossing. The list goes on.

Though these fine points are minute and may be uninteresting to some, they are the incredibly important details that, in part, keep Anchorage bonded to a car-centric street downtown. The City has developed numerous documents across departments that all converge on the design of streets, yet in many cases these documents are not aligned. It is essential that the City of Anchorage align its design guidance and decision-making parameters with the intent spelled out in recent planning processes. In doing so, the City will

institutionalize a multimodal approach to street design that can take hold naturally over time as resurfacing and reconstruction projects take place over time.

Summary of Recommendations

Near-Term

1. Mark Crosswalks at all downtown intersections and incorporate elements to mitigate multi-lane crossings. Utilize the [FHWA STEP Guide](#) to assess and select pedestrian safety treatments at unsignalized intersections.
2. Incorporate large-scale murals as a short-term, scalable, and low-cost way to highlight a local artist, calm traffic, and inject color into primary intersections or gateway locations. Large-scale murals are already in use on a handful of buildings downtown. In the future, murals could be implemented both within intersections (ground murals), on sidewalks, and on large buildings or structures. Murals may also be used to reinforce or establish district identities. In addition, ground murals in particular have been shown to offer speed management benefits with up to 50% reductions in crashes involving people walking or biking.
3. Align MOA Design Criteria Manual and MOA Traffic Impact Analysis Policy requirements and downtown development goals. When the Downtown Streets Engineering Study recommended in Our Downtown is pursued, incorporate scope to evaluate and update key manuals and requirements that affect the design of streets downtown. Consider, for example:
 - Eliminating use of LOS as a measure of success for downtown projects. One weakness of using vehicular level of service as a primary measure of traffic operations is that the use of a letter grade scale implies that “A” is the best condition. LOS A or B means that there is excess vehicle capacity, which can have negative consequences including speeding, safety risks for vulnerable users, and

adverse environmental impacts. There are no national standards for LOS, and cities or states have discretion to adopt LOS targets that reflect their values.

- Incorporating required TDM into the TIA and Development Guidelines. At a minimum include required unbundled parking/rent, especially for affordable housing projects.
- Updating lane, median and other dimensional standards for Urban Arterials to support the multimodal, safety, and connectivity goals of MOA. For example:
 - o Align design speed and posted speeds for a maximum of no more than 25 mph on downtown streets. Design speed refers to the speed engineers use to inform geometric decisions about the physical street. A lower design speed will include design features that promote slower driving speeds, while a higher design speed will include design features that make driving fast more comfortable for drivers. Today, MOA design guidance posts lower speed limits than the streets are designed for. This mismatch in design speed and posted speed makes drivers more likely to feel comfortable speeding, even if the speed limit is low. By aligning both the design speed and the posted speed, the design of Anchorage’s streets will reflect desired driver behavior.
 - o Eliminate median width requirements.
 - o Create guidance for one-lane streets (one way, one lane) that meet emergency access needs (for example, 16’ clear)
 - o Promote separated bike facilities for all streets with more than 6,000 ADT or those with high observed speeds
 - o Institute a leading pedestrian interval policy for

downtown streets where concurrent pedestrian phasing is used to give pedestrians crossing the street a “head start” before vehicle traffic starts moving.

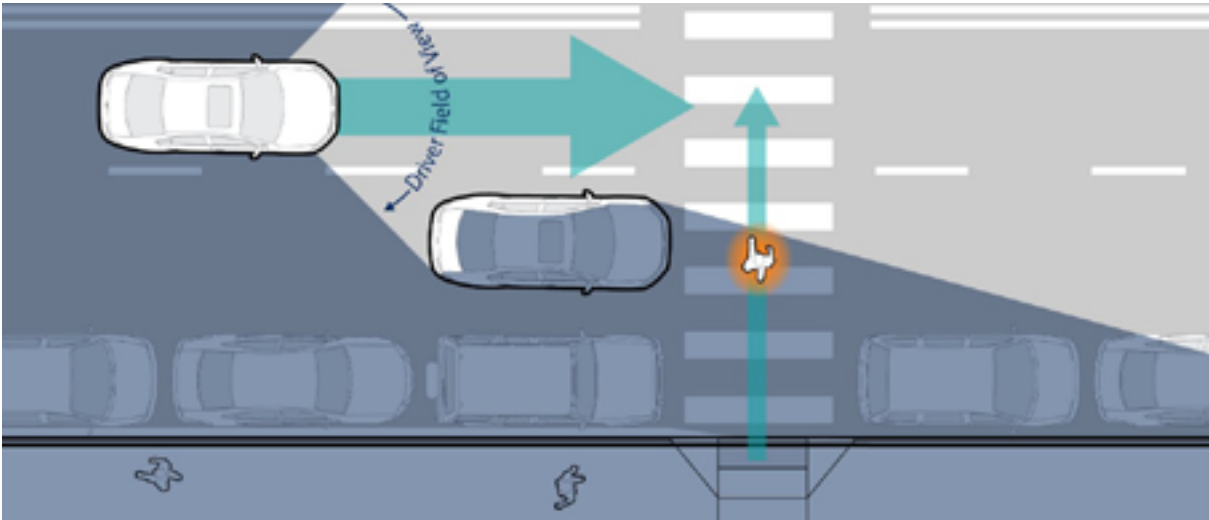
- Ensure street designs are evaluated in advance of routine repaving to take advantage of the opportunity to incorporate multimodal elements into routine projects.

Mid- to Long-Term

- Reduce vehicle travel lanes: Eliminate double and triple threat by reducing lanes or converting to two-way. Where one-way, multi-lanes persist, install protected measures at intersections.

Ongoing

- As sidewalks are maintained or new development occurs, build pedestrian priority into the design of new and existing driveways throughout downtown. Begin with consolidating curb cuts where possible. Advocate for sharing curb cuts across parcels where multiple parcels have a need for driveway access. Pedestrians should also be prioritized at driveway crossings. Ensure driveway crossings remain level for pedestrians instead of requiring and ramp down and up on either side of the driveway. Instead, use aprons for vehicles entering and existing the driveways with return curbs to manage the change in grade from the street to the adjacent land use. This not only slows vehicles as they enter driveways to mitigate potential crashes but also provides a much smoother and more accessible condition for people with mobility disabilities, pushing strollers, or towing rolling luggage.
- Raise side street crossings to preserve pedestrian priority across intersections where smaller downtown streets meet more major streets.
- Upgrade all curb ramps that do not meet ADA compliance (which is eligible for using Anchorage’s CDBG funding.)



Streets with multiple lanes in one direction contribute to a risk that a person walking will be hit by a car that cannot see the pedestrian because another car already has stopped to let the pedestrian cross. This is called a “multiple threat” crash, and conditions for these kinds of crashes are very prevalent in Downtown Anchorage.



Example of a driveway maintained at-grade with a vehicle apron to manage grade change on the street-side of the separated bike lane.



Example of a raised side-street crossing in Seattle.

- Install benches, climate-appropriate trees, bus stop amenities, and bike parking throughout downtown to support a welcoming and multimodal downtown. Incorporate secure bike parking racks (inverted-U or post and ring style) into streetscapes, especially near clusters of active, well-lit, and visible areas.



Though no bike racks are provided, numerous bikes are locked to street poles on 3rd Ave during a recent site visit.



Example of an in-street bike parking corral, which can be used in constrained pedestrian locations on a seasonal basis.

3. Align Curbside and Off-street Parking Policies with Desired Uses

Curbsides are some of the most valuable and contested real estate in any city. They are valued for transit access, shared ride and taxi access, vehicle loading, clear zones for pedestrian sightlines, on-street bikeways, amenities such as parklets and seasonal on-street dining, and on-street vehicle parking. On-street parking is typically the most desired location for parking in cities because it provides the closest parking to destinations. As a result, many cities make any curbside space not needed for other uses available for on-street parking.

In Anchorage, the majority of streets in downtown are dedicated to two-hour parking, with a limited number of three-hour and ten-hour spaces on the outskirts of downtown. Though on-street parking can provide a benefit to pedestrians by creating “edge friction” that slows down traffic and creates a solid buffer between pedestrians and vehicles passing by, demand for a wider range of curbside has grown over the years. In Anchorage, as in most cities, short-term parking (typically 15 minutes), daylighting at intersections and crosswalks, bus stops, loading and carshare, parklets, and other uses all compete for valuable curbside space that today is dedicated to metered, primarily two-hour, on-street parking in Anchorage.

On-street parking should provide enough short-term spaces (15-30 minutes) to serve businesses with short term parking needs (e.g., coffee or bakery take out). Outside of short-term parking, vacancy rates should be between 80 and 90% occupancy (10 to 20% vacancy). If occupancy rates are higher, parking rates may be too low and/or allowed length of parking may be too long. If occupancy rates are too low, rates may be too high or the allowed length of parking may be too short. Getting the rates and maximum hours balanced may be an iterative process, especially because frequent rate and rule changes confuse users and add significant staff management time. As it is today, the time limits for

on-street parking in strategic areas could be extended to help make on-street parking more attractive and encourage higher-occupancy. This would have dual benefits of absorbing some off-street parking lot demand and providing more incentive for the City and private investors to develop Anchorage’s many off-street parking lots.

Surface parking can fill an important demand gap in cities where on-street and structured parking is insufficient. In Anchorage, however, there is such an enormous surplus of surface off-street parking (as documented in Our Downtown) that off-street parking is one of the larger threats to downtown.

Today, off-street parking creates vast seas of dead space that make the city a far less desirable place to work, live, and visit. And, the threat of off-street is growing as older and unmaintained buildings continue to be demolished and replaced by yet more surface parking. This land speculation is detrimental to the health of downtown Anchorage.

Reducing the inventory of off-street parking should be the top priority for off street parking. Doing so would return some of the City’s most valuable land to productive uses (as discussed in the housing section of this report) and would increase utilization for the parking lots that remain. As a starting point, the MOA should institute a freeze on new commercial parking open to the public. A parking freeze caps the amount of commercial parking available to the public at a specific supply. The freeze could be structured such that as new development replaces parking lots, supply is returned to a “bank” that can be built against. Or, the freeze could be set based on a specific metric or theoretical “right size” for Anchorage’s downtown parking supply. In either case, no more publicly available commercial parking should be permitted until utilization rates of the existing supply are far healthier.

Summary of Recommendations

Near-Term

- Implement a parking freeze on any new commercial parking spaces open to the general public (structured or surface). Only consider lifting freeze if peak utilization is observed above 80% consistently on an average (no major events) day.
- Pilot meters offering 4-hour parking on streets with limited active uses and underutilized parking.
- Add free, 15-minute parking spaces at key on-street locations to facilitate quick trips to high-turnover uses such as cafes.
- Implement code protections to disallow blank walls on structured parking or, at the very least, for activating existing blank walls (e.g., with art installations, screening, etc.).
- Ensure all parking changes are communicated to the public and visitors.
- Build on lessons from the pandemic to create a program allowing for flexible curbside uses (e.g., restaurants or public park taking over parking spaces) based on seasonal or other demand. This requires standards and procedures for uses, including standards for safe, fully accessible facilities and preservation of clear space for wheelchair access.
- Implement parking maximums for on-site private parking associated with new development. Twenty-two percent of downtown households do not own a car. Overbuilding parking limits the amount of revenue-generating, job-generating, and housing units that each lot can support, and also contributes to higher costs for all users.
- Update parking meter standards so that any new meters are easily adjustable for length of time and rates, ideally remotely.

Mid- to Long-Term

- Use tax policy to encourage redevelopment of parking lots. For example, a land value tax (value capture) or a parking lot excise tax would create a powerful lever to discourage cycles of demolition and speculation, vacant land, and inactive land uses such as surface parking. Consider reduced tax rates of for affordable housing and other priority uses for downtown.
- Privatize parking requirements across all development types, allowing the market to determine the number of spaces. If privatizing parking demand is a longer-term objective, simplify the shared parking zoning incentives. Shared parking agreements allow off-street parking lots to be shared among different buildings in the area to take advantage of differing peak demand periods. (e.g., office uses during the day and residential uses at night). Shared parking can reduce circulating traffic in an area by encouraging people to park once and travel by foot between multiple places within a commercial or cultural district.

4. Strengthen Connections Between Transportation Design and Policy and Housing and Economic Development

As discussed throughout this report, transportation interests fully with Anchorage’s housing, economic, and cultural ambitions. Above, transportation-specific recommendations are outlined that would produce a many visible changes to the way residents and visitors in Anchorage move around the city. However, transportation can be affected from the outside as well. In particular, there are several steps Anchorage could take to reinforce and institutionalize multimodal transportation through distinct but related economic development and housing activities.

Summary of Recommendations

Near-Term

- Adopt bike parking requirements for all development types. Utilize the Association of Pedestrian and Bicycle Professional’s (APBPs) [Bicycle Parking Guidelines](#) for specific guidance around acceptable types of bike parking, installation considerations, siting, and more. In particular, the existing MOA guidance should decouple bike parking requirements from vehicle parking requirements.
- Expand the existing low-income worker relief program to include a cash-out option for people who elect to bike instead of taking transit or driving.
- Work with local anchor institutions to develop and implement Transportation Demand Management practices to help shift employer and visitor behavior.
- Introduce or pilot new transit services that encourage transit-oriented tourism. In particular, consider direct service to/from Ted Stevens Anchorage International Airport to the Downtown Transit Center and a “Transit to Trails” program that provides seasonal, weekend service to nearby trailheads at regular headways.

**Activate
Downtown**



Connect, Catalyze, & Cultivate the Downtown Economy

Invest in Yourself

In 1993, Oklahoma City voters decided to turn around their struggling city, after failing to attract a \$1 billion United Airlines investment, by doing something about it: approving a new tax on themselves.

Since then, Oklahoma City has undergone a transformation that has elevated the community to what former Mayor Mick Cornett calls a “big league” city.

The \$350 million sales tax-funded initiative was created to revitalize downtown, improve Oklahoma City’s national image and provide new and upgraded cultural, sports, recreation, entertainment and convention facilities.

By funding the projects with a limited term, one-cent sales tax, the projects were built debt free. The U.S. Conference of Mayors noted, “Using a pay-as-you-go structure allowed Oklahoma City to build world-class facilities without the burden of debt for future generations and city leaders. Oklahoma City citizens made the historic decision to invest their own money in the city they called home.”

Since that initial investment of \$350 million, Oklahoma City voters have continued to extend the sales tax generating an additional \$2.7 billion of investment.

Anchorage leaders need to create value in their city. This value can be monetary (downtown properties generate a greater tax revenue per acre), economic (downtown businesses generate more jobs per acre), or qualitative (creating lively, urban environments). For Anchorage to thrive, Anchorage residents and businesses MUST invest in urban Anchorage.

It is within a city's best interest to attract investment

downtown. In an urban environment, not only is the infrastructure concentrated and cost efficient – requiring very little to service many – but on a per-acre basis – the taxes and jobs generated from it are phenomenally high.

Even though most of downtown Anchorage consists of parking lots, the blank walls of offices and other buildings, and significant gaps between buildings, the small part of good urbanism that exists in Anchorage is what leaves the positive impression on both the resident and the visitor. Websites, marketing materials and postcards do not use pictures of parking lots; they use pictures of landmark buildings and sites of interest.

Anchorage has already demonstrated an interest in and commitment to downtown with the improvement district. However, that commitment needs to translate to action in the form of improved infrastructure and general maintenance. The urban core looks tired and faded. The Alaskan harsh environment accelerates this process, so it’s even more important that there be a robust maintenance schedule and maintenance partners.

Recommendations:

- The MOA must establish a baseline of service for the downtown. The improvement district is not meant to replace basic city service and that service needs to be articulated and established.
- Once the MOA service baseline has been established, the ADP must develop an aggressive schedule of regular maintenance enhancements.
- Consider contracting with a company for service and maintenance (Ambassadors). Downtown Oklahoma City Partnership implemented such a program earlier this year and the results have really improved the street environment and impressed the ratepayers. Two reputable companies that provides these services nationwide to downtown improvement districts are Block by Block and Streetsplus. This type of service also elevates the ADP brand.



ASHEVILLE
WALMART



DOWNTOWN
MIXED-USE

Land Consumed (acres):	34.0	00.2
Total Property Taxes per Acre:	\$6,500	\$634,000
Retail Taxes* per Acre to City:	\$47,500	\$ 83,600
Residents per Acre:	0.0	90.0
Jobs per Acre:	5.9	73.7

*Estimated from public reports of annual sales per sq ft.

Urban3
URBAN PARTNERSHIP



Heritage buildings and intact streetscapes make for better marketing materials than parking lots and blank walls.



Big Idea for a MAPS-type Catalyst

Investment

There are any number of first MAPS-type investments. For example, the site of the former Alaskan Native Medical Center would be a perfect location for an adventure park modeled after Riversports in OKC. Most visitors to Anchorage are looking for adventure activities. Instead of sending them 30 miles outside the city, invite them to participate in adventure activities downtown. You could start with a Sky Tower with skill trails, high-speed slides and a zip line. Adventures such as a wave system for surfing and an infinite articulated ski slope could be installed as funds allow. A pump track will please the bike, skateboard and skate community. This investment will generate economic revenue and serve as an anchor for the east downtown revitalization efforts. See more at <https://www.riversportokc.org/>

Activate Downtown

For well over a century, downtown districts have served as the heart and soul of communities. Downtown is where people congregate, and where history speaks to people in the form of beautiful, historic buildings. Anchorage has many natural assets and a rich history.

An active downtown provides another attraction for the tourism industry but visitors are searching for an authentic local experience that is best showcased downtown. Ultimately all downtown improvements benefit the tourism industry but think about the

residents first: design and program for locals. Tourists will follow.

The Anchorage Downtown Partnership already does an excellent job of programming and activating downtown. They even facilitate other groups holding events by serving as a resource and renting equipment. Activation, however, is best kept fresh and new. While residents value downtown traditions, particularly around the holidays, they are always excited about the opportunity for a new experience downtown.

Recommendations

- Do something with lighting. Anchorage gets less than six hours of daily sunlight in the winter months, so investment in a lighting system would be a delightful way to activate downtown in a manner few other downtowns can. Use your imagination; LEDs and programmable LEDs have made the possibilities endless. Vacant storefronts can host light features that would evoke the northern lights – an authentic Alaskan experience. Light canopies can drape over streets creating a soft glow for pedestrian activities.
- In keeping with the theme of light, consider temporary professional interactive art installations. These can often be sponsored and encourage residents to visit and participate in the “limited time only” experience.
- For summertime fun, paint a labyrinth on the area in Town Square on the wintertime ice rink space. In addition to its spiritual value, a labyrinth is both decorative and interactive.
- To attract adventurers, add a climbing wall in Town Square. Close a street or streets for the season and build an urban snow tube facility or locate it with the other adventures on the site of the former Alaskan Native Medical Center.



Activate and illuminate downtown with creative lighting displays.



Interactive art installations engage residents and visitors.

- Work with the museum and the botanical gardens to create an “Art in the Park” series on the museum lawn featuring interactive activities that are both educational and expressive such as bouquet making, beekeeping, composting, pottery throwing, painting and other forms of artistic expression.
- Create a curated rotating mural experience. Pick a wall (or two, or three) and curate new murals every 4-6 months. This gives downtown the opportunity showcase multiple well known, as well as developing artists. The changing images will keep residents coming back down to see the art. This is a great way to activate an underused alley and adds some much-needed color to the downtown year round. As part of this effort, perhaps make one wall a “graffiti with permission” wall where taggers, artists and citizens alike can express themselves.
- Children never tire of play and the places where they engage in such activity become special to them as adults. Grow early support for downtown Anchorage by involving kids and families in designing play spaces for all seasons. Check out <https://kaboom.org/grants>, which works to end playspace inequity by uniting with communities through grant funding to build kid-designed playspaces.
- Hold dancing lessons in Town Square Park. Featured styles could be salsa, hip hop or swing. Find some professional dancers to lead the group and let the music and the movement activate the space. This is a great activity for singles, couples or families and appeals to any age group.
- Recreate the famous German Christmas Market experience. Use some vacant green space to create a holiday pop up shop experience. Using tents, structures or just the grassy space, retailers will appreciate this extra opportunity to reach customers during the all-important holiday season. Rotate your businesses so residents have to come back every weekend to experience all the offerings.



Create a summertime labyrinth in the ice rink space.



Construct a snow tubing installation downtown.



Partner with local institutions to create interactive and educational experiences downtown.



Attract residents with a dynamic mural and street art program.



Create kid-friendly play spaces throughout downtown.



Hold downtown dance lessons/parties.

Make sure there is a Christmas tree, a warm fire and a vendor selling mulled wine.

- Using the web program “Urban Adventure Quest,” design a walking or a bike tour for all ages and abilities featuring landmarks and businesses in the downtown. It’s competitive, it’s fun and leads visitors to spots in your downtown they might ordinarily miss. Different than the many trail walks offered in the Anchorage, this is a scavenger hunt that is a quintessential urban experience.

Downtown Organization & Economics

Historically downtown districts were the business hub of the community. They were built for pedestrians with buildings close together so people could congregate in one district to accomplish all their daily tasks: shopping, drop off mail, catch a show at a theater, visit with friends, and have dinner. Alleyways were built for deliveries to businesses and served as alternate walkways for pedestrians. Downtown was where you went to “get things done.”

Anchorage is fortunate to have several organizations and individuals committed to restoring downtown Anchorage as the place “to get things done,” even in an era when many urban services are decentralized throughout the community. The community recognizes the importance of downtown past, present and future and that the physical appearance and vibrancy of downtown reflects how the community sees itself.

Seeing a critical need to move plans into actions, community leaders created the Roadmap to a Vital and Safe Anchorage (RVSA) to develop an action plan as a means of rapid response to the impacts of the COVID 19 pandemic. The group’s work thus far is both impressive and actionable and they should continue their work of breaking down multiple planning recommendations into action steps.

RVSA also did a notable job of identifying the barriers to success. Recognition that conflicting priorities, fragmented communication, and an uncoordinated vision are keeping the city from forward progress is an honest assessment from these leaders who are responsible for unifying the community’s vision for downtown. The downtown leadership community should continue to facilitate the continuation of these honest and action focused discussions.

Recommendations

- The Anchorage Downtown Partnership needs to elevate their brand. When locals attend community events downtown, they do not always know or recognize the organization that has provided this opportunity. An aggressive social media program would be helpful to promote the organization and all its efforts. Engagement in a contract with a national service provider for clean and safe services also creates opportunities for brand elevation.
- Provide low-cost financing for retail, service, and dining developments that add value to downtown. The national retail sector is evolving rapidly many of the nation’s largest retail chains and many independents will not survive the next few years. While consumers will continue to purchase online, opportunities exist for local retail businesses that offer a unique experience or product. These shops are where locals find items they would prefer not to order and where visitors come to sample the local flavor.
- Recruit a specific academic program, like the engineering or business school, from the University of Alaska Anchorage to downtown. Downtown provides an excellent learning lab for students and their presence activates the streets – particularly if student and/or faculty housing can be developed as part of the location efforts (See also discussion under housing section of this report).



Utilize some of downtown’s underutilized space to hold a rotating holiday market with retail and food vendors.



Feature downtown landmarks and amenities in a virtual scavenger hunt.

- Develop and implement a business retention and expansion (BRE) program for downtown. The primary reason for BRE is to provide information, resources, to the businesses and build relationships with business leaders. A typical BRE program has three main components:
 1. **Visitation.** Visiting businesses is the strongest way to build the relationships that are critical to a successful downtown. In addition, these visits could identify at risk companies, or those that are considering closing or relocating.
 2. **Surveys.** Periodically, the business community should be surveyed to collect data on a larger, quicker, scale. These surveys are typically brief and include questions about the current economic situation, and any other issues the community needs to measure.
 3. **Resources access.** Resources could include but are not limited to: connections to workforce programs, connections to capital, state/legislative information, and a relationship with local economic development leaders.
- Develop a façade improvement program for downtown. These are incentive programs created to encourage property owners and businesses to improve the exterior appearance of their buildings and storefronts. They focus on either commercial or residential properties and provide financial incentives such as a matching grant or loan, a tax incentive, and design assistance. The big “carrot” that makes a façade improvement program successful is the incentives the program offers. The most common sources of funding are federal and state grants for community and economic development and municipal revenue. Leaders generally work with a consortium of local banks that contribute equally to the funding pool to share investment risks. Application fees and interest income generated by façade improvement loans are also sometimes used to keep funding available and circulating in the target area. (See also the finance section of this report.)

Common Elements of Façade Improvement Programs

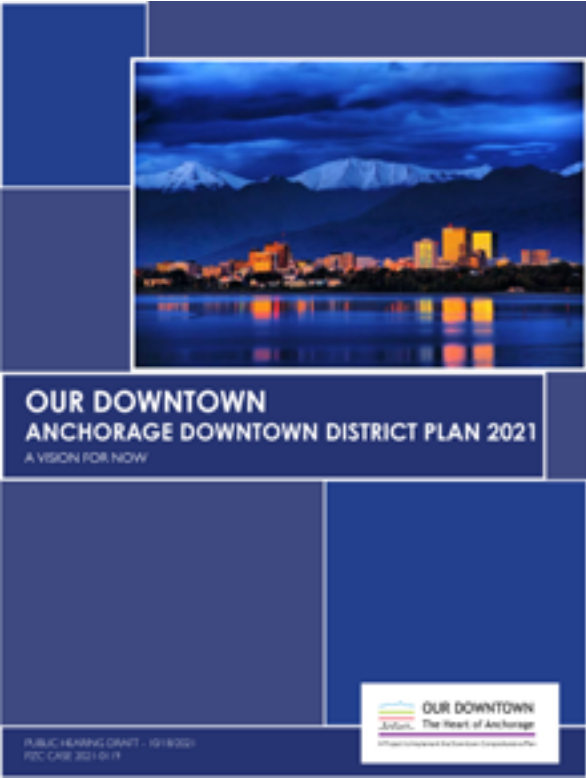
- » **A target area shown on a map or spelled out in clear language.** Successful façade improvement programs focus on concentrated areas where their investment can have an obvious, meaningful and lasting impact to attract other investment.
- » **Eligibility criteria and terms for participation which indicate who may participate in the façade improvement program.** This material also describes the type(s) of incentives and any related requirements, such as the minimum and maximum amount of the grant or loan, any requirements for participants to match the grant or loan, whether loans will be forgiven after a certain period, interest rates, and repayment terms for the loan.
- » **A description of eligible (and ineligible) activities.** Depending on the needs of the target area, eligible activities could be historic rehabilitation, storefront improvements, or (in some cases) even new construction on vacant land to eliminate gaps within the area. The range of work generally includes anything related to improvement of the building exterior or that is visible from the street. Interior work, landscaping, and parking are often ineligible, but may be covered by other local incentive programs.
- » **An emphasis on good design.** Improving the physical appearance of properties is usually a priority of façade programs and these programs are often capitalized by federal or state grant funding. As a result, facade improvement projects are often subject to some type of formal design review and approval.
- » **An application and selection process.** This process is usually led by the municipality and creates a “paper trail” of background data. Applications collect information about the prospective participant and usually include photographs and a brief description of the type of work the applicant would like to have completed.

Urban Fabric & Catalyst Sites



Implementing the Downtown District Plan

There are many strong elements of the Downtown District Plan adopted in late April, 2022. Rather than re-inventing elements of this plan, we would like to recommend some areas to focus immediate implementation strategies for some “quick wins” and longer-term successes.



Anchorage Downtown District Plan. Note: We understand the Downtown District Plan was adopted in April 2022 with some updated provisions. All references here are based on the October 18, 2021, Public Hearing Review Draft document.

The team heard from many downtown stakeholders that Anchorage has invested in and completed numerous plans over the past two decades, with many of these plans recently renewed and updated. However, due to various conditions, some that can’t be controlled — the Great Recession, COVID-19 pandemic — and some that are circumstantial, such as relatively short, term-limited political cycles, and changes in key city staff roles often tied to these election cycles and administrations, implementation efforts have been impeded.

As the City rebounds following the pandemic, a focused effort might turn the corner and establish Anchorage as a city that not only talks hopefully and dreams aspirationally, but effectively implements its plans as well. A plan with little action is really no better than no plan at all.

Part of effectively implementing plans is having a strong, collective community structure in place. The Project for Public Spaces, a “backbone organization” for the research, study and implementation of placemaking initiatives, suggests that community driven efforts are a key to creating vibrant and active urban places (see <https://www.pps.org/article/what-is-placemaking>).

The number of individuals we interacted and communicated with during the team visit, who are passionately interested and invested in seeing downtown thrive, is great evidence that Anchorage has the important social capital in place to succeed. We recommend putting that social capital to use by organizing networks around important desired outcomes, and develop a structure to the community stakeholders that provide a depth of institutional knowledge and advocacy to carry initiatives over, around and through the barriers and obstacles that inevitably come.

Cultural Districts

We love the concepts and ideas behind the three proposed Cultural Districts identified in the Downtown District Plan — the 2nd to 4th Avenues Historic Districts, 4th Avenue Mushing District, and Anchorage Museum Design District. We also recommend adding a fourth district in the area of the former Alaska Native Medical Center, north of 3rd Avenue between Eagle Street and Ingra Street, to activate the Pioneer Slope area of East Downtown, bring greater focus to a major opportunity site, and expand and improve the physical connections between the upper downtown bluff and the lower Ship Creek area.

We recommend more investigation and analysis of the identity, branding, themes and characteristics for each district. Following are ideas to add to the discussion, evolution and encouragement of these districts.

Mushing District

This is predominantly a visitor and tourist district, which seems appropriate. Every destination downtown has one or needs one. It is a place to highlight the long history and cultural diversity of the community, and many of the shops and stops in this area are clearly oriented toward out-of-town visitors. The Iditarod Sled Dog Race and Fur Rondy (Rendezvous) are large draws, and having a strong winter activity presence is an asset that many downtowns with large seasonal variation don’t have. The emerging visual representations in art and streetscape on 4th Avenue currently underway are encouraging.

During the team visit, we discovered two fascinating “story walks.” One was the Light Speed Planet Walk, located in parts of downtown and extending across the Coastal Trail. The other is a thread of Anchorage community history panels located on the Sunshine Plaza (yellow building) and 4th Avenue Market Place (blue building) on 4th Avenue. This community history exhibit is very specific to the Mushing District. We encourage this to become a much more prominent feature of this district.

The panels could remain on the buildings, or become a more prominent fixture and exhibit as part of the streetscape. Either way, we strongly recommend an upgrade, making these a more permanent, interactive and immersive element of the district. These could become a part of the wayfinding system described later, and could also link to places downtown and throughout the broader community where historic buildings and sites are visible, identified and “come to life.” We also encourage a more extensive addition of pre-Anchorage history. A single panel describes the Anchorage area before colonization, and this is a greatly missed opportunity for Indigenous and natural history.

We encourage the preservation, restoration and adaptive reuse of historic architecture. These are essential elements to the placemaking of this district, and will become even more meaningful with time as other parts of downtown grow and evolve. We encourage meaningful ways to connect key historic buildings through markers placed on buildings or available digitally, or both, and connect these into the “story walk” and wayfinding systems.

During the team visit, there was discussion about the desire for a Downtown Library branch, and the former, historic City Hall building was identified as a possible location. Although current functions there including the Visit Anchorage staff would need find a new home, we would support this initiative to establish a Downtown Library branch.

Historic Districts

2nd Avenue and 4th Avenue have wonderful collections of historic residential and commercial structures. We encourage the pursuit of the national and local historic district designations outlined on the Downtown District Plan, and incorporation of the federal and state/local tax credits or other financial incentives that often accompany such designations.

The 1964 earthquake had such a powerful impact on the history and development of the city, and buildings that survived the 1964 earthquake could be noted with a “survivor” plaque or other designation to help tell this remarkable story. This element could also be linked with the “story walk” experiences and wayfinding initiative for downtown Anchorage.

To the extent that local regulatory tools are available for preservation and adaptive reuse, we also encourage these to be utilized. If they do not exist in the city’s planning and community development toolkit, they are important tools that we encourage developing. The Complete Communities Historic Preservation Guide in Delaware (<https://www.completecommunitiesde.org/planning/inclusive-and-active/preservation/>) is a great resource, as is the Salt Lake City Historic Preservation Program (<https://www.slc.gov/historic-preservation/>). Additional ideas and resources area available through the National Trust for Historic Preservation (<https://savingplaces.org>).

Museum (& Arts) Design District

The Anchorage Museum is a wonderful arts and cultural resource for Anchorage, and we applaud those whose vision brought about this important addition to downtown. The Museum Design District is a commendable idea. However the small boundaries of this district noted in the Downtown District Plan may be selling short a more substantial cultural core of downtown — a larger arts and cultural district that could be a more powerful placemaking tool.

We recommend expanding this district to the west to include the Alaska Center for the Performing Arts Center and Town Square Park. This creates a more complete arts and cultural district bookended by critical cultural and arts institutions, and enlivened by numerous vital outdoor public spaces.

The current design district has the museum and its attached lawn but not much else going on there. And

it is missing other key assets of the downtown cultural district. The performing arts center is also a major downtown destination, and the complementary functions of the museum and performing arts center, together with several key outdoor public gathering spaces — including Anchorage Town Square, the Museum lawn and E Street Plaza and F Street Plaza streets that have been designed for closure for community activities — offer great placemaking opportunities.

Salt Lake City has developed a successful model for a creative downtown arts and cultural district. “The Blocks” (see <https://theblocksslc.com/about/>) that incorporates many of the same objectives of the Anchorage Museum Design District. It integrates elements of places, programs and promotion that guide developing, programming and marketing its downtown as the destination “cultural core” for the region. A downtown Anchorage Museum & Arts Design District has this same potential.

The Town Square and Museum Lawn are connected by a unique street with interesting opportunities and potential. While the closure of Nordstrom and several underutilized storefronts in the shopping center are temporary setbacks, we encourage the utilization of empty storefronts around the mall to recruit artists and artisan makers. The narrow “canyon” of the street itself may lend itself to creative, immersive art installations in between the mall and former Nordstrom building, including the skywalk structure.

While property owners, stakeholders and civic leaders consider the future uses of the Nordstrom building and the mall storefronts, we also strongly encourage the development of more direct connection of the skywalk to the streets and streetscape below. Skywalks often take foot traffic away from the street, and connecting these adjacent but disconnected pedestrian realms will provide a richer, more complete experience and will support the vibrancy and weaving together of this expanded cultural district.

East Downtown Market & Outdoor Adventure District

The former Alaska Native Medical Center site offers an important opportunity to expand placemaking and vibrancy in the east downtown area. We heard a clear message from enthusiastic property and business owners who see untapped potential in the east end, and this site is an important catalytic opportunity for both near term “pop up” activities, and longer term sustained investment to create another great downtown destination that we believe will balance, support and harmonize with the three other emerging districts.

We recommend weaving together three elements within this district: an international and Indigenous market, an RV park and hospitality center, and an outdoor adventure park.

International & Indigenous Market

For almost three decades, the Anchorage Market operated in the downtown area, from 1992 through the 2020 harvest season. Not being familiar with the likely complex reasons the Market relocated to the Dimond Center Mall, it seems to have found a viable new home. This move, however, is an unfortunate loss to Downtown, which brought an estimated 500,000 visitors in 2019. Farmers markets are not only important activation activities and events, they also are important business incubators and local market stimulators because they recirculate local dollars in the local economy. The Anchorage Market had the added benefit of highlighting local arts and culture, and especially highlight Indigenous businesses and enterprises.

The Downtown District Plan support re-establishing a seasonal arts and farmers market. However, rather than bring back a market similar to the one that moved, we encourage the evolution and replacement of the crafts and farmers market with something even more substantial and beneficial to Downtown, including permanent structures that offer a year-round indoor public market. Anchoring the west end of the site, we recommend this public market and marketplace be

geared toward small, local vendors, with an international and local Indigenous focus, along with outdoor areas that allow for season expansion of fresh produce and craft vendors during primary tourist and harvest season.

Two great West Coast examples of public markets are Granville Island in Vancouver, BC (<https://granvilleisland.com>), and Pike Place in Seattle, WA (<https://www.pikeplacemarket.org>). Pike Place is called the “soul of Seattle” and Granville Island is one of the most visited destinations in western Canada. Both are beloved equally by locals and visitors. Granville also has a strong international and Indigenous focus, which makes it a great model for what we recommend in Anchorage. Chelsea Market in New York, NY (<https://www.chelseamarket.com>) is another great example from the Atlantic states region. With more than 6 million national and international visitors annually, it is one of the most visited destinations in New York City, for both local foodies and international tourists.

There are great incremental ways to develop this market place. The Muskegon Pop-Up Shops in Muskegon, MI (<https://www.strongtowns.org/journal/2018/2/19/low-cost-pop-up-shops-create-big-value-in-muskegon-michigan>) and the Berwyn Shops in Berwyn, IL (<https://www.berwynshops.com>) have utilized small, low-cost pre-manufactured structures to create business incubator spaces in a market place that serves temporary infill and activation initiatives. This sort of temporary use could quickly infill portions of the site, while funding for more permanent and larger indoor facilities are developed. And Anchorage already has a history of established, standalone pop-up shops such as the AK Alchemist Coffee house built from a shipping container and raised patio that seem to have sufficiently tested and validated the market for pop-ups.

Granville Island is located off the south shore of False Creek in downtown Vancouver. It was formerly an unattractive warehouse district located beneath the primary highway bridges to Vancouver. It has been revitalized into an exciting, interactive shopping, cultural and entertainment destination. Indigenous retail shops and restaurants are intermixed with fine art and crafts galleries, there is a public food market and a children’s market, three theaters and a community center, an art and design school, offices and studios, and light production facilities are housed in a range of eclectic buildings located throughout the development. All the activity generated from these various uses creates a lively and peopled place throughout the day and evening hours.

This primarily commercial destination is anchored by six, loosely themed areas:

1. Net Loft: small specialty boutiques and artisan studios
2. Maritime Market: an eclectic range of maritime related businesses and art
3. Creekhouse: a mix of custom made fashion and accessory shops
4. Public Market: an indoor food emporium that is open year-round
5. Kids Market: a marketplace designed and themed for “pint-sized” customers
6. Arts–Crafts–Studios: 48 free standing studios and shops scattered through out the project

Pike’s Place is a great example of how public and private entities can work together and be mutually beneficial. The Market shows how a commercial endeavor can also provide local community needs for goods and services. It also illustrates a central management and operations model that might overcome some of the challenges with the previous ownership and management of the former downtown Anchorage Market.

The Market is a mix of public and private uses including:

1. Restaurant, food and arts & craft retailers
2. Bulk food wholesalers
3. Public housing (500 units)
4. Medical clinic
5. Childcare and a preschool
6. Food bank
7. Senior center

Chelsea Market, formerly the National Biscuit Company (Nabisco) factory in New York, is located in the Chelsea neighborhood in downtown Manhattan. It was renovated into a one-stop specialty food shop and restaurant destination. The building takes up an entire city block and is an excellent example of how mixing retail with wholesale activity and light production operations can create an exciting and interactive experience for the shopper.

The Market illustrates how wholesaling and retailing can co-exist and thrive while adding entertainment value by exposing the manufacturing process. A sampling of retailer–producers are:

1. Amy’s Bread
2. Hale & Hearty Soup
3. Chelsea Market Baskets
4. Sarabeths
5. Jimmy’s Gelato
6. Ronnybrook Dairy Farm

RV Park & Hospitality Center

At the bottom of the bluff to the north of the site is the existing Ship Creek RV Park. This seems to be a popular and well-utilized facility during the busy tourist season. During our team engagement with local business and property owners in the east downtown area, we also heard that the market for recreation vehicle touring is growing, and the demand for this type of venue is expanding. While it is a niche hospitality market and venue for tourists, we think that expanding this asset, either temporarily or permanently to the top of the bluff is a way to activate the east end of the site.

An RV park and hospitality center could be a mixed-use facility that includes shops and retail, restaurant, cafe or coffee shop, caretaker lodging, other short term rental, and related support services or other leased space.

Outdoor Adventure Park

The hillside area of the Pioneer Slope district of downtown is a high risk seismic area not suitable for major structures. This woody area, however, presents an opportunity for an experiential and curated outdoor recreation area that we recommend as an Outdoor Adventure Park. These types of popular recreation areas have popped up in locations across North America, and are very compatible with the brand and identity, and existing assets of this area.

The Outdoor Adventure Park could include ropes courses, zip lines and slides, and mountain paths, ramps, jumps and skill development courses. The adjacent market place and RV hospitality could provide necessary support space and infrastructure such as rest rooms, ticketing and administrative services, gear sales, rental and storage, and other necessary or desired support.

TreeRunner Adventure Parks operates several of these outdoor adventure park venues near Detroit and Grand Rapids, MI; Raleigh, NC; and Rochester, NY (see <https://treerunnerparks.com>). These might offer ideas and examples for this type of outdoor recreation facility.

Cultural Districts as Urban Design Catalysts

The downtown currently has an inconsistent mix of sidewalk paving patterns and finishes, streetscape elements and pedestrian furnishings. The development of unifying streetscape elements— lighting, signage, pedestrian amenities — within each of these cultural districts and immediate surrounding areas can reinforce themes in each district. This is a good place to start.

Work has already started on the Mushing District, with sidewalk improvements, art installations, lighting and traffic lights, and undergrounding of overhead electrical infrastructure. While these elements could be consistent throughout the entire downtown, the cultural districts are unique and the elements of style and form could reinforce the uniqueness of each district and provide distinct wayfinding cues that are elaborated in the following section.

Start with inexpensive and simple elements such as themed street signs and banners and temporary landscaping and art installations. Expand into paving and lighting as a longer term investment in conjunction with major road and sidewalk maintenance or upgrade projects.

Wayfinding

The Downtown District Plan emphasizes the importance of wayfinding, both to highlight important destinations and activity centers downtown, and to help individuals discover and explore. It can be extremely effective when designed integrally with other bicycle and pedestrian improvements outlined in other sections of this report, and we encourage this as a high priority project.

The team was impressed with the simple but effective wayfinding and information system already in place for the Moose Loop trail network. That system could be the basis for a downtown wayfinding system, especially in an effort to start with some simple and strategic steps forward with implementation of downtown wayfinding.

Ultimately, we recommend a more sophisticated system that includes not only static signs and markers, but unlocks the power and innovation of technology and mobile devices as part of a more comprehensive wayfinding system.

Design and installation of a wayfinding system is a daunting, but critical, element of downtown improvement. The Cultural Districts are meaningful ways to initiate wayfinding, both because they encompass many significant landmarks and destinations that provide a good place to start, but also because they offer the flexibility to take an incremental approach, rather than investing in an entire system all at once. We could, for example, envision stages of wayfinding with simple, strategically placed signs and markers across the downtown as a starting point, followed by a more sophisticated and digitally connected system in the 4th Avenue Mushing District and Museum, Arts & Design District, which are major downtown destinations, and then further expansion into other areas of downtown according to further funding and priorities.

Legible London (see <https://tfl.gov.uk/info-for/boroughs-and-communities/legible-london> and <https://segd.org/legible-london>) sets the standard for place-based and digital wayfinding, and has been widely replicated in many cities internationally. Elements of this system might be worth exploring for Downtown Anchorage.

A wayfinding system can also incorporate elements of existing and expanded “story walks” described in the previous section, to both encourage discovery and exploration of what makes Anchorage a special place, and to satisfy the curiosity and interest of a growing heritage tourism sector. A digitally connected wayfinding system, when properly and consistently managed, also allows frequently changing information — such as shops and businesses, restaurants, and seasonal events and activities — to be updated in a cloud-based system without expensive modification to static signage.

Legible London (from <https://www.appliedinformation.group/projects/legible-london>)

Legible London is a major innovation in the recent development of city wayfinding. It has influenced the last two decades of city wayfinding systems around the world, largely defining sign typologies, content criteria, information architecture and graphic cues used in many subsequent city systems.

Legible London is a comprehensive system of over 1500 signs throughout the city covering the majority of London’s 32 boroughs.

Street signs are placed in carefully selected locations to provide awareness and connectivity. Behind what looks like a simple sign system, is a digitally connected architecture and a carefully-crafted and curated system of elements, information and guides.

In addition to its impact on public awareness, its real innovation has been as a catalyst to integrate wayfinding across the city. It was built with extensive stakeholder consultation, based on core logics. The system has been extensively tested and reviewed, with well proven positive impact and benefit.



A comprehensive wayfinding system would link districts and points of interest.

Placemaking & Facade Activation

Zoning as a land use development tool has been around for about a hundred years in the United States. What started as a tool to address very real concerns with urban living conditions in the early 20th century, and evolved into a rapid growth management tool during periods of explosive post World War II population increases in many American cities, now presents us with even larger and more complex challenges in the 21st century. Unfortunately, the focus on generalized and often exclusive land use regulatory tools, with little emphasis on physical, built form of cities and neighborhoods, coupled with predominantly, and often exclusively, automobile dominated transportation systems, has created new public health risks and poor community character.

Anchorage is no exception. As already noted in this report, Anchorage has lost many structures of its “urban fabric” where large parcels and entire city blocks have been razed and replaced by parking lots. Much of the pedestrian infrastructure has been compromised, and bicycle infrastructure is sorely lacking in the City’s urban core.

Intersectional with these transportation and mobility challenges, urban areas have also seen an erosion of community identity, character and activity in their public places. Many cities recognize these losses and the associated poor outcomes and social and public health costs. Through much of human history, streets, plazas and parks were well designed places and experiences of the public realm, and just like buildings can be designed for important functions that happen inside, public spaces can be designed for equally important functions that happen outside.

Fortunately, there are many great organizations that have emerged as advocates for great urban design and placemaking. They work to build on the collective wisdom of communities, reinvigorate community character, and provide tools and resources to nurture

vibrant public spaces. In addition to the Project for Public Spaces cited previously (<https://www.pps.org>), and the Center for Communities by Design of the American Institute of Architects (<https://www.aia.org/pages/2891-center-for-communities-by-design>), which is the sponsor of this Design Assistance Team, we also highly recommend Congress for the New Urbanism (<https://www.cnu.org>), Strong Towns (<https://www.strongtowns.org>), and the National Main Street Center program of the National Trust for Historic Preservation (<https://www.mainstreet.org/home>) as valuable downtown community development resources and partners.

Downtown Anchorage would be well served to seriously consider replacing its current zoning regulations with a Form Based Code. This is no longer a novel idea, and many major cities have incorporated elements of Form Based Code into their community development toolkit, or completely replaced their zoning regulations for downtown and urban districts with this development tool. An article published by Strong Towns (see <https://www.strongtowns.org/journal/2020/6/8/6-reasons-your-city-needs-a-form-based-code>) describes six reasons to adopt a Form Based Code to better regulate downtown development:

- 1. Encourage Revitalization
- 2. Promote Workforce Housing
- 3. Support Small Businesses
- 4. Promote Walkability
- 5. Preserve or Recapture a Sense of Place
- 6. Stop Regulating the Wrong Things

Many of these same objectives were highlighted by stakeholders during our team visit, and are addressed in various ways in this Design Assistance Team report. We see Anchorage as a great candidate to put into place better downtown development and revitalization

tools as a major part of its Downtown District Plan implementation. Development tools and regulations are the “DNA” of cities, and a Form Based Code can be a better tool for doing the things Anchorage is trying to do with its downtown.

Changing these regulatory tools may take some time, and in the spirit of supporting other short-term solutions, we recommend working toward improving and guiding particularly the development facades for new buildings, and improving the facades of buildings you already have.

Fundamentally, good facade design doesn’t just focus on what happens at the “envelope” or outside wall of the building. To develop a good facade that promotes strong visual interest, more vibrant character, and engaging activity, one must realistically be thinking about, understand and explore opportunities of form and function that extend 10 feet inside a building and 10 feet outside the building as well, with the transect from private or semi-private space to semi-public and public space. Setbacks, overhangs and signage are also extensions of the facade, and should be given equal consideration as the building itself.

On the following page are examples of existing facades and the urban design qualities that we would characterize as “Good, Better, Best.”

And while we’re at it, we recommend looking at ways to avoid and discontinue the development of facades that we would characterize as “Poor, Worse and Worst.”

Creating Communities: A Guide to Walkable Centers

Envision Utah (<https://envisionutah.org>) is nonprofit organization that advocates for and organizes bottom-up initiatives to foster collaborative leadership and community development to manage growth and preserve quality of life in Utah and across the U.S.

Envision Utah recently published and launched Creating Communities: A Guide to Walkable Centers (<https://envisionutah.org/creating-communities-guide>). This guide is an informative tool for city staff, officials, planners, and the general public to learn more about creating walkable centers as a strategy to accommodate Utah’s growing population while maintaining its high quality of life.

The Guide discusses the major components and benefits of walkable centers — mixed-use locations in a region, city, or neighborhood that provides a variety of amenities and services, supported by infrastructure that reduces dependence and focus on automobiles — and provides tips on how to bring them to life in communities. It includes many examples of vibrant and thriving communities that exemplify the principles of walkable centers.

Good



Better



Best



A facade improvement program would incentivize businesses and property owners to upgrade their appearance, thereby enhancing the collective physical impression of downtown.

Catalytic Urban Design Initiatives for Six Downtown Districts

After spending time with Downtown Anchorage stakeholders, exploring and observing the downtown generally, and reviewing the Anchorage Downtown District Plan, we have put together a list of key recommendations for several projects or initiatives that we believe will have a short-term, positive impact on placemaking and establish a stronger urban design framework for continued downtown improvements.

Downtown Core

- Pop-up Uses in Parking Lots and Street Plazas: Explore ways to activate parking lots and street plazas through standalone or clusters of pop-up uses. Examples include food carts and food trucks, incubator cottages, shipping container structures.
- Facade Restoration and Activation: Implement a facade investment program to restore facades of historic buildings, and activate the facades of all buildings.
- Downtown Bike Infrastructure: Start by completing at least one major north-south and one major east-west bike route through the downtown core, and initiate a more complete downtown bicycle master plan.

Museum & Arts Design District

- Museum & Arts Design District: Expand the boundaries and rebrand the district to encompass the Alaska Center for the Performing Arts and Town Square Park, and develop unifying streetscape elements.
- Town Square Park Improvements: Fund and complete the recently planned updates to Town Square Park. Incorporate some common design elements from the Anchorage Museum, such as the birch grove.

- Public Art Installations: Develop and implement an immersive art installation on 6th Avenue between the Alaska Center for the Performing arts and the Anchorage Museum, and explore ways to incorporate the building facades and sky bridges of the Anchorage 5th Avenue Mall.

West Downtown

- Housing Infill : Complete one or two mid-rise housing infill projects, complementary to Elizabeth Place, in place of an existing parking lot.
- Alley Activation : Explore ways to re-establish and/or activate alleys or lane ways together with infill housing opportunities.

East Downtown

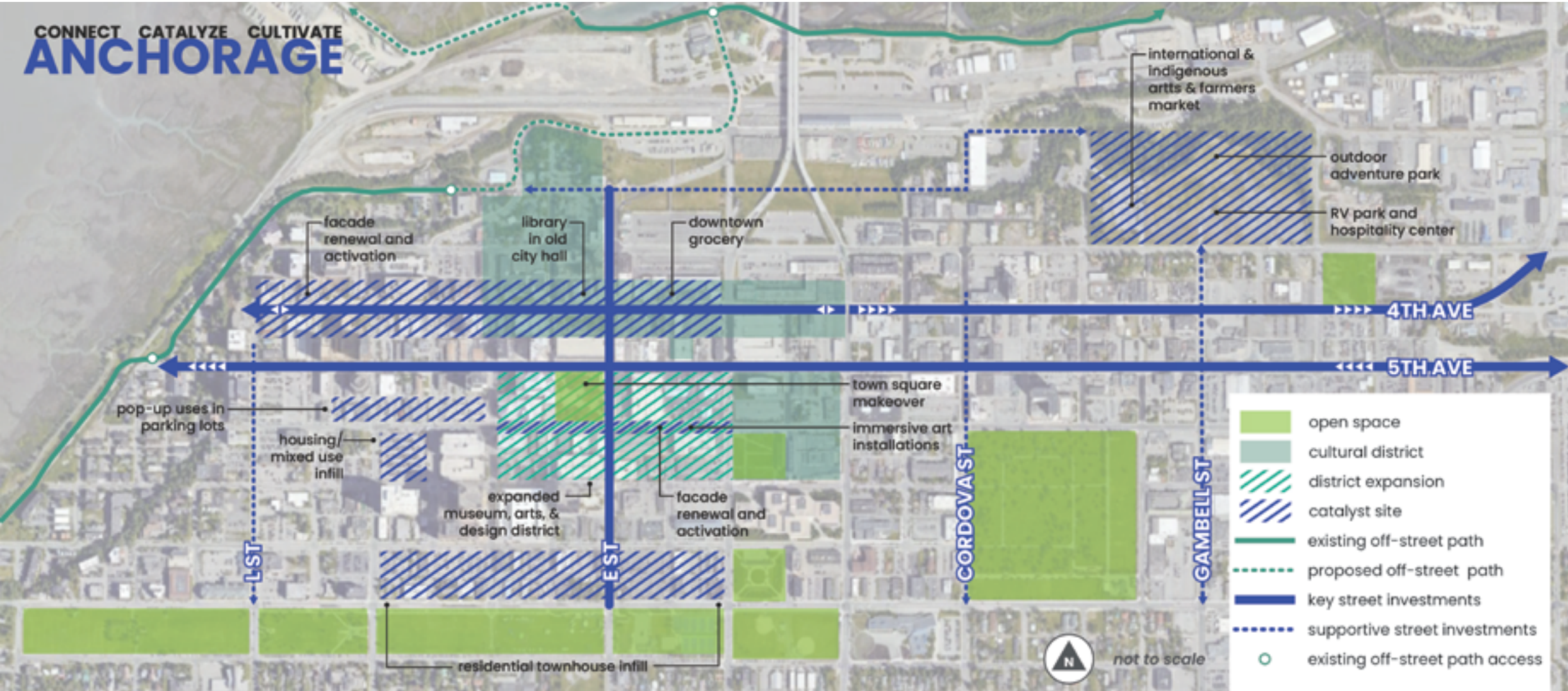
- East Downtown Market & Outdoor Adventure District : Establish and implement an additional East Down district at the former Alaska Native Medical Center, with temporary or permanent uses that include an International & Indigenous Arts & Farmers Market, an Outdoor Adventure Park, and an RV Park & Hospitality Center.

Mushing & Historic Districts

- Anchorage History Story Walk: Expand and improve the Anchorage history “story walk” into a more permanent, refined and inclusive of more early, Indigenous and natural history themes
- Downtown Grocery: Attract and establish a downtown grocery store of approximately 15,000 square feet, possibly in the lower level of the Sunshine Plaza building, to provide a “complete neighborhood” for downtown residents and visitors
- Downtown Library: Consider funding and developing a small Downtown Library branch in the former, historic City Hall building, with consideration for relocation of the current Visit Anchorage information and tourism services currently located there.

Delaney Park Strip

- Work Force Housing: Explore ways to create additional infill of low to mid rise work force housing, especially south of the Dena’ina Center.
- Park Strip Townhouses: Continue support for additional row house and town house infill, especially on the north side of Delaney Park, including consideration for live/work units.



Activate and connect catalyst sites.

Financial & Institutional Structures



Connect, Catalyze & Cultivate the Money

The community’s vision for downtown Anchorage is clear in its aspirations – a live/work/play destination for residents, workers, students, and visitors. The vision laid out in planning documents, particularly the Downtown District Plan, requires a financing strategy that supports the recommendations and action items and translates plans into brick-and-mortar developments. Financing recommendations need to consider existing resources, as well as explore different mechanisms that have been successfully deployed in other cities.

Nestled between mountains and the Cook Inlet, Anchorage was originally settled because of its strategic transportation location. Anchorage now additionally courts vacationers attracted by the city’s proximity to vast recreational amenities and businesses drawn to the state for its energy resources. The City is uniquely positioned to welcome and attract residents and visitors with its many programs and events, including seasonal employees to support the recovering hospitality industry and tourists who frequent hotels and retail businesses. Doing so involves directing resources – financial, technical, operational, and administrative – to development projects and businesses that support downtown vibrancy and enhance the current mix of uses. The recommendations laid out here support housing development and small business assistance. Office space is not a focus of this report given the current high vacancy rate in the downtown.

Downtown Housing Development

There is an expressed desire and demand for more housing in the downtown. From the supply side, housing production is connected to market demand, income levels of prospective tenants and owners, and development pro forma. A critical shortfall in that equation is a notable and severe gap in financing

housing projects. As illustrated in the Downtown District Plan, the development cost of a 40-unit housing project in downtown is approximately \$10M, but with a 58 percent financing gap. In the absence of any incentives, housing development will not occur unless a developer can drastically contain costs (low labor/material costs). If the City wishes to realize its priority of increasing housing stock, it will need to work with the development community and traditional and non-traditional financial institutions to help build the capital stack and, if necessary, develop new tools to close financing gaps.

A recent example of successful public-private cooperation is the Block 96 Flats at 8th and K, which broke ground in April 2022. This partnership between Anchorage Community Development Authority (ACDA) and Debenham Properties will result in the first downtown market-rate multi-use housing in 40 years. The project will include 44 units of studios and one-bedroom apartments. To bridge the funding gap even after receiving a 12-year tax abatement from the City, ACDA provided a 99-year lease with very favorable leasing terms to close the deficit. ACDA, through its

control of key sites in the City, is uniquely positioned to exercise greater authority to facilitate development. It also has bonding and land banking authority, tools that should be exercised to catalyze developments in priority areas where private investment is stagnating. The land banking authority is particularly important in that if a property becomes available, ACDA can purchase and land bank the parcel while identifying the appropriate use and development strategy.

ACDA is currently undergoing a strategic planning effort, which will hopefully result in a reuse plan supporting greater density in underutilized parcels. The decision-making framework should take into account the City’s capital plan, private investments, and the recommendations of the Downtown District Plan. Support for residential development should also factor in the mix of affordable versus market-rate so that people of all different income ranges could afford to live and work in downtown. To that end, ACDA should work not just with private development companies, but also with organizations like the Cook Inlet Housing Authority to add affordable housing units to the downtown housing mix. The Planning Department forecasts the potential to add 4,700 additional housing units in downtown. We believe the downtown can support doubling that number; an important and related consideration is the Congress for the New Urbanism’s calculation that roughly 1,500 housing units are needed to support one new block of stores. To achieve the desired mix of commercial, residential, and retail uses, the City is encouraged to support a greater density of housing not only to meet the housing demand but to help create retail demand.

Recommendation

ACDA should exercise its authority to utilize tools such as bond financing and land banking to support the desirable reuse of properties in its portfolio, including excess surface parking lots. ACDA’s strategic plan should be in concert with other approved plans and in partnership with other economic development organizations to support a

Summary Pro Forma Findings					
No Incentives + Market Rate Rents			12-Year Property Tax Incentive Reduces Gap by ~50%		
Site Name	E 15 th Ave/ A St	E Tudor Rd/Piper St	Downtown Example	W 44 th / Northwood Dr	W Dimond Blvd/Arlene St
Census Tract	West Fairview	Campbell Park East	Downtown (Tract 11)	Northwood	Dimond/Jewel Lake
Lot Size (acres)	1.03	3.98	0.50	9.96	6.21
Zoning District	R4: Multifamily Residential	R3: Mixed Residential	B2C: Central Business District, Periphery	R3SL: Mixed Residential*	R3A: Residential Mixed Use
Housing Units	31	112	40	180	130
Total Development Costs (TDC)	\$7,653,541	\$27,014,814	\$10,025,347	\$48,255,178	\$32,278,705
per sqft	\$243	\$239	\$251	\$250	\$248
per unit	\$243,489	\$242,232	\$250,634	\$268,084	\$247,637
Net Operating Income	\$250,186	\$906,070	\$352,385	\$1,485,283	\$1,030,308
Property Tax Payment	\$82,083	\$289,859	\$98,511	\$512,465	\$343,905
Value of Income Stream (discounted cash flow, 8%)	\$2,881,018	\$10,479,645	\$4,164,155	\$16,945,963	\$11,826,266
Project Gap	(\$4,772,523)	(\$16,535,169)	(\$5,861,192)	(\$31,309,215)	(\$20,452,439)
Gap as % of TDC	62%	59%	58%	65%	63%

Table #2 – Summary of Pro Forma Findings

mix of both market-rate and affordable housing units and an activated public realm that adds to the downtown's attractiveness. The City Planning Department should amend the Zoning Ordinance to support a greater density of housing in the downtown.

There are emerging financing mechanisms beyond the traditional, syndicated, joint venture, mezzanine debt. Equity crowdfunding is a newer tool for real estate development. It's unclear whether this is a good fit for Anchorage but it's worth investigating its potential applicability. Some other resources referenced in the Downtown Plan include the Alaska Housing Finance Corporation, MESA payments by ACDA, and local, state, federal, and foundation funding to capitalize a Housing Trust Fund. There has also been a rapid growth in green bond funds in other regions of the US. These should all be vetted for applicability and compatibility with existing offerings.

Recommendation

Compile a comprehensive list of all resources that can be utilized to support housing development, including details pertaining to eligibility guidelines, funding limits, timelines, and process.

The Anchorage Downtown District Plan lists action items worth noting. Action Item LU-6 would establish a Municipal Downtown Capital Improvement Tax Zone, which would allocate a percentage of the Alcohol Tax estimated at 11 to 13 million dollars per year. If successfully executed, that funding would be readily available to support infrastructure improvements needed to support housing production. Each percentage equates to \$110K to \$130K, so the amount could be accumulated over time for larger improvements, used as a match for the private developers, or used to support enhancements to the public realm such as a wayfinding system. An additional option is the establishment of an infrastructure bank. Infrastructure banks commonly

work with municipalities, but property owners can also be eligible for improvements to utilities, roadways, and energy efficiency building improvements. The Rhode Island Infrastructure Bank, which has been doing this work for over 30 years, is a good example worth reviewing.

Actions RVS-3 to create the Downtown New Investments Program and RVS-4 to establish a Gap funding housing trust fund could be tailored to truly incentivize development. The funding trust fund could be crucial in the early part of the development process, to offset predevelopment costs. Successfully executed, the City would be poised to see new life in areas that may have seen little to no investment.

RVS-3 goal of a single point of contact offers up a one-stop information clearinghouse that would lay out a clear roadmap for regulatory compliance. The City has the ability to facilitate or obstruct business transactions through control of permitting activity. A

business typically has to obtain building-related permits in addition to use related permits and licenses. For the desired types of businesses, a step-by-step guide to obtaining all required permits and licenses, presented in an easily digestible format, will save time and money for both the City and the businesses. For a more-robust solution, a business ombudsman position can be created (whether by title or responsibility) to champion small business needs and help businesses navigate the complexity of permitting procedures. Another area of clarity, especially given the need to access early seed capital and/or close funding gaps, is the tax abatement process. Should a position of business ombudsman be created, they should establish a clear procedure that's transparent and accessible.

Recommendation

Undertake a permit streamlining process, particularly focused on those business and housing uses that are desired in the downtown. Appoint a business ombudsman



to champion support for that sector, including guiding businesses and developers through the City’s abatement/tax incentive process. Review ACDA’s Incentives Handbook and update it as appropriate.

The City’s Heritage Land Bank, a division of the City’s Real Estate Department, manages the City’s real property assets. The Heritage Land Bank should reevaluate its inventory and identify and dispose of properties that can most readily support housing development. The RFP document can reference desired use (mixed-use vs. all housing) and density; short-term activation requirements; and city-controlled incentives as part of its offerings. They can also work with ACDA to meet Downtown Plan Action Item LU-4 to create land assembly and site control strategies for larger-scale development.

Recommendation

The City’s Planning Department and Heritage Land Bank should utilize its zoning and permitting authority and available funding mechanisms as well as manage its real property assets to support denser housing development while proactively disposing of its real property assets to achieve a more desirable use. Anchorage should also review the feasibility of establishing an infrastructure bank to tackle infrastructure improvements.

While ACDA can leverage site control to support development, a different set of tool kits will be needed to support private developments. To more comprehensively understand where the major barriers are, we suggest meeting with representatives from the development community to pinpoint development gaps and whether assistance is needed earlier in the process (e.g. site selection/land acquisition/predevelopment/land entitlement vs. development/construction.)

Recommendation

Conduct a stakeholder meeting with developers, both small and large scale, to identify key hurdles. Follow up with economic development agencies and financial

institutions to address those concerns.

A strong public-private partnership goes a long way to creating a business-friendly climate that’s supportive of common missions – observing the aphorism that “a rising tide lifts all boats”. Given the tremendous talents and intellectual capital present in the City, and the many different entities who share a common concern for downtown vitality, it’s suggested that they fortify their relationship by meeting regularly to build partnerships, share information, triage common concerns, and coordinate each group’s efforts. An added benefit is a unified vision for the downtown and a shared mission, despite differing organizational missions. The group can be expansive since the downtown boundary is porous; including value-add organizations such as the Anchorage Community Land Trust would be helpful.

Recommendation

Establish routine check-in meetings, at least monthly, for economic development organizations. These meetings should represent private, non-profit, and public entities, as well as small and large business representatives.

Downtown Business Development

The AIA community conversation with stakeholders held on May 2, 2022 reflected a desire to go back to a pre-COVID time when people came to downtown to enjoy the diverse dining scene and partake in the many events and programs. The past two years have been hard on individuals, but many small businesses suffered acutely. To regain its vitality and bring people back into downtown, the support for small businesses should be two-fold – assisting existing small businesses and supporting new start-up businesses.

There are business support services including but not limited to the Anchorage Economic Development Corporation, Alaska Small Business Development Center (SBDC), and the U.S. Small Business Assistance. To improve downtown vitality, however, the presence of

street-level, retail, and restaurant businesses offer eye-candy appeal that draws people in.

Beyond the technical assistance support, such as those provided by Alaska Small Business Development Center, start-ups often rely on friends and family to launch their business ventures. To accelerate the pace of business start-ups, there are several proven tool kits:

- **Incubator space:** There are great examples of incubator spaces that offer access to expensive equipment, offsetting early-stage high investment costs. An example is a commercial kitchen that can launch food-focused enterprises and serve as a commissary for food trucks and prepared food items. A maker space also serves a similar purpose but offers a wide range of DIY possibilities, including facilities for metal shops, ceramics, woodworking, etc. The Anchorage MakerSpace should be part of any ongoing discussions on nurturing the entrepreneurial ecosystem.



- **Accelerator program:** Big businesses all had to start somewhere. Nurturing the entrepreneurial spirit by providing mentorship-driven start-up assistance can lead to new business opportunities. While historically accelerator programs focused on tech start-ups and there are many accelerator programs in Anchorage geared toward technology/energy/maritime sectors, nowadays accelerators also support consumer goods products, social ventures, and lifestyle businesses.
- **Downtown business venture fund:** By providing seed capital (the biggest barrier to starting a business) and availing the funds in targeted areas of downtown for preferred retail types, some of the vacant storefronts can see new life with uses that add to street vitality. There are good examples of revolving loan funds, often sitting in a public-private partnership organization – this type of investment meets banks’ CRA commitments and, if tailored for low and moderate income benefit, can also constitute a CDBG eligible activity. There are also federal resources – U.S. Economic Development Administration offers a Revolving Loan Fund Program and the SBA has the Program for Investors in Microentrepreneurs (PRIME). The fund should offer favorable and/or flexible terms such as low or zero percent loans with interest-only payments in the first few years, or loans forgivable over time.

Recommendation

Explore incubator and accelerator programs whose success would directly impact downtown business occupancy. Create a revolving loan fund to help start-up retail, restaurants, and other desired businesses in locations where such activation would enhance the public realm.

Recommendation

Create a façade improvement program. Depending on the amount of available funding, the program can be expanded to include the entire façade of the building or just a signage and lighting program. Activity that directly supports low- and moderate-income residents can qualify as a CDBG eligible activity.

First impressions can be lasting, and if it’s unfavorable, the damage can be lethal for a business. Street activation is difficult to achieve if the “bones” hold no appeal to prospective customers. A façade improvement program, whether managed by a downtown business association or the City, can uplift a business’s appearance, resulting in increased foot traffic and higher sales at the end of the day. Improvements can range from simply a fresh coat of paint to signage and lighting upgrades. But regardless of the scope, availing a program like this can go a long way to improving business pride and increasing economic development activity. (See discussion of the Port Angeles façade improvement effort at the end of this report.)



Recommendation

Do not leave money on the table! If the capacity to apply for grants and funding is limited, outsourced the service. A successful application can more than pay for the cost.

Demand for economic development support will always exceed supply. Programmatic success is directly connected to the availability of resources. Every funding rock should be turned over to assess its applicability, and, where there’s synergy, pursue the funding source. One interesting observation is the availability of the State Small Business Credit Initiative. The Council of Development Finance Agencies shows a \$59.9M funding allocation to Alaska for 2021-2030 that was never applied. The 2010-2017 funding round shows >\$13M allocation that was directed toward the 49th State Angel Fund. The recent round represents a significant chunk of money that could have gone towards the downtown. There are also large infrastructure grant programs, such as the \$7.25B U.S. DOT’s Infra Grant Program; eligible uses are projects that “improve safety, generate economic benefits, reduce congestion,

enhance resiliency, and hold the greatest promise to eliminate freight bottlenecks and improve critical freight movements.”

State Resources Map

The following information summarizes the SSBCI application status or program information for each state participating in the Initiative. If you are a state SSBCI or access to capital program manager, you can help develop the SSBCI State Resources Map by sending information, comments, or materials to [CDFA](#).

To view a list of Tribal Governments that have submitted a Notice of Intent (NOI) to apply for SSBCI funds, [click here](#).

Alaska Overview

	SSBCI 2.0 (2021-2030)	SSBCI (2010-2017)
Agency		Municipality of Anchorage
Allocation Amount	\$59,905,891	\$13,168,000
Programs		49th State Angel Fund
Notice of Intent Submitted	Yes	State did not accept funds
Application Submitted	No	Yes
Funds Received	No	Yes

Moving Forward



Conclusions & Next Steps

The Anchorage Downtown District plan, when fully implemented, will help transform downtown. Our focus was to identify immediate next steps and longer term actions, however, understanding that resources are always limited and the full plan will take years to advance, and not necessarily cover everything that is required.

With the conclusion of that planning process, Anchorage is ready to focus on some short term projects to move forward and to build momentum.



Activating the front façade of parking garages, parking lots, and dead areas in the urban fabric can be as simple as identifying those areas and installing art installations, street furniture, or simply allowing food trucks and carts to activate the space.

Early Steps to Reconnect Alaska’s Cultural Heartbeat

Create new downtown housing at all levels of affordability and land tenure	
1.	Eliminate punitive housing minimum lot size, front, side, and rear setbacks, and open space requirements that don’t apply to non-residential uses.
2.	Privatize downtown housing (and perhaps other uses) parking requirements- let the market decide.
3.	Examine the Anchorage Public Health Building for possible reuse for housing.
4.	Create a comprehensive one stop team to support housing.
5.	Consider the full range of housing support services including a community resilience hub.
Reduce the amount of off-road surface parking lots, converting the land to housing and other infill	
1.	Create a plan of which ACDA parking lots can be surplused for housing.
2.	Create a clear policy of how surplusng of ACDA parking lots works.
3.	Adopt parking management strategies to ensure the availability of on-street parking.
Strengthen the transportation network, improve safety, encourage walking, and activate streets	
1.	Connect the trails to downtown.
2.	Paint the streets to mark crosswalks, narrow intersections, and create visual interest through murals.
3.	Implement a parking freeze on any new commercial parking spaces open to the general public.
Enhance the downtown retail, dining, and service economy to activate downtown	
1.	Expand small businesses assistance to include business venture fund and façade improvements.
2.	Develop a Business Retention and Expansion program.
3.	Work with the MOA to establish a service baseline for clean and safe services so that ADP can develop an ongoing maintenance schedule with baseline and enhancements.
4.	Develop messaging that positions downtown and downtown investment as supporting the entire community. Elevate the brand of ADP with an active social media campaign.
Strengthen the downtown urban fabric, fill gaps and activate streets--focus on catalysts	
1.	Develop and invest in a comprehensive winter lighting program.
2.	Create a downtown scavenger hunt walk using Urban Adventure Quest.
3.	Host summer dancing lessons once a week in July on Town Square various genres.
Improve the financial and institutional structures to support downtown improvements	
1.	ACDA should exercise its land banking and bonding authority.
2.	Create a business ombudsman position/responsibility within City Hall.
3.	Sell off City real estate assets, which can be readily be put to productive use.
4.	Strengthen public private partnership among economic development organizations.
5.	Chase all grant funding opportunities to supplement existing resources.

A Watershed Moment for Downtown –
Learning from Other Communities

The timing of this project is important given the passage of the downtown plan and the numerous public conversations that are represented in its proposals. Many of those ideas were reinforced during this process. The team heard repeatedly a public desire to see the downtown become more than a commercial or entertainment district but serve as the primary urban neighborhood for the city as well as the economic, social and cultural heart of Alaska: Reconnecting Alaska’s Cultural Heartbeat.

As the principle goes, people make place – and downtown Anchorage currently lacks a critical mass to produce a vibrant neighborhood with pedestrian activity and a compact mix of offerings that combine to create the urban life which attracts people and investment. Less than 1,000 people live downtown – in a city of over 290,000. It will take concentrated investment focused over a significant period of time to transform the downtown into a vibrant place. However, Anchorage is not the first city to face this challenge. The Communities by Design program has worked with numerous cities on downtown transformations over the past decades, and their stories and lessons learned are instructive. The following sample of stories demonstrates that community-wide partnership and focused effort will yield dramatic results over time.

Boise, Idaho

In the 1970s, city leaders demolished large blocks of historic buildings downtown in a failed attempt to attract a shopping center development. The impact was compared to a bomb being dropped on the downtown, leaving large vacant tracts of land in the city’s core. The downtown area was described as a “wasteland” and a “no man’s land.” In response, the city brought a Design Assistance Team to Boise to assess the situation and recommend a strategy for downtown, which “became the template for the work done then, and for the busy

downtown core that exists now.”

The AIA team’s assessment of downtown Boise was stark. They reported, “Boise is a city in search of its identity, sense of place and purpose. It is a city with parking lots where a vibrant business, entertainment and residential core—its ‘heart’—should be.”

The team of architects pledged to build a better Boise, “renewing a sense of civic pride” in Idaho’s capital city. They focused on an eight-block area at the city’s core, but their study also outlined how work on that core could integrate the advantages of the entire downtown area. As a local downtown leader described it, the team’s report was “the Bible.” “It said, ‘Stop tearing things down. You have a nice historic urban environment.’” The urban design plan included a new public space, which has become Grove Plaza, where major civic events are held today. It stressed connections back to the riverfront. It called for mixed-use, urban density and pedestrian-oriented streets. It stressed the need for more downtown housing. A major corridor, Eighth Street, was redesigned to make it the primary pedestrian connection between the Idaho Statehouse and the Boise River.

As the local newspaper states, “Thirty years later, the results of that team’s work can be seen in the busy car, foot and bicycle traffic downtown and in the local retail, offices and restaurants that fill the core.” What happened during the 1980s is now celebrated by locals as “The Boise Revolution.” As Anthony Lyons observes, the revolution “completely changed the direction downtown Boise was headed. The revolution began with a change in political leadership that first allowed the retail shopping center to go to the suburbs where it always wanted to be. The new mayor and members of the city council brought a neotraditional approach to urban design in downtown that emphasized pedestrian-friendly streets and mixed-use buildings. This approach was advanced by the visit from the American Institute of Architects’ Design Assistance Team. The DAT made 16 specific recommendations related to redevelopment and city design, most of which have been accomplished or

are currently underway.

The real revolution was the community coming together to overcome downtown’s stagnation, to heed the advice of the DAT team that Boiseans should “submerge their individual agendas and work together in the broader interest of the entire community.” Now, when so many people throughout the greater metropolitan area look at Boise’s downtown with a shared sense of pride, it is instructive to remember that was precisely the thing that was missing following the “bombing raid” days of not so long ago.” In Boise, the local newspaper marked the 30-year anniversary of the DAT process in 2015, noting that the 1985 DAT “set the stage for Boise’s downtown.” “Thirty years later, the results of that team’s work can be seen in the busy car, foot and bicycle traffic downtown and in the local retail, offices and restaurants that fill the core.” In 2016 alone, 24 new businesses opened in the downtown and the city was included on U.S. News & World Report’s Best Places to Live list, Forbes’ list of America’s Top 20Fastest Growing Cities, and Livability’s list of the Best Downtowns. The transformation in downtown Boise is dramatic.



Austin, Texas

A 2013 retrospective on downtown Austin stated, “When looking back on how far downtown Austin has come in the last 20 years, many newcomers to Austin would be surprised by the state of downtown in 1993.” Back then, downtown Austin was known as the “see-through city” due to the rampant vacancy, depressed real estate, the lack of downtown residential development, and a host of other challenges. Locals claimed that you could see clear across town through all the empty buildings.

“The roots of modern downtown Austin date back to the 1990’s. It was right after the notorious Texas savings and loan meltdown, the oil meltdown and an office space overbuilding frenzy. The City’s stated goal was to create a 24-hour live, work and play community in the heart of the city. At the behest of city leaders, architectural and planning experts descended on Austin and put together an AIA regional urban design assistance team plan (R/UDAT). The plan concentrated on the six blocks around the current city hall and incentivized multifamily, hotel and office developers who filled in what became the 2nd Street district. The city maintained control of

ground floor retail and the synergy of the action were the genesis for much of the momentum fueling today’s growth.”

In fact, city leaders brought AIA DAT teams to assist them multiple times over a decade. As they report, “Austin’s R/UDAT 1991 analyzed the problems of Downtown Austin and made recommendations on how to revitalize Downtown. After the 1991 team finished its work, a community group worked for a year to develop an action plan—A Call to Action. Although some steps were taken over the next six years, Downtown Austin was still in desperate need of development in 1997, when the team was brought back for AIA R/UDAT Revisited. Since the team felt that the original recommendations were still, for the most part, applicable, they decided to develop a short list of “do-these-first” projects. These projects were reviewed in the AIA R/UDAT Review 2000 conference on December 6, 2000.”

Many of the urban design suggestions would prove prescient, as the city worked to strengthen its connection to the waterfront, improve the public realm and walkability, increase mixed-use development in the

downtown and provide for civic facilities in strategically important locations. The Great Streets Initiative focused energy on improving the public realm and experience downtown as a core part of catalyzing interest. The city reprioritized its streets policy to prioritize pedestrians, transit, bikes and then cars for use, re-orienting streets as places. As they reflect on the economic juggernaut that downtown has become today, local leaders note that “It’s worth pointing out however that all this has not ‘just happened’ by itself.” It reflects an intentional process of planning that was refined and adjusted repeatedly as it evolved.

Today, the downtown is the centerpiece of a city that doubles its population every 20 years, boasting major corporate headquarters, robust residential growth and a vibrant cultural and business scene epitomized by the SXSW event, which has an annual economic impact of over \$100 million. In 2016, Forbes declared Austin “America’s Next Boom Town” after analyzing the 53 largest metro areas in the country to determine which have the best chance of prospering in the next decade.

Port Angeles, Washington

Port Angeles, Washington has inspired pride in change by creating a truly public revitalization process. Their success has been built around involving everyone in the process. In 2009, Port Angeles hosted an AIA team to focus on downtown revitalization and waterfront development. Port Angeles had suffered declining fortunes as the result of mill closures and reduced productivity from natural resource industries.

The three-day AIA process created enormous civic energy to pursue a vision for the city’s future. “Just two weeks after the AIA presented more than 30 recommendations, the Port Angeles Forward committee unanimously agreed to recommend 10 of those items for immediate action,” said Nathan West, the City’s Director of Community and Economic Development (now City Manager). “Public investment and commitment inspired private investment, and, less than a month later, the

community joined together in an effort to revamp the entire downtown, starting with a physical face-lift. Community members donated paint and equipment, and residents picked up their paintbrushes to start the transformation.” An immediate idea came directly from the community. Volunteers banded together to give 43 buildings downtown an immediate face-lift, and the momentum was born.

This effort led to a formal façade improvement program that extended the initiative exponentially. The city dedicated \$118,000 in community development block grants (CDBG) for the effort, which catalyzed over \$265,000 in private investment. The city also moved forward with substantial public investment in its waterfront, which had a dramatic impact in inspiring new partnerships and private investment. Within 5 years, Port Angeles had over \$100 million in new investment downtown, including an award-winning waterfront that draws people back to the downtown. In June 2012, Port Angeles was recognized with a state design award for its waterfront master plan. The city completed construction of phase 1 in 2014, and launched phase 2 in 2015. Today, major new public facilities are breaking ground on the waterfront, including an arts center and a cultural center dedicated to the indigenous peoples of the area and their history.

As West concluded, “The City of Port Angeles AIA design assistance experience was far more than just a planning exercise. This opportunity for our community was a catalyst for action, implementation and improvement. A primary outcome has been that the process awakened community pride and inspired a “together we can” attitude. Today the inspiration remains and the elements and recommendations of the program continue to be the driver for publicly endorsed capital projects and investments in our community. More importantly this sustainable approach has tapped into the core values and priorities of our citizens to ensure a better and more balanced future for our City.” As then Mayor Daniel Di Guilio observed, “This study will certainly continue to





provide us with very positive and visible results for our city to benefit from for many years to come.”

In 2015, the city was runner-up in Outside Magazine’s Best Towns competition. As the Magazine observed, “In the final throes of this year’s contest, Port Angeles staged an impressive fight. Homeowners put placards in their yards reminding passersby to vote, businesses made pleas on sandwich boards, and locals stood on street corners with signs. The town ended up coming in second to Chattanooga—which has almost ten times the population—by just 2 percent of the vote. The message was clear. “We love this town, and this community can really pull together,” says Jacob Oppelt, owner of Next Door Gastropub. The magazine concluded that “Port Angeles isn’t big, but as this year’s Best Towns showing demonstrates, it can compete with just about any place.”

Place and Identity

The opportunity to leverage downtown’s important role in activating and amplifying the Anchorage identity and cultural traditions cannot be overstated. Telling your story is important – particularly in terms of changing the current narrative and addressing some misconceptions as well as the sense of civic insecurity the team sensed in some conversations with downtown residents during the process.

The downtown should be a place that inspires pride across Anchorage, and our team was concerned by some of the narratives we’ve seen and heard. For instance, multiple national travel stories about Anchorage cite the following slogan, attributing it to local sentiment: “Alaska is 30 minutes outside of Anchorage.” To make this statement with the knowledge that Anchorage represents 40% of the entire state population is offensive. While the natural beauty of Wild Alaska is surely an asset, the cultural heart of Alaska and its diverse peoples are here in Anchorage. This city and its downtown should be a place of profound cultural meaning that inspires pride.



Our team found the recent Land Acknowledgment initiative and related efforts to center indigenous culture in the city’s identity an exciting development. It should be expanded moving forward.

Another national press piece we read stated that “Alaska does not have a reputation for diversity.” We believe the time is long since passed to correct such misperceptions and project a narrative identity for Anchorage that is fully representative of the deep diversity and rich cultural traditions that are present here. Anchorage hosts the nation’s most diverse neighborhood, the highest percentage of indigenous people in our nation, and the many varied cultural traditions that contribute to contemporary Anchorage, ranging from Pacific Islanders to Russians to African-Americans to Chinese and others.

In Dubuque, Iowa local officials have an ongoing campaign to amplify the diverse citizenry of their community called I’m a Dubuquer. As they describe it, “Through simple, black-and-white portraits of our neighbors, our fellow Dubuquers from all different walks of life, ages, occupations, and backgrounds, and the words, “I’m a Dubuquer,” we’re hoping to invite conversation about our community, to broaden our collective understanding of who our neighbors are, and to grab hold of the fullness of what the word Dubuquer does and can mean for the whole community.” Initiatives like Dubuque’s can begin to develop a collective identity and a common narrative about who you are as a city that inspires pride and partnership across diverse communities.

In Philadelphia – another city with an industrial waterfront – several innovative seasonal placemaking initiatives have leveraged the pride in industrial heritage while inviting people to celebrate their waterfront and civic identity. In Philadelphia, an industrial site and surface parking lot at Penn’s Landing turns into a winterized riverfront park as a seasonal pop-up for WinterFest. It is specific to the city’s industrial character and creative culture and the scale of event has real impact. A parking lot is used to create a skating rink,



more than 100,000 LED lights illuminate the area, a ski chalet style heated tent offers sofas and fireplaces, and industrial storage containers are programmed to sell food, serve as game rooms, create bars, and produce retail offerings. The industrial heritage and character of the area is leveraged and celebrated while animating it and making it a people-friendly environment. In the summer, Spruce Street Harbor Park is created as a “beachfront” with a boardwalk along the river. One hundred hammocks are hung in a grove of trees on the site under thousands of LED lights that glow at night. Industrial containers are utilized to create restaurants and bars. Two barges are used to create a public space on the water which hosts an art market featuring local artists.

These kinds of strategies would apply well in Anchorage and reinforce its unique identity while expressing a vision for the kind of place it wants to be in the future. The AIA team believes that the community should think creatively about interventions and make sure they express your unique, funky culture and leverage existing assets. The ability to experiment with temporary or seasonal pop-up projects can allow learning and refinement over time and lead to permanent installations that create unique destinations.

Toronto’s industrial waterfront features Sugar Beach, a park created from a surface parking lot – something

Anchorage has in great supply – to create a unique destination that communicates a sense of playfulness and fun on the city’s waterfront. As they describe it, “This playful park transformed a surface parking lot into an urban beach at the water’s edge. Sugar Beach draws upon the industrial heritage of the area and its relationship to the neighboring Redpath Sugar Refinery Museum to create a whimsical urban beach at the water’s edge. The beach allows visitors to while away the afternoon as they read, play in the sand or watch boats on the lake. A dynamic water feature embedded in a granite maple leaf beside the beach makes cooling off fun for adults and children. The park’s plaza offers a dynamic space for public events. A large candy-striped granite rock outcropping and three grass mounds give the public unique vantage points for larger events and the space between the mounds result in a natural performance space for smaller events.”

In Philadelphia, Cira Green utilizes the top of a parking garage to create a unique park setting, a larger versions of Anchorage’s Rooftop Park at the Fifth Avenue Parking Garage. Cira Green includes walkways, benches and lawns where people gather for all kinds of activities and programs, from yoga to picnics or games. The space also creates a unique vantage point to experience the city. As they describe it, “Looking east, Cira Green offers an unobstructed view of the Philadelphia Skyline thanks to the train track, highway, and Schuylkill River

below that prevent any tall buildings from being built nearby.” It doesn’t take much imagination to consider the possibilities in downtown Anchorage, expanding on the Fifth Avenue Parking Garage rooftop park concept, and the exciting destinations that could develop as hot spots of activity as a result of their unique leveraging of place.

Building a Civic Movement for Innovation

Anchorage has won the coveted All-America City Award four times, including 1956, 1965, 1984–85, and 2002. Often referred to as the “Olympics of Community,” the award recognizes jurisdictions that have built cross-sector collaborations to address their critical issues. Anchorage has proven that it has the capacity to build partnerships that involve a broad sector of the community in realizing common goals. Leveraging this civic capacity is critical to addressing aspirations for downtown.

The New York Times feature, 36 Hours in Anchorage, includes this observation: “Anchorage sits between mountains and saltwater in a setting that is hard to improve upon. “And they haven’t,” a cynic might say of the state’s largest city. True, this municipality of 300,000 (its sprawling boundaries make it nearly four-fifths the size of Delaware) will not win any urban-planning contests.” Even as outsiders to the city, reading that passage from a media source that reaches millions of people solicits anger. The team feels that civic leaders

across the Anchorage community should use such disparagement as a rallying cry to build an award-winning downtown that is a shining example of what it means to be a Winter City. All of the elements to build such a place are already present here, from the natural landscape to the cultural roots. They simply need to be integrated to produce a rich representation of place, and the downtown plays a critical role in this development. Telling your story through place is important!



Team Roster



Wayne Feiden, FAICP– Team Leader

Wayne is Director of Planning & Sustainability for the City of Northampton and Lecturer of Practice in planning and sustainability at UMass. His focus includes sustainability, resiliency, regeneration, urban revitalization, open space, alternative transportation, and public health. He led Northampton to earn the nation’s first 5-STAR Community for municipal sustainability as well as “Bicycle-Friendly,” “Pedestrian-Friendly,” “APA Great Streets,” and “National Historic Trust Distinctive Communities” designations.

His research publications include “Conservation Limited Development” (in press), “Building Sustainability and Resiliency into Local Planning Agencies” (APA PAS Memos), and Local Agency Planning Management and Assessing Sustainability (APA PAS Reports). Wayne’s Bellagio Residency (Italy), State Department Professional Fellowship Exchange (Malaysia), German Marshall Fund fellowship (United Kingdom and Denmark), Fulbright Specialist Fellowships (South Africa and New Zealand), Eisenhower Fellowship (Hungary) all focused on revitalization and sustainability. He has served on 33 multidisciplinary teams to other communities on revitalization and sustainability issues. Wayne is a fellow of the American Institute of Certified Planners. His awards include honorary member of Western Mass AIA, professional planner and advocacy planner awards from APA-MA, and American Trails Advocacy Award. Wayne has a BS Natural Resources from the University of Michigan and a Masters in City Planning from the University of Northampton Carolina

Lydia Hausle, AICP

Lydia is a Senior Planner at Toole Design Group in Boston, MA. For nearly a decade, the projects Lydia has managed and supported throughout her career emphasize the need for safe, convenient, and equitable access to multimodal transportation. Though her focus

is on transportation, Lydia approaches projects with an inherent commitment to explore and incorporate a community’s land use, social, economic, and climate contexts as they intersect with transportation.

In her time with Toole Design, Lydia has led and contributed to a wide range of transportation planning and design projects across the northeast. She has played a pivotal role in steering and producing multimodal master plans ranging from the campus to the statewide scale. She has completed multimodal design guides, parking plans, full-depth corridor reconstruction projects, rapid implementation projects, temporary demonstrations, and many projects in between. As a design-minded planner, Lydia enjoys building strong partnerships with municipalities and the public to help them move from the planning phase directly into the capacity building and implementation phases for their multimodal networks. In addition, Lydia brings several years of experience in private development and regulatory permitting and has worked directly with local, state, and federal agencies to shepherd development projects through public review and permitting processes from initial concept to building permit.

Jane Jenkins

Jane Jenkins is President and CEO of Downtown Oklahoma City Partnership. With over 30 years of experience in downtown revitalization and management, Jane is an internationally recognized speaker and expert on urban issues. She is a former Chairman for the International Downtown Association Board of Directors and is also active in the International Economic Development Council, Urban Land Institute, and the American Institute of Architects. In 2014, Jane earned accreditation from the Congress for New Urbanism and she was recently named a Senior Fellow at the Institute for Place Management in Manchester, England. A former high school educator, Jane was named 1982 Teacher of the Year at Union High School in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

She holds a Master of Public Administration from the University of North Texas in Denton.

Søren Simonsen, AIA

Søren Simonsen is Executive Director of the Jordan River Commission. Søren is an urban planner, architect, educator, community-builder and social entrepreneur. Over the past three decades, including 17 years of public service as an appointed and elected official, he has worked to create sustainable places and livable communities in Utah and the West.

Søren earned a Master of Arts in Community Leadership at Westminster College in Salt Lake City, with an emphasis on organizational leadership, public policy and community organizing. His research and thesis focused on sustainable cities and natural resource issues. He previously received a Bachelor of Architecture from the University of Texas at Austin, with an emphasis in environmental design, urban design, and community and regional planning.

Søren is an accomplished professional and has received broad recognition for his planning, public policy, urban design and advocacy work. He was recently elevated as a Fellow by the American Institute of Architects. Other honors include the AIA Utah Bronze Medal and four Best of State Gold Medals in Community Development. He has received numerous citations from the American Planning Association American Institute of Architects, American Society of Landscape Architects, and U.S. Green Building Council. He directed or contributed to 28 projects, plans and initiatives that have received an Envision Utah Governor’s Quality Growth Award, including Parleys Trail and the Swaner EcoCenter.

Søren was elected to the Salt Lake City Council in 2005, serving two four-year terms. He was Salt Lake City’s representative in the formation of the Jordan River Commission in 2010. Following his city council

service, he was appointed as Salt Lake County’s “At-Large” member of the Commission from 2014 through 2016. He has served on numerous local and national boards and committees for professional and community organizations, where he has been a champion for social enterprise, urban design, active transportation, public health, ecology, environmental stewardship and resource conservation, arts and culture, and human rights.

Theresa Park

Theresa Park joined MassDevelopment in March 2021 as deputy director and senior executive vice president. She will be second in command at MassDevelopment per the bylaws and will focus on program effectiveness and development.

Theresa comes to MassDevelopment with 25 years of regional and municipal planning experience. She most recently served as the executive director of the Merrimack Valley Planning Commission, one of 13 regional planning agencies in the state. Theresa’s planning background includes serving as director of the office of planning and development for the City of Lawrence, overseeing the operations of planning, economic development, community development, and inspectional services departments while also advancing improvements in transportation infrastructure, Brownfields redevelopment, housing development, and parks and open space. Her other experience includes seven years leading economic development at the City of Lowell, Massachusetts, seven years as principal planner at the City of Newton, Massachusetts, and three years in different roles in Cambridge, Massachusetts and she brings extensive experience in the areas of economic development, telecommunications, transportation, and permit streamlining.

Theresa received her master’s in Urban and Regional Planning from The George Washington University and a bachelor’s in Business Administration from

the University of Massachusetts – Amherst. She also attended the International Summer School in Oslo, Norway while in graduate school and spent a semester abroad in Kenya as an undergraduate student. Her non-work hours are spent serving on boards, globetrotting, and learning home-improvement projects.

Erin Simmons

Erin Simmons is the Senior Director of Design Assistance at the Center for Communities by Design at the AIA in Washington, DC. The Center is a provider of pro bono technical assistance and participatory planning for community revitalization. Through its design assistance programs, the AIA has worked in over 250 communities and has been the recipient of numerous awards including “Organization of the Year” by the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) and the “Outstanding Program Award” from the Community Development Society. Erin is a leading practitioner of the design assistance process, providing expertise, facilitation, and support for the Center’s Design Assistance Team programs. In this capacity, she works with AIA components, members, partner organizations and community leaders to provide technical design assistance to communities across the world. Her portfolio includes work in over 100 communities across the United States and internationally. Erin is an Academician of the Academy of Urbanism in London, UK. Prior to joining the AIA, Erin worked as historic preservationist and architectural historian for an environmental and engineering firm, where she practiced preservation planning, created historic district design guidelines and zoning ordinances, and conducted historic resource surveys. She holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in History from Florida State University and a Master’s degree in Historic Preservation from the University of Georgia.

Joel Mills

Joel Mills is Senior Director of the American Institute of Architects’ Center for Communities by Design. The Center is a leading provider of pro bono technical assistance and democratic design for community success. Its programs have catalyzed billions of dollars in sustainable development across the United States, helping to create some of the most vibrant places in America today. The Center’s design assistance process has been recognized with numerous awards and has been replicated and adapted across the world. Joel’s 27-year career has been focused on strengthening civic capacity, public processes and civic institutions. This work has helped millions of people participate in democratic processes, visioning efforts, and community planning initiatives. He has delivered presentations, training content, workshops and public processes in over a dozen countries across 5 continents. In the United States, Joel has provided consultative services to hundreds of communities, leading participatory processes on the ground in over 85 communities across 35 states. His work has been featured in over 1,000 media stories. Joel has served on dozens of expert working groups, boards, juries, and panels focused on civic discourse and participation, sustainability, and democracy. He was a founding Board Member of the International Association for Public Participation’s United States Chapter. He has spoken at numerous international conferences concerning democratic urbanism and the role of democracy in urban success, including serving as the Co-Convener of the Remaking Cities Congress in 2013. Joel is an Academician of the Academy of Urbanism in London, UK. He is the author of numerous articles on the relationship between democracy, civic capacity and community.

Connect, Catalyze, & Cultivate Anchorage

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1735 New York Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20006

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