

Housing and Homelessness Town Hall Series

Summary/Rationale

The Anchorage Home Builder's Association (AHBA) and the Anchorage Coalition to End Homelessness (ACEH) have partnered with the Seawolf Speech and Debate Program, the Anchorage Daily News, and Rasmuson Foundation to host four live-streamed candidate town hall discussions for upcoming state elections.

This is intended to be a neutral platform for candidates to discuss their perspectives and policy goals on the suite of issues pertaining to housing and homelessness in Anchorage. This opportunity provides a forum to share information with the community on the systemic challenges to residential development, housing affordability, and addressing homelessness.

The need for this platform has been emphatically endorsed by both private builders as well as non-profit affordable housing and service providers: namely the cost/difficulty erecting four walls within the Municipality is a major (but poorly understood/appreciated) barrier to improving the quality and affordability of our housing stock; this is true throughout the entirety of the price spectrum and has a direct impact on the building industry, cost and availability of local labor, and access to affordable housing. Simultaneously, there is a public outcry to address impacts of homelessness in our community that struggles to meaningfully engage with homelessness' root causes. While many socioeconomic challenges make homelessness more complex- experts internationally conclude that solutions to homelessness start and end with a home. This is particularly relevant as Anchorage prepares for the economic impacts of COVID-19 and its potential to significantly increase new homelessness.

Events Overview

The Town Halls will take place at the 49th State Brewing Company Ballroom. Candidates and the public will be provided relevant information around the history and current state of Anchorage's residential construction industry and homeless services in advance of the events.

Beginning Thursday September 10th, four weekly townhalls will invite all legislative candidates from a quadrant of Anchorage (2 adjacent Senate districts, see 'Candidates and Groupings') to a joint Town Hall discussion. Participating candidates will meet onsite with expert panelists, moderator, and A/V crew (no physical audience) to engage in the townhall.

Each Town Hall will be divided into three sections, focused on our low rate of home building, affordable housing, and homelessness.

Discussion Goals

We envision a conversation that acknowledges that Anchorage faces chronic failures to produce the quantity or variety of housing units and services that Anchorage residents need AND that the causes of these failures are both complex and frequently rooted in a set of legitimate community concerns that should be considered. Where prior discussions have frequently been framed around particular impacts, plans, strategies, or priorities, we believe we can facilitate a dialogue built on acknowledgement that there are a wide variety of interests at play in conversations around Housing, and that while efforts to serve these interests can work at cross purposes to one another, they are also far from zero sum.

These Town Hall discussions are not intended as a means for AHBA or ACEH to vet candidates for support, or for candidates to compete for *our* approval. Our organizations/industry have distinct but frequently overlapping interests in these topics, and agree they are of critical importance. Our goal is to provide candidates for State office with a platform to engage prospective voters on issues of great concern to members of our community regardless of their political inclinations.

Moderator and Panelists

The moderator will be Steve Mac Donald, former Anchor with KTUU.

The panelists for the first event will be Chris Kolerok, Government Affairs Director at Cook Inlet Housing, Shanna Zuspan, one of the principals at Agnew::Beck who has analyzed barriers to housing development, and Clai Porter.

Venue/Layout/COVID Precautions

The events will be live streamed from the 49th State Brewing Company ballroom (to your right past the gift shop as you come through the main entrance off 4th Avenue).

Candidates will be positioned in rows of chairs spaced at least 6ft apart. They will be facing the moderator and panelists.

Rules

Be respectful.

The moderator will manage the discussion. All candidates will be afforded time to speak. No clearly defined rebuttal or opening or closing remarks will be given.

Raise your hand, look for acknowledgement from the moderator to get in the queue.

The discussion will be shaped by the candidates. There are PLENTY of problems and solutions to dig through, we encourage you to come prepared with some things you think are good ideas and some things you think are bad ideas; and we hope you weigh in on things you like and dislike about other candidates responses, and advance the discussion by relating your addition or alternative to solutions proposed by other candidates.

The moderator will look to encourage engagement, hear from a balance of perspectives, and look to move the discussion along if it seems to be getting stuck.

COVID-19 Precautions:

- There will be no in-person audience, Town Hall participants and production crew will have room to maintain 6ft of separation during the events.
- In order to comply with the Emergency Orders, participants will be asked to wear a mask when they are not speaking, wearing a mask while speaking is allowed but not required.
- If anyone has a condition which precludes wearing a mask, please reach out to Drew Cason with AHBA to discuss appropriate accommodations.

Questions and Structure

The Town Hall will begin with a short video to orient the audience to the issues at hand, the video will be available for candidates and the public to view by Tuesday 9/8 (it is presently in development).

The moderator will then introduce the participants and ask the first question.

The event will be broken into thirds, with the following questions providing the core structure, beyond which participants will shape the discussion. There will be one question for the discussions on Housing and Affordable Housing, and two questions in the third section (homelessness):

1. Housing Continuum: Planners, builders, business owners, and community development experts agree: Anchorage (and Alaska) are under-producing housing by significant margins, with a variety of harmful impacts. If elected, what would you do to increase housing production?
2. Affordable Housing: Alaska has 20,000 rent burdened households. This means households who are spending above 30% (often above 50%) of their income on rent. Almost 90% of these rent burdened individuals are either working, formerly retired, or permanently disabled. Minimum wage earners need to work over 75 hours a week to afford a one-bedroom apartment in Anchorage. Combined with the economic impacts of COVID (AEDC predicts Anchorage will lose over 11000 jobs by the end of 2020) we have a significant current shortage of affordable housing and rental units and anticipate this gap will continue to grow due to local economic changes and our rapidly aging population. Developers report that building additional affordable housing in our community “doesn’t pencil”. How would you suggest addressing this need for affordable housing in Anchorage?
3. Homelessness
 - a. Homelessness Question 1: Invisible Homelessness. Homelessness is of significant concern to our community. We recognize that many people are eager to hear your ideas on how to address unsheltered or street homelessness and we will get to that next. To start this conversation, we would like to begin talking about invisible homelessness. Many of the rent burdened individuals we spoke about earlier fall into what is sometimes called invisible homelessness. This includes youth and young adults, families with children, domestic violence survivors, elders- many working people who cannot make ends meet. Anchorage serves over 7500 of these individuals in housing and homeless programs across the city. These individuals never hit the streets or are publicly visible to the community. We expect the number of people in this invisible homeless category will increase due to COVID-19 and yet Anchorage is presently ~3,000 units short just to address pre-COVID 19 invisible homelessness. Experts nationally estimate that the economic impacts of COVID-19 could increase new homelessness by up to 50%. Should the state play a role in expanding affordable housing to prevent new homelessness and to make stable housing a reality for all community members? If so, what should that look like; if not, do you have an alternative suggestion for addressing the gap?
 - b. Homelessness Question 2: Unsheltered Homelessness. Anchorage has seen an increase in community concerns around unsheltered homelessness, sometimes called street homelessness, particularly unauthorized camps. We just discussed solutions for the 7,500 invisible homeless, we would now like to discuss addressing the homelessness we see outside. In 2019, Anchorage Police Department identified almost 250 individuals residing outside in the summer months. If you were elected, how would you address unsheltered homelessness in Anchorage?

Potentially helpful background information

[ACEH General Information](#)

[AHBA Infographic](#)

[AHFC 2018 State of Alaska Housing Assessment](#)

ASHBA (Alaska State Homebuilders Association) [Resolution](#) supporting a State Building Code - ([Letter of Support](#))

[ACDA AML Presentation](#)

Alaska Economic Trends – [August 2019 Article on Alaska Rental Market](#)

If you have any questions about the Town Hall questions, background materials, or underlying issues; please reach out to Drew Cason with AHBA or Jasmine Boyle (contact info in ACEH General Information document). We would be happy to answer questions, direct you to additional resources, or connect you with other subject matter experts.

Candidates & Groupings:

- 9/10 - Senate Districts G and H (East Anchorage/Eagle River) (11 invitees)
 - Senate H: Bill Wielechowski (Di) & Madeleine Gaiser (R)
 - House 13: Ken McCarty & James Canitz (D)
 - House 14: Kelly Merrick (Ri) & Mike Risinger (I)
 - House 15: David Nelson (R) & Lyn Franks (D)
 - House 16: Ivy Spohnholz (Di) & Paul Bauer (R) & Kohlhaas (I)

- 9/17 - Senate Districts J and I (Mt. View, Downtown, Midtown, Spenard) (5 invitees)
 - Senate J: Tom Begich
 - House 17: Andy Josephson
 - House 18: Harriet Drummond
 - House 19: Geran Tarr
 - House 20: Zack Fields

- 9/24 - Senate Districts L and K (West Anchorage, Sand Lake, Dimond, Oceanview) (12 invitees)
 - Senate L: Natasha von Imhof & Roselynn Cacy (D)
 - House 21: Matt Claman (Di) & Lynette Largent (R)
 - House 22: Sara Rasmussen (Ri) & Stephen Trimble (I) & Nees (AIP)
 - House 23: Chris Tuck (D) & Kathy Henslee (R) & Timothy Huit (AIP)
 - House 24: Tom McKay (R) & Sue Levi (D)

- 10/1 - Senate Districts M and N (South Anchorage/Hillside) (13 invitees)
 - Senate M: Josh Revak (Ri) & Andy Holleman (I)
 - Senate N: Roger Holland (R) & Carl Johnson (D) & Care Clift (I)
 - House 25: Mel Gillis (Ri) & Calvin Schrage (I)
 - House 26: Laddie Shaw (Ri)
 - House 27: Lance Pruitt (Ri) & Liz Snyder (D)
 - House 28: Kaufman (R) & Suzanne LaFrance (D) & Benjamin Fletcher (I)

Content/Questions - Background/Brainstorm

For candidates: Below you will find the high-level discussion topics we expect to cover and some suggestions on topics to delve into details as they are of high interest to housing and homeless experts and the general public. Please refer to the “Questions and Structure” section above for expectations about how questions will be phrased during the town hall.

I. Why aren't we building more houses? What can we do about it?

- a. High cost of development
 - i. Title 21
 - ii. Planning and Zoning Enforcement
 - iii. Offsite infrastructure requirements
 - iv. Labor Shortage
 - v. Rising materials cost
 - vi. High cost/value of existing structures
- b. Land availability
 - i. Encourage redevelopment
 - ii. Add land
 - iii. Encourage density
- c. Barriers to density
 - i. Zoning
 - ii. Building requirements
 - iii. Everyone needs/wants a car

II. Anchorage and Alaska have major gaps between housing needs and what residents can afford. When people can't afford housing, it harms them and their community. How can we help more people afford housing?

- a. Increased funding for existing programs
 - i. What are the most successful existing programs at addressing our largest areas of existing need?
 - ii. Who funds those programs?
- b. Improve access to existing systems/sources
 - i. Coordination barriers
 - ii. Barriers accessing clients
- c. Publicly funded housing

- i. Purchase (renovate) and operate existing rentals
 - ii. New construction
 - d. Rental assistance
 - i. Expand eligibility
 - ii. Funding
 - iii. Are units available?
 - e. Incentives for private development of affordable housing
 - i. How effective have existing efforts been? (# of units)
 - ii. How many privately constructed affordable units can we incentivize in the next 5 years? 10 years? How?

III. Invisible homelessness =7,500+ people served every year in Anchorage before COVID and its economic impacts. Unsheltered homelessness =~250 persons during peak summer months. If elected, how would you address invisible and unsheltered homelessness?

- a. Mental health services
 - i. Private providers
 - ii. Public providers
- b. Substance abuse programs
- c. Prevention and diversion
- d. Supportive housing
- e. Shelters/outreach
- f. Criminal justice
 - i. Corrections
 - ii. Law enforcement
 - iii. Courts