

University Area Community Council
Federation of Community Councils 1057 W Fireweed Ln, Anchorage, AK 99503

July 8, 2021

Dear Mayor Bronson and Assembly Members,

Re: Proposed Homeless Shelter/Navigation Center SE of Tudor Rd and Elmore Rd

The University Area Community Council fully acknowledges that more homeless services are needed in Anchorage. We commend Mayor Bronson for addressing the issue, but many of our members have expressed legitimate concerns with the proposed facility. We agree with Vice-Chairman Chris Constant's view at the 6/23/21 Assembly's meeting on Homeless Issues: Every area of Anchorage has homeless issues, and every area should do their part in resolving those issues. The UACC is willing to continue doing our share, even increase our share, and we hope other parts of Anchorage do likewise. However, this huge, proposed facility appears very problematic and not viable in its present form for several reasons.

Timing

We see no realistic, affordable way this \$15 million+ facility could be even close to fully operational when cold weather arrives in a few months. We have seen a colorful slide show, but few hard facts. The public needs to see detailed cost estimates and plans, from design, permits (land use, building and 404), and project approval, to purchase, construction, furnishing, staffing, training, access and parking and start of full-time operations. Each of these steps is time consuming, considering the complex nature of the work

For example, under current Title 21 regulations, shelters are conditional use in the PLI zoning district. The typical timeframe for completing the conditional use process is at least 90 days. However, this permitting process usually requires more time, upwards of 120-180 days.

This lack of clarity makes it difficult to imagine timely project completion. If the proposal is approved in July 2021, it would require an exceedingly diligent effort to be operating, even by Winter 2022, because the great majority of work occurs after the building is erected. The lack of clarity also makes it difficult for the UACC to make more detailed comments on the proposal and compare it to proposals developed by the previous administration and provided to the Mayor.

What is the new administration's Plan B? How will people experiencing homelessness be housed and provided meals and services if this proposed facility doesn't work out in time. Any Plan B should be distinct and separate from this proposal.

The Mayor indicated he will be requesting \$15 million from the Assembly before the public has seen his detailed “concrete” proposal. We strongly request that the Mayor immediately request or even purchase an extension of the option to buy the former mid-town Alaska Club (set to expire 7/9/21) as the best realistic alternative option that meets the need for the un-housed population in the shortest timeframe. The Muni professional staff indicated, if purchased, the Alaska Club facility could be made ready for full-time use in fall 2021, as testimony to the Assembly on 6/23/21 made clear. Nothing close to that has been said about this Homeless Shelter/Navigation Facility.

Too Big a Shelter/Navigation Facility

On 6/20/21, the ADN quoted Lisa Aquino, CEO of Catholic Social Services in reference to the huge, proposed facility: “. . . smaller shelters are better. The Brother Francis Shelter has cut its capacity in part due to Covid-19 but also to mitigate its impact and provide better services.” We understand that the lower capacity will be maintained post-Covid-19. Everyone experienced on homeless issues with whom we have spoken, also said smaller is better, as do the UACC area residents who commented. We understand smaller means a capacity of fewer than 150 beds.

This proposed huge facility has a capacity of 1000 people, but Dr. John Morris indicates that it would actually house about 400. That is exceedingly difficult to believe. If such a large homeless facility/navigation center is built and works as well as he says, more people experiencing homelessness would come. He states the facility would be very low barrier (i.e., few turned away), so more would have to be admitted and housed, perhaps nearing the 1000-person capacity.

This facility (whether it is permanent or temporary is unclear), is under one roof and described by Dr. Morris as having sound-proof walls, smaller spaces for engagement, dignity and quiet, co-locating the full menu of wrap around services, with easy separation of persons based on the type of care they need. Again, we find this ideal very difficult to believe without sufficient evidence of the efficacy of such a proposal. The large congregate setting has a high potential to create serious health and safety risks. A low barrier facility implies minimum paperwork, no curfews or background checks, few or no restriction on possessions, accompanying family members and pets, minimum restraint to entry and exit, etc. Given that locked gates seem inconsistent with the concept of a low barrier facility, people experiencing homelessness would be able to come and go at will 24/7 and have minimum restrictions on their movements within the facility.

Unfortunately, among people experiencing homelessness, are those with mental health challenges, sex offenders and people who experience substance abuse disorder. A major concern is whether women and children in the facility can be adequately protected when there is no reasoning with clients who are under the influence. It is likely with the facility's inherent anonymity, size and easy access, that some of those who have been sexually assaulted would come in contact with their molester. That is unacceptable. Also, this large a facility could promote transmission of disease and allergens, including those from pets and pet waste.

We are concerned people experiencing homelessness will have a bad choice:

a) arrest or b) living in a place that may not be safe and sanitary.

We support a smaller facility (up to 150 beds) because it would promote community within the facility while allowing individuals to receive one-on-one care and services resulting in a decrease in negative incidents

Neighborhood safety and security issues

Chris Constant, who is highly knowledgeable on homeless issues, is quoted in the 6/11/21 ADN: "Putting 1000 people in one site costs that neighborhood their integrity." One resident in our area said, "another forested part of Anchorage [could become] a place where garbage and human waste accumulate."

The UACC area already contributes to serving members of our community experiencing homelessness. The well-run, high barrier, Anchorage Gospel Rescue Mission is located on the north side of Tudor just six blocks from the location of the proposed shelter. The Anchorage Gospel Rescue Mission has a capacity of approximately 100 people. Despite the well-run nature of the facility, neighbors with homes and apartments in close proximity have experienced thefts and other property crimes.

The new shelter will also bring an increase in the number of illegal pedestrian crossings on a very busy, 50 MPH section of Tudor Road potentially increasing pedestrian injuries and deaths.

A multi-use trail closely parallels the proposed shelter site on the south side of Tudor before crossing the Tudor bridge and going north toward UAA and APU campuses, including UAA student housing, approximately 2 blocks distance. It also forks east, then north, paralleling the backyards of the homes on the west side of Wesleyan Drive in the College Gate neighborhood.

In a few minutes, the clients of the newly proposed Shelter/Navigation facility would have easy access to other neighborhoods within a mile or so (U-Med Gateway and Castle Heights) as well as the Greenbriar Apartment Complex (directly across Tudor). A number of businesses and a convenient liquor store are less than ½ mile away. A subsequent increase in petty theft would be expected.

Has the transition team or new administration studied or taken into account the impact on these areas and potential conflicts with the hundreds, perhaps thousands of daily users of the multi-use trails, including dog walkers, hikers, bikers and skiers? We would like to see results of such a study. We have already seen an impact on the multi-use trail and neighborhoods bordering the Sullivan Arena, with groups of people congregating and some camping in nearby wooded areas.

We feel the larger the facility at Tudor and Elmore, the more people experiencing homelessness would camp outdoors in nearby wooded areas. If requested by police to move, they could easily take their camping gear into the facility for a day or two and later re-set their camps. If people can come for meals only, many will congregate, and likely roam around as was seen frequently at Beans Café.

We are concerned that risk of fire would increase substantially. We agree with Samantha Emerson's Letter to the ADN Editor of 6/23/21: The proposal puts this huge facility "into the most densely forested area in the City. This will inevitably result in a mass influx of camps, and dangerous costly fires, into these immense green spaces . . . We already have numerous wildfires in this area each year, started by such camps. Just two years ago, a fire started near the same corner as the proposed site, tore through the woods, forced evacuations and threatened lives." We also do not support the Municipality shifting \$3.5 million in funds earmarked for spruce bark beetle kill mitigation funds for the construction of homeless facilities. We need this mitigation to greatly reduce fire hazards.

The site is close to Providence Emergency Room and even closer to ANMC's, both of which are at capacity essentially 24/day. At first this may appear to be a benefit, but Dr. David Tarby, a nearby College Gate resident with experience working at both said, "When a shelter is placed within walking distance [to an ER] without the opportunity to have pre-screening by EMS or other health personnel these non-emergency visits will greatly increase."

Another UACC neighbor said: "Placing additional strain on the hospitals while moving the primary shelter away from all other support services is a recipe for failure and financial ruin. Attempting to concentrate a large portion of Anchorage's homeless population in one place compounds the problems associated with homelessness.... It

creates an environment in which housing insecurity, substance abuse, and petty crime are the standards; there is no driving force for positive change. We know this because Anchorage has attempted it twice already.”

Additional Missing Information

We request clear statements of sources of public and private funds. What percent of the \$15+ million will be from NGOs? What construction and operations costs are not in the estimate?

Have the Mayor and his advisors made a thorough assessment of the data and analysis that the Muni funded for Site 27 as a possible new location for the Bus Barn? If not, we urge you to do so. It's the same site proposed for the Homeless Shelter/Navigation Center.

We request detailed plans for meals, sleeping, childcare, pet care, laundry, medical and mental health services, a multiple-person de-tox unit, counselling, case management, job-placement, sanitation and security for this facility.

Alexis St. Juliana, a College Gate resident, took the time to spell out the kind of homeless shelter assessment that is needed by the Mayor and the Assembly. We would like to see thoughtful, candid, complete responses to her questions. **See Attachment A.**

Without this and our other requested information, we cannot make a reasoned judgement of the merits, quality and efficacy of the facility and its operations. No one can.

Is this proposal the right solution for Anchorage?

The slide show states a number of conclusions. What is the basis for these conclusions? Who did the assessment that led to them? We need comprehensive analyses.

An assemblage of many organizational logos appears in the Administration's slide show. It implies that these organizations endorse this proposal. Do they think this is the optimal solution for Anchorage? If this is the case, we would like to see a detailed statement of support from each of them.

An Assessment of the experience gained by the use of the Sullivan Arena should be conducted and distributed to the public as soon as possible.

We would like to see a thorough evaluation of how the Sullivan Arena functioned as a Homeless Shelter and Navigation Center? Was it effective in getting people into housing, and what was the impact on the adjacent greenbelt and surrounding neighborhoods? We want a candid description of the lessons learned from using the Sullivan as a large homeless congregate facility. What worked well, what didn't and why? It appears that the Navigation site concept may be useful in addressing some of the homeless issues, but we feel that having a least a couple of sites could be more successful and better address the inherent difficulties that large congregate facilities have in providing a) services in a dignified manner, b) health and safety of the homeless population and c) better outcomes in retaining the safety and inherent values of the communities adjacent to the facilities.

Request that the Assembly and the Mayor Consider all Viable Alternatives

We understand that the new administration has or will soon present the Assembly with a formal concrete version of their proposed plan. We respectfully request that the UACC be given a copy this proposed plan, as it would have a tremendous effect on our community. While we understand the urgency of addressing homeless issues with the impending closure of the Sullivan Arena, we are concerned that trying to rush to a "new" solution may create a new big problem that the University Area, adjacent communities and Anchorage as a whole will have to live with for decades to come. We urge the Mayor and the Assembly to look at all viable alternatives, such as the previously mentioned Midtown Alaska Club, perhaps in combination with a facility that services up to 150 clients located at the Tudor/Elmore site, and/or other sites in Anchorage.

Homelessness in Anchorage will not be "solved" by a new big facility or a combination of smaller facilities without substantially more local, state and federal long-term funding of the medical and on-site social services, along with permanent supportive housing, which are necessary to get at and treat its root causes.

A Detailed Milestone Schedule for selecting, developing, constructing, staffing and operating of any new homeless facility is urgently needed.

As we said at the Assembly meeting on June 23, 2021, we request all Project information be shared publicly on a MUNI website that is updated weekly. We request the new issue a detailed schedule as soon as possible, so stakeholders can fully understand this proposal and any others being considered.

Summary

The UACC strongly supports efforts to reduce homelessness in the municipality. We commend Mayor Bronson for addressing the issue, but believe the proposed facility is far too large. Smaller shelters are better. Insufficient time remains to complete this facility by the onset of colder weather in Fall 2021. The proposal is ill-defined and there is no Plan B. We see no statements of support from any of the organizations in Dr. Morris' Power Point slides. The 24/7 low barrier to entrance invites safety and security issues and acceptance of pets increases sanitary issues. Serious conflicts with neighbors and an increase in petty theft appear inevitable. The risk of forest fires from nearby camps is likely to be very high. Further overloading of Providence and ANMC emergency rooms would be expected. We would like a thorough, candid, independent assessment of the experience gained by use of the Sullivan Arena. The Mayor/Assembly should immediately seek an extension of the option to buy the midtown Alaska Club that expires 7/9/21. We need a detailed schedule of critical milestones about the proposal from the new administration straightaway. Failure of this endeavor is likely without developing and meeting such milestones. Without the information we requested, the UACC cannot make a reasoned judgement of the merits, quality and efficacy of the facility and its operations. No one can.

The UACC already has a well-managed homeless facility about a half mile from Site 27. We would consider support for an additional facility of up to 150 beds because it would have less anonymity and the potential for far fewer negative incidents while individuals could get more one-on-one care and services.

We look forward to assisting the new administration in finding an effective and equitable Anchorage-wide solution to this difficult problem.

Vote on sending this letter to the Mayor Bronson and Assembly:

In favor 21 Against 1 Abstain 0



Paul Stang, President, UACC

Attachment A

Proposed Homeless Shelter/Navigation Facility

Key Questions from Alexis St. Juliana, a College Gate resident for Anchorage Mayor Bronson and Assembly

I write to express my concern about the hastily planned shelter for those experiencing housing insecurity at East Tudor and Elmore roads. I strongly believe that Anchorage should act quickly to ensure safe shelter and a path to long-term housing for all Anchorage residents. However, the recent proposal strikes me as ill conceived.

I respectfully ask that the incoming Mayor and assembly enlist an impartial research team to conduct a rapid assessment how this particular site will address current needs and yield sustainable solutions in this ongoing crisis. Such an assessment could ascertain how to best use local funding and resources AND meet the needs of our neighbors in need. As I read in local media, the proposal involves the expenditure of up to \$15 million, and likely more funds in the future. Before allocating resources, the city should do its due diligence to make sure this is the right solution. An assessment could address questions such as:

- Are those experiencing housing insecurity comfortable and willing to stay at a facility of this size in that location?
- To what extent will a facility in the proposed location meet the day-to-day needs for transportation to other points in the city for employment, education, medical care, and/or shopping?
- What percentage of the shelter population is likely to access services at the native medical center, versus other medical facilities in Anchorage?
- What are the most needed amenities among those experiencing housing insecurity and living at short-term facilities?
- Would a facility of the proposed type and in the proposed location also offer park benches, playground equipment, or other outdoor recreation opportunities on-site (e.g., basketball hoops)? (An online presentation suggests “secure space for outdoor gatherings,” but it isn’t clear what that means, and it isn’t legible in the site plan).

- What proportion of the shelter population is likely to be newly vs. repeatedly experiencing housing insecurity?
- Given the question above, what is the likelihood that the proposed site becomes permanent?
- How would a tent structure like the one proposed appreciate/depreciate in value over time? What is the lifespan of such a structure?
- Would investment in a location with a permanent structure allow a better opportunity for the city to invest in real estate that would appreciate in value over time?