

27 April 2020

Michelle McNulty
Planning Director
Municipality of Anchorage Planning Department
4700 Elmore Road, Anchorage AK 99507
By Electronic Mail: michelle.mcnulty@anchorageak.gov



Re: Spenard Corridor Plan comments – Spenard Community Council

Dear Michelle McNulty,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the Public Hearing Draft Spenard Corridor Plan (SCP), dated January 2020. These comments are submitted on behalf of the Spenard Community Council (SCC).

Since 2014, the SCC has supported efforts to fund and develop the Spenard Corridor Plan. When this planning effort began in 2016, our council became involved and has continued to help shape this plan as a comprehensive vision for our community. The SCP is unique for Anchorage in having transit-oriented development, active transportation, and neighborhood identities as central and necessary components of the document. We feel these components are essential in guiding our community for years to come.

We have adopted this plan as our own and intend to campaign to have the Anchorage Assembly adopt it as the official neighborhood plan for the SCC. We offer the following comments in an effort to continue to align the document with our resident's vision for our own neighborhoods.

We are thankful for the opportunity to help make this great document even better. Please contact us for clarifications or questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lindsey Hajduk".

Lindsey Hajduk
President
Spenard Community Council
907-360-3320

Recommendation Summary

- **Chapter 7:** The SCC supports the inclusion of these new components into the final SCP.
- **Land Use Encroachment:** The SCC recommends incorporating a new policy on land use encroachment to ensure residential properties are protected.
- **Minnesota Drive:**
 - The SCC would like to see Minnesota Dr. better incorporated into the SCP to have vision/goals, framework policies and directives, and design guidelines, applied to the roadway. The SCC would also like to see Minnesota better reflected in the maps.
 - The SCC does not support the so-called “one-way couplet” on Minnesota-36th Ave-Spenard and recommends it be removed from the SCP.
- **Parks and trails:** Our council strongly supports connectivity of our parks and trails, as well as the long-term vision of daylighting Fish Creek. We also emphasize the need to use native plants throughout the community near these open spaces and during redevelopment.

Chapter 7: Implementation

The Spenard Corridor Plan represents a community plan to be implemented for the next 30 years. It is the closest thing to a community vision for Spenard that will exist for the neighborhood. The Planning and Zoning Commission and Anchorage Assembly should officially adopt this plan and ensure its incorporation and implementation into all municipality actions within the planning area going forward

The SCC is pleased to see the addition of sections within Chapter 7, including the action plan and implementation strategies by chapter. The policies and concepts included within the SCP help paint the future vision for Spenard, but the implementation of these components are essential to making this vision a reality. The SCC strongly supports the incorporation of the new Chapter 7 items in the document, with the following recommendations included.

Chapter 7 Implementation, page 140: The text reads, *“The project must be fully designed and shared with neighborhood groups, such as Spenard Community Council, although at no more than a concept level. This approach holds the developer to a shared objective, but allows an interim project that is viable. In most cases, the unbuilt portion of the property would serve as surface parking in the near term with an understanding that it would be developed later. This will allow high intensity projects to take place over time, and can enable them to start in the near term with currently feasible partial projects.”*

However, allowing surface parking in the near-term is not any different than what is the current unenforced, but existing, code enforcement policy in the Corridor. We would prefer more

specific guidance for developers regarding "interim projects." What would "interim" time frames look like within the 30-year window referenced in this section preamble?

Chapter 7 Implementation, page 142: These sections on Adaptive Reuse and Building Renovations and Improvements are vitally important to the development of the neighborhood's commercial uses. References to Municipal support such as financial assistance, low interest loans, and other similar mechanisms could also include reference to the creation of a revolving loan fund from Community Development Block Grant sources to support small business improvements. This would be added to the section that includes, *"Adaptive Reuse Not all private investment in Spenard should be focused on new construction. There are significant opportunities to reuse existing commercial buildings for new land uses that better support the Plan's goals for the Corridor. For example, a vacant building that housed an auto-mechanic shop could be reconfigured to house a coffee shop or an art gallery. This type of investment should be encouraged and supported by the Municipality, particularly since these smaller, older buildings can help maintain the eclectic and authentic feel of the area as newer development occurs on other sites. Supporting this type of investment may require enhancing flexibility in the zoning code to remove barriers to adaptive reuse, such as required parking. Building Renovations and Improvements The Municipality should support property owners that want to invest in renovations or site improvements to existing properties. Enhancing landscaping, consolidating vehicular access, reconfiguring parking, redesigning façades, fixing deteriorated building elements and adding new outdoor seating areas are all examples of renovations that would further the Plan's objectives. Consider the potential to set up programs at the Municipality or in partnerships with Spenard non-profits that encourage and reward property owners that want to invest in their property. Financial assistance, low interest loans and other similar mechanisms are all possibilities."*

Chapter 7 Implementation, page 148: The text reads, *"Examples of redevelopment barriers include requirements for lot size, setbacks, landscaping, easement and parking. Minimum parking ratios are a leftover from suburban traffic engineering of the 1960s. They have codified automobile-only planning and over-parking to the extent that many places appear to be wide open parking lots instead of urban places for people to enjoy. To address this, this Plan recommends legislating parking maximums instead of minimums, and letting developers and the market determine whether or not parking is needed for a site. This is a high priority zoning action which could occur in coordination with a more comprehensive zoning overlay as discussed above or it could be done sooner with a more targeted zoning amendment."*

The SCC agrees and is pleased to see this recommendation referenced and connected in language elsewhere in the plan that supports shared parking zones, such as in Implementation section (p.176) *"Policy 5.29: Promote Compact Parking Design* 1. Provide an adequate number of spaces while also minimizing curb cuts and avoiding potential interruptions to vehicular traffic and pedestrian/ bicycle traffic. 2. Locate and design parking to reinforce the transit-peDESTrian-, and bicycle-friendly vision for Spenard. 3. Refer to bullet list under Policy 5.29 for specific design alternatives." Zoning overlays which would allow lower parking requirements

are the right idea for Spenard, where the commercial sectors should be available for patronage of multiple businesses by non-motorized and transit users.

Land Use Encroachment

Land use change often occurs within the SCP area. The municipality's enforcement team is an important key to ensuring that the appropriate land use designations are followed.

Chapter 3 Plan Concept/Framework pages 40 or 41: As the conservation of residential lands for housing is a high community priority, rezonings of residential properties to commercial is inappropriate. Stable residential neighborhoods should be maintained. This should be included on page 40 Changes in Land Use, or page 41 Protecting Established Neighborhoods. To discourage speculative rezone, staff should consider including sunset clauses in conditions for rezone.

Chapter 4 District-Specific Concepts, Page 69 “Potential Encroachment of Commercial on Single-Family Properties:” Land use encroachment occurs throughout Spenard, often for speculative purposes from residential to commercial, taking time and energy of residents to fight for residential properties. The SCP is encouraging higher-density residential use, so this concept should be strengthened and turned into a policy to apply to the full SCP area, not just the Central District.

Chapter 3 Plan Concept/Framework, Page 41, Policy 3.8: The Spenard Overlay Zone acts as a tool to provide guidelines and policies on what transitional land use can occur. The council supports the distinctions within the overlay zone.

South District

Chapter 4 District-Specific Concepts, Page 84: Major at-grade pedestrian crossing should be placed at Breezewood with a zebra marked, bulb/choker crossing to minimize the distance the pedestrian or bicyclist must cross and a pedestrian activated stoplight. Serious consideration should be given to a pedestrian refuge island at Spenard and Aviation Avenue.

Other considerations should be slowing traffic from Northwood Drive to International, taking into account the deep curves of the road that make it unsafe for ingress/egress from side streets for pedestrians, bicyclists and vehicles.

Chapter 4 District-Specific Concepts, Page 88, Southern Gateway: This language should be removed from this section, “Improvements to this intersection may also include a future interchange.” This is neither wanted nor needed and has been strenuously opposed by the Spenard Community Council for years.

Minnesota Drive

Minnesota Dr. should be fully incorporated into the SCP to ensure planning solutions are able to address the needs within the plan area. Currently Minnesota Dr. acts as a highway dividing our community, obstructing access across superblocks, and creating high air pollution along its route. This length is just 1 mile long, but improvements along Minnesota Dr. that align with the SCP principles, design concepts, street-edge character, etc., should be applied to Minnesota in this plan.

Opportunities, including in the Metropolitan Transportation 2040 plan offers multi-way studies on Minnesota from Tudor to Hillcrest to test for solutions our community members have long sought out, including reduced speeds (to 35 mph), safer and more frequent crossings, a lane diet, and supporting the daylighting of Fish Creek Road.

Chapter 3 Plan Concept/Framework, Page 26 and subsequent maps (Figures 3.3-8) Plan

Concept area map: A conspicuous deletion from the plan area map is Minnesota Drive, essentially a 6-lane high speed corridor through the heart of the Spenard neighborhood and Corridor Plan. Concepts around connecting features on either side of Spenard Road itself cannot be taken into consideration without Minnesota Dr., which is an important regional feature that needs to be incorporated into planning and solutions offered in the SCP.

Chapter 3 Plan Concept/Framework, Page 32 (Figure 3.5) Active Transportation Network map: The entirety of Minnesota Drive from Tudor Rd. to Hillcrest Dr. should be identified as a Secondary Active Network. There should be safe sidewalks or multi-use path facilities along the corridor to accommodate for people on foot and by bike. Currently sidewalks are narrow and directly next to three lanes of 45+ mph traffic. Neighborhoods throughout the plan area are often segmented and obstructed, leaving the pathway along Minnesota Dr. as the best option for active transportation. Potential intersection changes along Minnesota Dr. should also allow for the active network to continue along the roadway.

Chapter 5 Circulation and Connectivity, page 101: The community has clearly spoken against routing northbound traffic from Minnesota Blvd. onto Eastbound Spenard Road, a proposal AK Department of Transportation refers to as "the one-way couplet." The Minnesota-36th Ave-Spenard couplet is not supported by the SCC and should be removed from the SCP.

Chapter 5 Circulation and Connectivity, page 117: We recommend adding a new survey tool to the red text in this section, which reads, "*Minnesota Drive at 33rd Avenue. A crossing at this location would provide more direct pedestrian and bicycle crossings from the neighborhoods west of Minnesota Drive to the Spenard Road corridor. However, due to the impacts on Minnesota Drive (signal time given to each direction dramatically decreases a road's capacity, increasing the possibility of congestion and queues), this crossing should be implemented only in response to a substantial increase in pedestrian demand. Further study is needed to project the potential use levels of this crossing.*" When there is no current safe crossing, such as at

Minnesota Drive and 33rd Avenue, we cannot measure true pedestrian demand. We recommend DOT/AMATS create a new survey tool to forecast demand based on proposed improvements, i.e. if there was a signaled crossing or pedestrian bridge at 33rd and Minnesota and how likely it would be used.

Parks and Trails

Page 44 (Figure 2.8) Open Space Network: There are exciting new components included, like the note about the potential for the Alaska Railroad trail. The Fish Creek Greenbelt and primary active network along it is an important priority for the community. These regional open space features described on page 39 are exciting opportunities to build on the Anchorage 2040 Land-Use Plan for greenway-supported development.

Utilities, including electrical, should have another policy number that includes maintaining native vegetation when servicing their water/wastewater and electrical lines. As of now, there is nothing that mentions the destruction that is happening currently to the mature trees of Spenard by Chugach Electric Association in taking down entirely or cutting trees at electrical line height. They are also taking trees down next to parks that feed into Fish Creek. This would not be a problem if they put their electrical lines underground as they are required to do with the monies collected each month from the ratepayers.

AWWU should be required to revegetate with native species, after laying or replacing pipes, especially when it is in an area that feeds directly into the Fish Creek watershed. (See Northwood Park as it ends at Tundra Court.)