

Federation of Community Councils history

- **SLIDE 001**

- Good morning, I am indeed David Reamer and indeed a historian, much to the explicit confusion of some. There was a, to be unnamed yet high-ranking, Muni official last year for whom I was an absolute conundrum. They kept asking me, but what do you really do.
- Oh well!
- We are here to talk Anchorage community council and Federation of Community history, with a focus on strengths and wins, but first let's prove I'm real historian.

- **SLIDE 002**

- And you'll know I'm a real historian, because I begin decades before the creation of the modern Anchorage community councils. Surprise! It's not just that the past is prologue, but that all the past is prologue.
- This city was established in 1915, and that summer, residents gathered together and voted on what to call this quaint new town.
- The big winner was, Alaska City, because Alaskans have never been great at naming things. Lane was the second choice, after Interior Secretary Franklin Lane, and you all remember him, don't you? Anchorage came in third, albeit above some gems like Homestead, Gateway, and Terminal.
- And nobody cared. Anchorage then was a government town. There was no assembly or councils or mayor. Instead, the railroad ran the town, and there were no meaningful elections. There were no police drawn from the population. Instead, there were soldiers. The residents—the laborers and shopkeepers and engineers and moonshiners and sex workers—had no authority, no built-in power.
- Things have changed. Now there is a community council, apart and part of the traditional government, with rights and access to power built into the Municipal charter.
- By the way, we wound up with Anchorage because of the Postal Service. The railroad wanted to call the settlement Ship Creek. The US Board on

Geographic Names, now part of the Interior Department, ruled that both creek and town were actually to be called Woodrow Creek after President Woodrow Wilson. And of course, nobody asked the local Dena'ina anything about anything, just told them to get out of the way, which is not flippant but what actually happened.

- But the postal service called it Anchorage, and nobody can out argue, or out stubborn the post office. Even today, the post office in Fairview is officially the Eastchester location, and that area hasn't been called Eastchester since 1954.

- **SLIDE 003**

- The modern community council system, federation and all, derives from the 1975 merger of the Greater Anchorage Area Borough and the City of Anchorage into our modern civic government, the Municipality of Anchorage.
- That long war and its attendant turmoil is a story for another time, but in the very, very short version, just know that Anchorage was divided into two antagonist civic authorities from 1964 to 1975. Northern Lights Boulevard was a primary boundary, the city to the north and borough to the south.
- This image is from 1961, of the escalator in the Caribou department store, what was later a Montgomery Wards, then REI. The eastern end of the Northern Lights Shopping Center, that building with Title Wave in it.
- This was the first escalator in Alaska history and an absolute tourist attraction. Note nobody in this photo is actually buying anything. And since it was right off Spenard, the joke was, as you can see in the signs along the escalator, you entered the ride in Anchorage and exited in what was then an independent Spenard.

- **SLIDE 004**

- There were, of course, precursors to the modern community councils. There have been councils comprised of residents other than politicians since the beginning of Anchorage, but they grew in number as the city itself grew, as this town boomed in the mid-20th century, as the city government became increasingly remote from the average citizen.

- For, these early community councils tended to form in response to some unmet need, a way for politically disenfranchised populations to share information, advocate for change, or just commiserate, by which I mean complain.
- For example, an Anchorage Jewish community council was especially active in the early 1950s. The early local NAACP chapter was more concerned about mutual defense and support than social advocacy.
- In those days, community councils under various names were especially popular in the most distant neighborhoods, like Spenard, where the Spenard Community Club predated all more formal governments, the public utility district and borough that would follow. In Fairview, the ancestor was the East G Community Club.
- Through the 1960s and into the 1970s, perhaps the most regular, organized community councils were in Fairview and Mountain View, still relatively new neighborhoods that were already earning reputations as forgotten corners of Anchorage.
- After Mountain View residents voted in favor of annexation into Anchorage in 1954, the formerly independent community was so stripped of pre-existing services that annexation elections, previously successful increasingly failed, most especially in Spenard where the supposed “rape of Mountain View” became a cautionary tale.
- That image is from the 1959 Spenard Special, an anti-annexation oneshot newspaper.
- In other words, these were areas frequently neglected by city authorities. Not coincidentally, a common political observation of this era, a joke for those that didn’t live there, was that no one was elected out of Fairview. And also not coincidentally, it was the only neighborhood where the average annual income actually declined during the 1970s oil boom heyday.
- Community councils, without any support, tried to fill the gaps as best possible, but again, there was no responsibility to listen to them.

- **SLIDE 005**

- It's important to understand this context, to understand the history of this town and the relevance of the modern community council system, compared to the time of its absence.
- In 1960s Mountain View, if the roads weren't plowed consistently in winter, you could try and call, but no one cared. That's not a random, generic example. When independent, Mountain View had its own snow plow. That went away after annexation.
- Or, there's this picture. That's Northern Lights looking towards Spenard Road in 1960, flooded as it often was back then.
- Due to poor planning and poorer maintenance, flooding was extremely common in the streets at and beyond Anchorage city limits, roads like Northern Lights, Debarr, and Boniface. There was no community feedback forums, no effective councils watchdogging the response. There were just exasperated people who felt alienated by their elected leaders.
- The next year, the Greater Anchorage Chamber of Commerce vice president made a full presentation calling for a ferry system on Northern Lights, because it was so often flooded. He noted that the support needs would be small, and the trips short. However, he admitted that two ferries would be needed.
- Everybody laughed. Very little was done. So little that some of the affected residents petitioned President Kennedy instead. He didn't respond either. It's so funny except that it negatively impacted lives.
- The difference is in relevance and access, and the stricter relationship between city authorities and community councils. The earlier, pre-merger community councils lacked effective power. Members, attendees, stakeholders, they could shout themselves blue but there was no need to listen, not officially.
- And here's a fun, underdiscussed bit of Anchorage government lore. Back before the merger, people were often escorted out of city council and borough assembly meetings, not for any nasty behavior but for publicly disagreeing. It happened with the frequent flooding.
- It notably happened in 1967, when the City of Anchorage passed a toothless fair housing ordinance. When the Black attendees asked for an amendment to punish discriminating lenders, they were told (1) No. (2).

Shut up. And (3) They could leave unless they shut up, all in relation to a law supposedly to their benefit.

- **SLIDE 006**

- The direct precursor to the modern community councils came in 1973, a Citizen's Advisory Committee created and invited to offer its perspective on longrange planning.
- This, coincidentally, is a 1973 aerial view of downtown Anchorage, looking west.
- In August 1974, the borough assembly passed an ordinance for the creation of slightly more formal, slightly more official community councils. Shockingly for the era, it was a unanimous vote, an almost unheard of event. The city council—this is still pre merger so there was both a borough assembly and a city council—followed suit in short order.
- Jane Angvik, one of the Municipal charter architects, played a key role here, from when she worked for the Borough planning department. “To bring government decision making to the neighborhood level,” she said.
- And perhaps not coincidentally, she envisioned councils primarily as an informal extension of the planning department, a way for neighborhoods to receive, share, and discuss proposals, with the planning department profiting from possible community endorsements, the residents feeling valued, and the city therefore prospering in a new enlightened age.
- Still, in her words, “the scope and direction of a community council is established by the residents themselves.” End quote. She had her hopes, but she also knew that if councils were to flourish, then they needed to reflect the desires, needs, interests, and even whims of its members.
- For all that, this brief era of community councils failed to significantly develop. Nine months later, there were only three officially recognized community councils, and these were smaller than their modern counterparts, more subdivision sized.
- However, there was also the Greater Anchorage Action Council, also established in 1974, a private, nonprofit group formed to coordinate and support the community councils. Lanie Fleischer, renowned for her bicycle and trail advocacy, was the first Executive Director.
- The Action was usually spelled with all caps.

- **SLIDE 007**

- In September 1975, voters finally approved a merger and a new charter. And that charter so instructed, “The Assembly by ordinance shall provide

for establishment of community councils to afford citizens an opportunity for maximum community involvement and self-determination.”

- Also note that it orders “procedures for negotiation between the local government and each community council.” There is finally a meaningful relationship between city and community councils.
- Community councils were so important to the charter authors, that they also included them in the charter’s bill of rights.
- The Greater Anchorage Action Council became the Anchorage ACTION Council which became the Federation of Community Councils in October 1976.

- **SLIDE 008**

- This is where the difference is made, from the pre-merger community councils and the modern system. As outlined in the municode, this is the Municipal responsibilities TO the community councils. Not bylaws or procedure rules or definitions or some otherwise meaningless recognition of status.
- There are other sections in the code about what is due the councils, but this section is illuminating.
- Reading from it as direct quotes are always good, “The mayor shall be responsible for giving to community councils an opportunity to participate in the formulation of, and to review and comment upon, all land use, social and economic proposals which . . . will have a significant impact on all or a substantial portion of district residents.”
- “Such opportunity for participation shall be afforded community councils in the INITIAL stages of planning as well as in subsequent stages of proposal development.”
- Again there is much more, about notice requirements, including about alcohol license reviews, Heritage Land Bank activities, municipal land disposal, land use planning, Chugach State Park Access, and so forth.
- This wasn’t in the 1975 charter but added over time, much of laid down in 1978.

- **SLIDE 009**

- A sidenote. All of you should spend more time looking through the code, just browsing. For example, did you know that two ordinances include notes that they were ruled unconstitutional by Alaska courts? Looking out

at you, I think most of you were alive during the Bronson administration and might remember the anti-panhandling signs. There was a pre-existing anti-panhandling ordinance, but it was ruled unconstitutional in 2014.

- The other such example regards prohibited acts by holders of adult oriented establishment licenses or massage parlor licenses. You'll have to look that one up yourself. Or catch me after, and I'll tell you.
- The more you read, the more you'll learn, about the law and the history of this town. Like this little bit about vehicle violation enforcement. It says here, "no enforcement of any vehicle violation may be performed by any persons other than a regularly sworn police officer." The backhistory here is the old Anchorage Parking Authority and the Muni's disastrous fling with traffic cams in 1996.
- The Parking Authority was so hated that two women became folk heroes after they dressed as fairies and deposited change in expired meters.
- As for the traffic cams, the city screwed up by hiring the sketchiest company, with 70% of the money from citations going to the camera company, which also had conducted precisely zero real research on the accuracy of their cameras, which meant a debacle in the courts when locals sued, and resulted in a ballot initiative in 1997 requiring actual cops to do ticketing.
- And yes, there is a later carveout, an exception for EasyPark.
- **SLIDE 010**
 - Historians are addicted to tangents and you were briefly a prisoner to one. Congratulations on escaping. Back to community councils.
 - These are the community councils as they were in December 1976, and a picture of the downtown Wendler Building from the same year.
 - So, 1976 was the first full year for official community councils in Anchorage. And you might be wondering, what were their concerns back in those simpler, pioneer times? I reviewed some meeting minutes from this year, and here are some of the pressing issues:
 - In Tudor Park, some renters weren't caring for their yards, described as a quote "major problem." Unquote.
 - From Sand Lake, there was concern about snowmachines on the Kincaid Park ski trails. There was actually a long battle in the years leading up to this to keep people from just riding snowmachines in the middle of

Anchorage, on the streets. There were even snowmachine robberies, where they robbed a store and then drove off on snowmachines.

- From Turnagain, there were concerns about the International Airport fencing in portions of existing, if unofficial ski trails. And there were worries about increased noise there.
- In Scenic Park, there was an emphasis on dog control and meeting candidates and elected officials.
- In North Star, they wanted to establish a bike trail and fight the city from rezoning an area from a maximum 11 units to a max 55 units.
- In Chugiak, I don't know if you're going to believe this, but that council was concerned that city planning was overly concerned with the urban areas and not humble little Chugiak.
- As you'd expect, there's a range. All that's best of dark and bright.
- **SLIDE 011**
 - Neither people nor the nature of local governance has changed that much in the many years since. Thus, even with the wide range of issues faced, these concerns are overwhelming familiar. Public safety, zoning consistency and continuity, road quality, pedestrian access, public nuisances, parks, playgrounds, and trails. There aren't a lot of surprises here.
 - In 1978, the Hillside East council defeated plans to build a gravel pit in their area. Anchorage was once liberally dotted with gravel pits. Changing zoning and urban sprawl meant they more frequently relocated to the freedom of the Mat-Su and Kenai.
 - In 1979, the Taku Campbell council bought land that became Wolverine Park.
 - Community councils led the way for the pedestrian bridges on Lake Otis Boulevard and Muldoon Road, paving of all unpaved roads in Spenard, the construction of the Fairview Rec Center, overpasses, trails, new parks, development of old parks, community gardens, block parties.
 - And there was another benefit. Community councils became proving grounds for up and coming politicians, a way to garner connections and experience before running for office. This is future project of mine. I want to document every Assembly and Legislature member who passed through the community councils.

- The community council system was such a good idea that you would think they copied the design, but no, it is nearly unique in its weaving together of government and private citizen.
- **SLIDE 012**
 - Official status has in many instances encouraged community councils to be loud in their protests, and in turn more effective. To define their neighborhoods as they, the residents, wanted it defined. Now, the council members themselves may shade that efficacy. I've attended many different community council meetings across this town, read your letters to the papers across decades, seen you yell at the Assembly. In other words, I've heard the gripes, I know about the complaints, that the Muni people just ignore the councils.
 - There could be better communication, yes, and there's been some losses. And there's been some misguided actions when councils strayed from the wishes of their community. But let's continue to emphasize those victories, for they prove that all this effort is worthwhile.
 - So, let's talk about liquor.
- **SLIDE 013**
 - This photograph is late 1970s Anchorage. The Cold Beer sign is for Liquorama, a package store near the intersection of Dowling and Old Seward.
 - There are many ways Anchorage has changed over the decades. From a retail perspective, there were once many more grocery stores and gas stations. Those grocery stores tended to be smaller but not always. There was once a Safeway just down Gambell from that Carrs. There was once another Safeway across Minnesota from that Carrs, and there was a Piggly Wiggly on Spenard Road, more besides.
 - And there used to be more package stores, nearly residential package stores in some locations. In the early 1980s, there were at least four in Fairview alone: the Oaken Keg, Time Saver Liquor, and two Bottle Barns. And by the late 1980s, such package stores became a frequent community council target.
 - In 1986, Taku/Campbell successfully fought off a new package store opening.
 - After years of battles, the South Addition council forced the closure of a Bottle Barn at 14th and G, yes, a common liquor store in the heart of South Addition. Neighborhood character indeed.

- In 1993, former community council presidents Cheryl Clementson and Charles Wohlforth were elected to the Assembly, where they aggressively pushed an entire package of ordinances that made it harder for new liquor licenses to open, made it easier to address problematic locations, and established moratorium zones in some of Anchorage's more crime and drunkenness plagued neighborhoods.
- It wasn't just community councils, but they and their members, past and present were leading a battle to define Anchorage.
- **SLIDE 014**
 - This is an Oaken Keg advertisement from March 27, 1992, though I could have picked one from many other months and many other years. It may be hard to see, but that's a damn good price for Sutter Home white zinfandel. Otherwise, it's a pretty average example of their work.
 - But take note, down at the bottom there is some fine print. I've enhanced for the image on the right.
 - "Some liquor items not available at Gambell Street store," meaning the one by the Carrs grocery store, in Fairview.
 - If there's anyone here really familiar with my work, then you knew I was going to talk Fairview.
 - The translation here is that the Fairview Oaken Keg did not carry as many of the finer items and was more focused on less expensive options. All you were presumably young once and know what I'm talking about. The giant and small plastic jugs of liquor. The cheapest beers in stacks to the ceiling.
 - In my varied past, I once managed a package store/bar combo, the only bar in town. Obviously not Anchorage. And there was a formula to low end sales, something for which I always knew the answer. Because people always needed to know what product offered the greatest amount of alcohol for the lowest price. People would ask this question explicitly. Many years later, I still remember the answers, usually Crystal Palace vodka for liquor and Steel Reserve for beer, which was 8.1 percent ABV.
 - For some package stores in Anchorage, this was willful choice to essentially curate their selection for the heaviest drinkers without concern for the impact on the surrounding neighborhood. When the Bottle Barn owner experimented with eliminating smaller bottles, he "went from selling 20 cases of vodka to five cases a week." He quit that quickly.

- **SLIDE 015**

- Rather than simply protest the locations, the stores themselves, the Fairview Community Council basically invented a new form of local activism. They went directly after the liquor licenses.
- Time Saver Liquor was on East 9th, near the Fairview Rec Center. When Fairview residents protested Time Saver's license renewal in February 1983, it was only the second time in living memory that a license renewal in Anchorage had even been debated. Time Saver itself had been open since 1968, and 1983 represented the first public hearing regarding its license.
- After a lot of arguing, in return for a license renewal, the store owner made a nonbinding promise to move out of Fairview within a year. While it took more than that promised year, Time Saver Liquor was eventually sold and closed.
- There was once a Black community called Eastchester Flats, what is today modern Fairview between 15th and Chester Creek. The residents were forced out in the 1960s, their neighborhood cleared in favor of new, denser housing.
- After the Time Saver promise, one longtime Fairview resident said, "They want to give this man a year to move his license, but when they cleared the Eastchester Flats, they gave me 30 days to move my four children. I guess a liquor license is worth more."
- Still, this was a real turning point in local history. Shortly after this, several downtown strip clubs and bars were closed and razed. Other community councils were inspired, and the Time Saver example directly led to the late revisions in the Code.

- **SLIDE 016**

- After Time Saver, the Fairview Community Council targeted Bottle Barn, which operated two locations in Fairview, on East 15th Avenue and East 12th. After years of negotiations, owner Richard Blumer promised to close one of his Fairview locations in exchange for a renewed license. After renewal, he reneged. The Fairview council sued for breach of an oral contract and, in 1994, Superior Court Judge John Reese ruled in favor of Fairview. Both Bottle Barn locations in Fairview were forced to close.
- "It's nice to win one once in a while, isn't it," said Fairview council member Celeste Benson. "I think we've made a statement to people who

are in that business that they're going to have to be a part of the process for keeping safe neighborhoods.”

- I couldn't find any good images of a Bottle Barn, but this photo is Fairview albeit from 1957, on 4th near Gambell. That woman is Blanche McSmith who was appointed to the Alaska Legislature in 1959, its first Black member. She and her husband also sold TVs out of that business, and she also worked as a realtor.

- **SLIDE 017**

- Now we enter more recent history, which more of you might remember. Spirits of Alaska. After Bottle Barn closed in early 1994, Bridget Thompson purchased the 15th Avenue license with the intent to relocate to East 12th Avenue and Gambell Street. In return for Assembly and Fairview council support, she pledged to hire security and strictly control sales.
- Oh, Thompson spun some magical tales to ensure she was approved for that license. She claimed that the new space would allow her shop—which again was a package store on Gambell—to include antiques, flowers, and, of course, coffee drinks.
- Faced with pretty promises, the Assembly reluctantly approved the move, but, and this will shock you, none of the promised improvements materialized. There was no combo café, antique, flower, liquor store on Gambell, just a low-end package store.
- She named her shop Spirits of Alaska, and it quickly earned a reputation as one of the worst liquor stores in town, a place that repeatedly sold to already intoxicated individuals, minors, and in exchange for food stamps. Its immediate area became a notorious nexus of crime, populated with dangerous individuals at all times of day, frequently and openly conducting drug sales.
- The 2008 stabbing of Francis Katongan was but one particularly horrific incident. A drinking companion, Stephen Borozny, sent Katongan inside the package store with \$50 while he waited in a cab. She returned with beer and \$12 in change. Thinking he had been shortchanged, Borozny left his front seat, opened the back door to Katongan, and stabbed her in the stomach before running off with the beer. He was quickly caught, convicted of first-degree assault, and sentenced to ten years in prison. She did live.
- After years of negotiating with Thompson, the Fairview Council instead campaigned for the store's closure, staging protests outside the store and

at Assembly meetings in 2015. In turn, the Anchorage Assembly protested the renewal of the store's license, and the Alcohol Beverage Control Board then rejected that renewal. Spirits of Alaska closed in April 2015, and the location was refurbished into a laundromat. Thompson sued the city but settled in 2016 when the Assembly allowed her to sell her license though barring its use at that location.

- **SLIDE 018**

- There were critics of this approach, naturally. In the 1990s, lawyer Dan Coffey represented many members of the local liquor industry, and he described the councils as populated with, quote, "yuppie, elite people." End quote.
- Right after that quote, and I kid you not, Coffey continued by saying he was representing the common working man who, quote, "likes to have a vodka collins at the end of the day." End quote. Ah yes, vodka collins, the standard drink of the new millennium for road crews and construction workers.
- Context, this is the same Coffey who ran for mayor in 2015 and finished fourth in the general election. Dustin Darden was fifth. Yeah.
- But the Fairview Council was more flexible than the account to this point might make them appear.
- In late 2013, a group of residents appeared before the council and demanded the closure of both Spirits of Alaska and the Oaken Keg.
- Yet, the Fairview Council responded with negotiations with both package stores, and the Oaken Keg ownership and staff responded positively, compliantly even.
- They hired more security guards, enforced a list of unwelcome patrons, had two staff members on duty at all times. A representative would show up at council meetings, reporting on refused sales and other progress. Again, a more flexible approach than you might think.

- **SLIDE 019**

- Now let's slide towards the conclusion with a lighter story, another victory with lasting impact on our urban environment.
- Have you ever wondered why the two main Costcos in town look so different outside?
- The one on Dimond, it's your American standard acreage of unadorned warehouse and pavement, straight ugly lines. It was the first Costco in town, opened in 1984. Annual membership then cost \$25.

- Then there's the one on Debarr Road, at Bragaw. It features trees, shrubbery, and generally a less linear, less minimum design to the exterior.
 - That location opened in 1991, but only after a lengthy battle with the Russian Jack council.
 - When it was initially proposed, the Debarr location was going to be a simple warehouse. Then Russian Jack Community Council president Cheryl Clementson said, "It's 414 feet long, 30 feet high and made of white sheet metal. It's worse than ugly."
 - Another resident at the time noted, "They wanted to put in a building that was just a warehouse, and we wanted something that was welcoming into the neighborhood," claimed another resident present at the time.
 - Due to land-use restrictions, the developer was required to undergo a public review. Given the heated opposition by residents, the design for the store was revised into its current form, incorporating landscaping, covered walkways, and a mixed-material façade.
 - In addition, the developers agreed to construct a new road that would funnel residential traffic away from the commercial site. As a joke, the lead developer named the new road San Clementson after the council president, his nemesis during the negotiations. It's there still, the first right driving north on Bragaw from the Costco.
 - He laughed, but there was also at least a little negative intent, to name this humble feeder road, a short stretch of pavement that is immediately forgotten by everyone who's ever driven on it.
 - No matter, Clementson loved it "I go out of my way to drive down the street," she said at the time.
- **SLIDE 020**
 - People sometimes ask me, apropos of absolutely nothing, what did minorities and the politically disenfranchised do in times of more aggressive oppression.
 - In the past, what you see is an emphasis on community, well defined with even a little bit of gatekeeping, enforced and enriched by shared language and even history. For be honest, it's normal to care more about a friend than a stranger. It is the same way with neighborhoods and cities. Personal connections and shared history are bridges.
 - Lines of communications and mutual aid partnerships, those were also common in times of severe oppression.

- And community councils are A way to that end.
- In conclusion, I like to include the history of the location in my talks, keeping to that theme of connections.
- This is a 1967 aerial view of Spenard, looking south. The Northern Lights Shopping Center is in the middle, where Title Wave is today. Below that is Northern Lights Boulevard. To the right, you can see Carrs. And if you follow the Spenard Road at the left, you reach the red circle, where we are today.
- This location was previously the Lake Spenard Baptist Church, dedicated in 1949 though the building wasn't finished until 1952. That was common in that era, during a population and construction boom, with corresponding shortages in housing and building supplies. This was a time when a common Anchorage joke was that you needed "Not for Sale" signs a lot more than "for sale" signs, because if you had a stack of lumber in your yard, you'd definitely have people stopping by and asking if you wanted to sell it.
- Thank you, please tip your Federation of Community Council president

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