“The Pledge”

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Just returned from the AIA Convention in Atlanta having heard lots of talk about how architects have a natural tendency to do good and some self-congratulation about how much good we do. Here is a proposal to help Anchorage architects do good in a collective way.

Let’s consider something called “The Anchorage AIA Architect’s Pledge”. It could be a way for us to give the public a clear message about the advantage of working with AIA architects. It could also be a way for all of us to carefully consider our role in our community and whether we are in fact doing good. Fairbanks and Southeast could develop something similar based on their circumstances.

Anchorage has a bright future with many opportunities but it also has impending roadblocks:

- The increasing expense of fossil fuels (already more expensive here than anywhere else in the U.S.), both through declining supplies and expanding markets, and through increased taxation.
- The national movement towards user fees causing those who use it to pay for it. This, combined with the current reduction in Washington DC pork will significantly reduce the federal government’s subsidy of life in Alaska. Many public services do cost more to deliver in the relatively remote north. This movement will also reveal and inspire responses to the increased cost of providing services to outlying neighborhoods in Alaska communities.

Sprawl is the overarching nemesis of sustainable communities in south central Alaska. Sprawl is driven by the desire to develop raw land and exaggerated by the ever increasing quantity of roads and parking lots. Sprawl is especially costly in the north. Sprawl has always been based on the transfer of expenses from the developers and their clients to the rest of us taxpayers. We know that:

- Roads are more expensive here because of, among other things, freeze/thaw cycles, studded tires, snow removal and storage, and the damage wrought by the snow removal equipment.
- Utilities and other public services are more expensive to deliver because, among other things, they are subject to damage by cold, wind and snow, and sometimes earthquakes and volcanoes. Utility costs are also increased by our remote and relatively small community. Having to bury some utilities 10 or more feet in the ground, and then having to repair them when the ground is frozen further increases the expense.
- Surface parking consumes acreage and increases the length of our roads and utility lines.
As architects, and citizens, we should do what we can to make sure that sprawl and its consequences do not reduce or even eliminate the viability of major population centers in southcentral Alaska. Together we can help our community to recognize the ongoing costs of sprawl. This has quality of life and cost of government impacts, a real win-win.

To ensure the continued viability of urban life in southcentral Alaska, let us, as individual Anchorage AIA architects, adopt the following pledge:

- I will
  1. Testify against sprawl whenever there is a public opportunity to do so.
  2. Oppose the Knik Arm Crossing in every way that is available to me.
  3. Do everything I can to increase the use of public transit (reducing the need for more roads)
  4. Search for ways to reduce the necessity for additional roads and snow plowing.

- I will not participate in a project that
  A. requires the consumption of previously undeveloped land.
  B. requires the construction of new roads.
  C. does not contribute to the development of public pedestrian space.
  D. proposes to export or store snow in a way that reduces local ground water quality.
  E. includes an uncovered parking lot for more than 5 cars.

- I will not design a building that has areas of surface parking that exceed the footprint of the building.
- Other than one and two family dwellings, I will not participate in a project that does not have direct access to public transportation.

Every item in the pledge strengthens our ability to sustain a healthy, lucrative and enjoyable future in southcentral Alaska. As architects, we know better than most how property developments affect neighbors and neighboring communities. It’s time we shared this expertise with everyone else. Please think about it, argue about it, refine and revise, but let’s find a way to lead. If we can agree on a strategy and stick together on it, we will lead Anchorage to a better future. In so doing, we will increase the public’s respect for architects and increase our influence within the community.