

Quite a few urban design experts from around the world have visited Alaska's villages and towns. One consistent remark is how our communities look like Anyplace, U.S.A. Suburban sprawl with cookie cutter sub-divisions separated from civic facilities, workplaces and shopping. Places where sidewalks are rarely installed and the automobile is king. Places oriented around the individual with little inherent sense of neighborhood or community. Places where six months of cold and darkness reinforce the isolation of individuals.

Some voices speak out for more roads, wider roads, grade-separated interchanges so that able-bodied adults can quickly move about - time is money and one minute more on the road is less profit in the pocket. These voices speak to individual self-interest and the short-term focus of commerce. The voices of kids, elderly, physically disabled and folks without cars are ignored. The voices of neighborhoods are frequently over-ridden.

Commerce has traditionally shaped the design of urban areas. However there are key differences today in our northern communities. First, the world of commerce is being rapidly transformed. Advances in computer and telecommunication technology are providing the impetus for the unfolding reality of the new economy. The Digital Age is constructing an alternative way of moving economic goods and services. Electronic roads and streets are being built to provide ready access to the information super-highways. Our economic system is creating a new venue for commerce that lessens the need for traditional road expansion. This expanding network of digital roads allows for increased delivery of tele-education, tele-shopping, tele-medicine and even tele-commuting. The future will witness further transformation of urban areas as more and more commerce shifts to the convenience and efficiency of the digital transportation system.

Second, many communities are physically constrained by mountains and water which limits the normal option of continual suburban expansion.. Anchorage, in particular, is running out of cheap land in the Bowl. A recent commercial development of another big box retailer was noted for its high cost of site preparation due to large amounts of peat that had to be removed and replaced with gravel. Re-development is already beginning to occur. Fairview is undergoing a significant transition with new investment as the good soils and low land rents of east Downtown become more attractive. Re-plats of trailer courts are beginning to occur as the marketplace moves the land to a higher and more intensive use. This activity will increase the density of people and economic activity.

Third, our communities and especially Anchorage are Winter Cities. Anchorage is the only American metropolitan area located in the sub-Arctic. Many of our communities are the only ones in America located in the Arctic.

We live in communities where fully half the year is winter. It is questionable whether the suburban style of development acceptable in the Lower 48 is appropriate in our northern environment. We know that sprawl is expensive to support in a winter city. The financial cost of snow removal consumes large amounts of scarce resources (How much did your community pay for fuel this past winter?) which sun-belt communities can ignore.

There are a number of common problems associated with northern cities in the winter. Snow and ice can substantially reduce resident's mobility and social interaction, thereby affecting businesses. Driving and walking can become extremely hazardous. Weather can affect outdoor activities. Long cold winters can severely restrict resident's outdoor activities for long periods of time. Some medical professional assert that the increase in diabetes and obesity can be linked to the inappropriate design of our communities. The winter landscape can be rather gloomy and bleak, and there may be little vegetation and color. Long winters can affect a person emotionally. One can sense some resident's depression and we know that Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) or "cabin fever" affects most of us in some way.

Mature winter cities are scaled to people. They are cities built with kids, elderly and the physically disabled in mind. Accessibility to arts, culture, recreational, sports and entertainment activities must be assured for all residents. There should be equal choices for indoor and outdoor activities. If we make our communities easier for our neighbors to get around in the winter, then able-bodied adults will witness a dramatic improvement in their quality of life. We can overcome the inconvenience, difficulty or emotional burden placed upon us by long dark winters. We can create livable winter communities in which we celebrate our northern environment and our community becomes truly a place for all seasons. A community created so that it actually feels like a real home rather than just a place you drive your automobile.

What type of improvements would we see if we embraced the notions of a more livable winter community? We would see:

- more separated sidewalks so that kids and other non-auto residents could feel safe when walking along our roads. Improved snow and ice removal to our bus stops to support use of public transit.

- in the densely developed parts of a community one would gradually see innovative ways of enhanced pedestrian mobility such as heated sidewalks, arcades, colonnades, hard awnings, canopies and skywalks. We could see the road intersection raised to the level of the pedestrian rather than lowering the pedestrian to the level of the vehicle.

- more creative engineering solutions to usable pedestrian crossings of our arterials such as the tweaking of steel design at the Tudor and Bragaw overpass. Smarter engineering would push the envelope on excellence for pedestrians.

- more compact, mixed-use development so that we do not have to walk so far during the day and the costs of operation and maintenance are sustainable. This investment would reaffirm our uniqueness as a quality place to live, work and raise a family.

Are we prepared to make the decisions that will commit resources to the design and construction of a more human scaled community? Each thoughtful individual should be asking their neighbors that question. Is it time for us to enhance our built environment so that children, the elderly and physically disabled can move freely about our community? Some say we need to do it to remain competitive in the global marketplace for knowledge workers. Others say we need to do it because of our maturity as unique people of the north. What do you say?

Each person can make a difference. If your vision of our northern future includes an enhanced quality of life then make sure your voice is also heard.