

Juneau Empire Editorial: City's Top 10 goals: Tricks or Treats?

Posted: November 13, 2011 - 12:06 a.m.

The City and Borough of Juneau Assembly finalized its list of top 10 goals for 2011-12 at its Halloween meeting of the Committee of the Whole.

While the list offered some treats, it was a bit scary to see aiding affordable housing efforts left off the list.

The issue is important enough the League of Women Voters made it its No. 1 question for Assembly candidates to answer in its pre-election questionnaire.

Each Assembly candidate touched on it during conversations with the Empire's editorial board. Yet, when it came time to pick priorities for the year, there was no definite commitment to this issue.

The best the Assembly could muster was to try to "(f)ind ways to reach out not only to our neighboring Southeast communities, but all Alaska communities to enhance Juneau as the Capital City and an important regional economic and transportation hub," a pledge that could be fulfilled by ensuring the name Juneau is spelled correctly on state maps and shipping charts.

The problem is obvious.

The average cost of a single-family home in Juneau is \$321,391, according to a recent report by the Juneau Economic Development Council.

The U.S. Census Bureau puts the national number at \$243,900.

Juneau's rental vacancy and homeowner vacancy rates were at 3.2 and 1.4 percent, respectively, well below the 5 percent threshold needed for a healthy balance between profitability for landlords and sellers and affordability for renters and buyers.

The JEDC report concludes Juneau needs 360 more single-family residential units for our housing market to be healthy. And that's with Juneau's trend of nearly-flat population growth.

When Juneau grows — as it must to enhance its role as a leading city in Alaska and Southeast — the problem will only be compounded if not addressed now.

Obvious problems do not always present apparent causes or lead to easy solutions, which is why we look to the Assembly for guidance.

When we spoke to candidates to get their takes on the housing issue, some reasons presented for Juneau's housing predicament — illogical demands and inexplicable delays in obtain building permits and a property tax system that can instantly increase the assessed value of a newly-subdivided lot several fold — are obstacles the Assembly can take the lead on addressing. Are building codes addressing the needs to foster safe construction and protect Juneau's environment, or are there some that are either outdated or designed as solutions in search of a problem?

A thorough review of Juneau's permitting requirements would answer those questions and could clear the way for developers exasperated with delays and denials to give building a fresh look. A property tax structure that doesn't punish an owner who subdivides his lot with a sudden spike in assessed value would also help.

Then-candidate Jesse Kiehl suggested delaying the tax increase for five years so the subdivider would have time to improve the land, build a house and sell it so the tax burden could be shared, an idea with significant merit.

Juneau's lack of affordable housing has been an issue for several years, and no action taken has significantly alleviated it. The time has come for the Assembly to take affirmative action to address this problem, both in the short term and the long term. We're hopeful the Assembly will revise its top 10 list and make a firm commitment to ensure this obstacle to Juneau's growth is, eventually, removed.