

Open Discussion Concerning Chugiak-Eagle River Growth

Description

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“Los Anchorage,” Alaska, has a problem.

Like Los Angeles, California, Anchorage is located in a geological bowl surrounded by mountains and ocean. Los Angeles County is in a large bowl of sand with sandy hills—the largest flat basin opening onto the Pacific Ocean. Anchorage is in a smaller bowl of clay and silt, surrounded by rugged mountains.

Land suitable for building homes in Anchorage is therefore limited.

A Town Hall meeting on September 14, held in lieu of the regular monthly Birchwood Community Council meeting, was at the Chugiak-Eagle River Senior Center to accommodate the crowd.

Thus began the conversation about Anchorage Water and Wastewater Utility (AWWU) water transmission and sewage trunk lines being installed to the site of a proposed development in North Eagle River. Called Powder Reserve, the development needs for water and sewer drew plenty of people to hear AWWU manager, **Brett Jokela** and staff experts, explain how the construction of trunk lines will happen and who will pay for this major infrastructure investment.

Curtis McQueen, CEO of Eklutna Native Corporation (ENC) also provided insight at that meeting into why this particular land was made available for development at this time: “I can’t predict what is going to happen here, but when you hear the number 1,400 homes going in there we don’t know; it might take 30 years. It depends upon what the market does. Instead of a shot here and a shot there we are trying to do it better by anticipating where the city is growing and where demand is likely to develop.”

Rep. Dan Sadler summarized what resident's concerns were midway through the meeting. Assembly woman Amy Demboski facilitated the

Because Anchorage
population is trending
toward Eagle River-

discussion. Photo by Donn Liston

Chugiak, the area's largest landowner feels obliged to provide land for development where people on modest incomes want to live, according to McQueen. Powder Reserve is located on some 404 acres of sloping land—with wetlands at the base—north and west of the north Eagle River exit of the Glenn Highway, south of Chugiak High School. This is beyond the 360 building sites of Powder Ridge subdivision, which was also established on land owned by Eklutna.

Single-family homes and condominiums will be constructed by reputable builders, with some 100 acres of green space to protect animal habitat. According to McQueen some 30 percent of residents at the Powder Ridge are military families and his corporation supports the mission of JBER in allowing more housing for these families.

On the other hand, some residents of Chugiak-Birchwood say they like living on large lots—with independent water and sewer systems—because they don't want their quality of life diminished by having to pay for large-scale development leading to ever more Anchorage urban sprawl. They have fought off efforts to bring water and sewer into this area because once the expense is incurred they know who will likely be expected to pay for it.

But the AWWU spokesman said current residents need not worry.

Brett Jokela is General Manager of AWWU. Photo by Frank E. Baker

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Brett Jokela is General Manager of AWWU.

“To bring water and sewer services to development of that scale takes a lot of infrastructure not limited to 8-in pipes; we need water transmission lines to bring a lot of water into the area” Jokela said. “We need pump stations and pump servers to take the wastewater to treatment. As it happens, the upfront financing of infrastructure is a major impediment to large-scale development. This is a cash-flow concern for development interests...for the past two years we have been trying to figure out how to address this need that has been identified.”

Apparently, they have found a way to limit exposure to current residents through cleaning up the language of some tariff requirements so that funding for the project will come only from residents served by the major pipes and system necessary to serve new construction. The estimated hook-up fee per property will only apply if a property owner chooses to hook up, once the costs are approved.

“The Municipal Assembly authorizes creation of utility districts by resolution. The utility determines the cost for improvements and the preliminary allocation of costs to be accessed to each property for the improvements,” Jokela continued. “When the allocated costs are determined we would establish a ballot for affected property owners to determine either ‘yes, that is an amount I would be willing to pay,’ or ‘No, I don’t want to pay that amount.’ It takes 50 percent or better of property owners in the affected area to include the prospective assessment.”

At one point in the discussion, it was revealed ENC owns some 48 percent of the land that might be subject to assessment for systems necessary to bring their water from Eklutna Lake to homes and then cycle it back to a Muni treatment plant.

Some old timers from the Birchwood Community Council expressed skepticism about how long homes with wells and septic system would be able to maintain their integrity with expensive Muni infrastructure and feeder lines all around them.

“At this point, we have not taken a formal position on this particular project, however, Birchwood Community Council has been on record several times in the past opposing bringing city water and sewer services to our community,” said Birchwood Community Council President, Kevin McNamara. “The current phase, Powder Reserve, has been approved and is currently in a building phase. It has been slowed by the need for improved infrastructure—water and sewer. **We will be discussing this project at our October Community Council Meeting on October 11th and perhaps will vote on an official position at that time.**”

The plot thickens, but don't put your money on under-financed individuals living independently on large lots, when it is time for development to move in.

Everybody in Anchorage can't move to the Valley, can they?

Comments:

Lee Jordan

Your observation about the impact of "under-financed individuals living independently on large lots" is key in consideration of expansion of water/sewer lines. Frontage of 330 feet on two sides of a 2-1/2 acre tract means assessments in six-figure amounts to pay for extension of lines, possibly doubling mortgage payments. Small tracts developed half a century ago are becoming saturated to the point of being unsuitable for on-site wastewater disposal and wells are threatened by shrinking aquifers as well as contamination. Public water indeed is in the future, but how to lessen the impact on those "under-financed individuals" is a question demanding both humane and moral solution.

Category

1. Uncategorized

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