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Chair Bjorkman, Vice Chair Merrick, Members of the Senate Labor and Commerce Committee:

This written testimony is as an individual and planning professional who has worked with communities across Alaska on comprehensive planning projects.

I support Senate Bill 50 because it connects two important roles for local government: taking action on community needs, like housing, and engaging with the community to create a vision, and set clear goals to achieve that vision. There is already a process for this function, known as a comprehensive plan. Comprehensive plans are big-picture, wide-ranging plans that serve as a 20-year roadmap for communities: they are both a process and a product. When done well, plans build the community's consensus for who they want to be, with practical strategies to get there.

Planners can easily list off the big topics in a typical comp plan: land use, transportation, infrastructure, economic development, public lands and facilities, and other issues. However, sometimes it's hard to see where housing fits in: is it a land use issue? An infrastructure issue? A workforce issue? Often, it's all of the above - housing intersects with many topics, but is distinct and different, and given the challenges we face today across the state, deserves local attention on local solutions.

In my experience as a consultant, communities updating plans want to really engage residents in setting direction, and are also managing a number of pressing issues and competing priorities - it is difficult to give every topic the attention it deserves. Elevating housing as an important topic, distinct from land use, encourages communities to make this a local planning priority. Some communities have already recently updated their plans: one example is my former client, City of Valdez. Valdez recently completed a comprehensive plan update, and identified housing as a top community priority, using current data to inform their next steps. While I was not involved in the plan, I was proud to support an implementation project and public process a key priority in their plan, updating zoning code to help meet future housing demand. We should commend Valdez for their planning, and commitment to action: and encourage all communities to take up the topic of housing, and build support for local solutions to their own housing needs.

It is also important to emphasize, this is encouraging but not mandating how communities engage in housing work. Comprehensive plans are required, but what they look like and what directions the communities choose to pursue are left to the local level. A comprehensive plan update can look like creating a full new plan; updating data and demographic trends to match current conditions; adopting additional plans, such as a targeted housing strategy; or simply re-prioritizing an existing plan to indicate what the local government will focus its efforts. SB 50 is not a mandate, but a positive call for local planning, and local action on housing.

Lastly, the information below is shared in response to a question in a prior committee about what is currently required for comprehensive plans, and what this looks like in practice:

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Title 29 calls for communities (cities, boroughs) to update comprehensive plans every 20 years. A Home Rule community like the Municipality of Anchorage is not subject to this specific section of Title 29, but our Charter and code have an equivalent regular cycle for updating our comprehensive plan, as well as contemplating more regular reviews and updates of the plan for various reasons, such as updating population projections. The 20 year cycle is a general target and timeframe for the plan, not a firm requirement, although communities do take this seriously and do periodically undertake significant updates. Comp plans often take multiple years to complete from beginning to end, starting with data gathering and community engagement, to drafting, receiving and incorporating changes based on public comments, and ultimately formal adoption by a Borough Assembly or City Council.

Thank you for your consideration.

Anna B. Brawley

This letter is written in my personal capacity as a professional city planner and resident.