

# Community Building Working Group Kickoff Meeting Summary

Tuesday September 1, 2020, 4 p.m. – 6 p.m.

## Participants

Aaron Jongenelen, AMATS  
Allen Kemplen, Fairview CC  
Andrew Romerdahl, CIRI  
Bob Butera, Rogers Park CC  
Bob Mintz, Gottstein Properties  
Carol Wong, MOA Planning  
Carolyn Ramsey, Airport Heights CC  
Collin Hodges, MOA Planning  
Craig Huffman, Kroger/Fred Meyer  
Craig Lyon, AMATS  
Dave Forsland, Geneva Woods HOA  
Dave Post, DOT&PF Planning  
Emma Irish, Anchorage Economic  
Development Corporation  
Heidi Zimmer, DOT&PF  
Jim Nordlund, Neighbor Works Anchorage  
Julie Decker, Anchorage Museum  
Katie Conway, DOWL

Kim Mahoney, UAA  
Kristine Bunnell, MOA Planning  
Lindsey Hajduk, Neighbor Works  
Anchorage  
Michelle McNulty, MOA Planning  
Nicola Person-Allen, UAA Center for  
Community Engagement and Learning  
Rachel Steer, DOWL  
Renee Whitesell, DOWL  
Ryan Riddle, DOT&PF  
Sean Baski, DOT&PF  
Sen. Tom Begich, AK Legislature  
Shawnalee Whitney, UAA  
Steve Noble, DOWL  
Zach Zaletel, Rogers Park CC/Ingra Street  
Pat Gaynor, DOWL  
Leo Vazquez, NCCP

## Kickoff Meeting Objectives:

- Understand the Working Group's role in cultivating and carrying out a unified vision to guide future development in Midtown in a way that encourage growth of a deliberate, coherent identity. .
- Generate a preliminary list of ideas that can be more fully explored during the Visioning Session in October

## Kickoff Meeting Agenda & Notes

1. Welcome – Rachel Steer, Midtown Congestion Relief Public Involvement Lead, introduced the team and the purpose of the meeting. DOT&PF Project Manager Sean Baski thanked everyone for their participation.
  - This Community Building Working Group (CBWG) is a direct outcome of the MCR Planning and Environmental Linkages (MCR PEL) study. Throughout that study, members of the community expressed a desire to have a broader discussion about the future of Midtown.
  - Tonight's conversation will start moving us toward the creation of a common, cohesive vision for Midtown and a plan for realizing it. What is Midtown to all of us, and what do



we want it to be for the next generation? How can we assist Midtown to grow in a way that helps us all live, work, and play in the ways we want and need?

- Members of the team speaking at the meeting tonight:
  - Sean Baski, DOT&PF, project manager
  - Steve Noble, DOWL, project manager
  - Leo Vazquez, National Consortium for Creative Placemaking, placemaking coach and community building guide/guru
  - Renee Whitesell, DOWL, lead transportation planner
  - Katie Conway, DOWL, coordinator for this community building initiative
- 2. Introductions – Katie facilitated roundtable introductions, asking participants to say what they hope to accomplish in their CBWG participation.
  - *Find out more about Midtown, ongoing topic as our city grows. Neighborhoods becoming more condensed.*
  - *Interested in seeing how project impacts intersect with land use in Midtown.*
  - *Here to listen and learn.*
  - *Ensure MCR and Midtown works well for residents.*
  - *Previously involved in placemaking projects in other parts of town.*
  - *Very interested in community building and placemaking, keenly interested in our future.*
  - *Very interested in this project how it affects access.*
  - *Listen and offer input.*
- 3. Katie gave a brief overview of what the CBWG meeting schedule and objectives are over the next several months.
  - The Working Group will meet twice more this fall – for a visioning session in late October and a strategy lab in early December – and then quarterly after that.
  - This group’s objective is to generate a cohesive vision for Midtown that translates to design themes and aesthetic improvements that can serve as guidelines to be considered when developing projects within the area. It will also consider how to apply the vision to bigger picture elements – projects, programs, policies, and partnerships – for a more comprehensive and longer-term approach to making positive change in Midtown.
  - We need to keep in mind the vision when talking about the smaller, tangible actions we can take today.
- 4. Leo set the stage for the brainstorming exercise later in the meeting with an overview of community building and how it relates to creative placemaking.
  - First, Leo recapped a question from the stakeholder survey: what do you hope this initiative will accomplish?
    - i. *Make Midtown a better place to Live.Work.Play.*
    - ii. *Identify tangible ways Midtown is seen as a destination, rather than a pass-through, where it is safe and fun to spend time, meet neighbors, frequent local businesses, and more.*
    - iii. *Bold change.*
    - iv. *Help to create an identity and sense of place for Midtown.*



- v. *To improve and expand the green landscape in Midtown in ways that everyone who comes into and through Midtown thinks of it as a beautiful and safe place to be.*
- vi. *Make Midtown more safe and inviting.*
- vii. *Frame the infrastructure place-making priorities in Midtown so that they are in sync with Anchorage's land use plans.*

- Community building is about people working together to achieve shared goals, working through shared values. We will develop a sense of those shared values and turn these into strategies that we can use as a foundation moving forward.
  - Creative placemaking is one aspect of community building in which we bring in arts and artists to implement aspects of community building.
5. Leo facilitated a discussion about community building. Questions were asked about the types of things or activities that can help support physical needs, self-actualization, sense of belonging, aesthetic/natural environment, physical and emotional security, and novelty. Answers are summarized below.

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| ▪ <i>Trails</i>  | ▪ <i>Indigenous plants and indigenous artists</i>  |
| ▪ <i>Outdoor spaces</i>  | ▪ <i>Green space, mixed use, access to sunlight</i>  |
| ▪ <i>Parks and trails</i>  | ▪ <i>Nice sidewalks and well-maintained roads</i>  |
| ▪ <i>Clean air</i>   | ▪ <i>Aesthetic features that exist across seasons</i>  |
| ▪ <i>Transportation access and safety</i>  | ▪ <i>Contributing to a vibrant Winter City</i>   |
| ▪ <i>Affordable and accessible mobility options</i>  | ▪ <i>Places where we can walk to shop and not have to drive a vehicle</i>  |
| ▪ <i>A place to congregate (in non-pandemic times)</i>   | ▪ <i>We live in a place that has borrowed vernacular; this is a good opportunity to rethink our own vernacular</i> |
| ▪ <i>Economic prosperity</i>   | ▪ <i>Authentic – real – something that represents who you are</i>  |
| ▪ <i>Safe sidewalks and transportation options</i>   | ▪ <i>Aesthetic features are across seasons; we should be able to enjoy our environment throughout the year</i>     |
| ▪ <i>Support quality of life</i>   | ▪ <i>Streetlights</i>  |
| ▪ <i>You get to know your neighbors, make connections and a difference in their lives</i>                  | ▪ <i>Eyes on the street</i>  |
| ▪ <i>Diverse housing options</i>   | ▪ <i>Being around other people</i>   |
| ▪ <i>Places to congregate and inviting spaces that draw people to businesses; important for civic life</i> | ▪ <i>Abundant community resources</i>  |
| ▪ <i>Respecting the viewsheds that exist</i>   | ▪ <i>Lower traffic speeds</i>  |
| ▪ <i>Human scale</i>   |  |
| ▪ <i>Significant public amenities such as Greenways</i>  |  |



- *CPTED designed infrastructure and built environment*
  - *Streetlights/lighting that will respect the dark sky initiative*
  - *A welcoming feeling*
  - *When you're safe and can connect with neighbors you build relationships*
  - *Human scale; facilities for all modes*
  - *Being comfortable in public spaces*
  - *Shared identity, maybe*
  - *Midtown needs branded signage like Fairview and Downtown have*
  - *Having your needs reflected/prioritized in the infrastructure*
  - *Novelties include things that we take for granted - clear air, clean water and the natural resources we can celebrate in our midtown. Salmon runs in Chester Creek and Campbell Creek for example. Includes the viewsheds and the natural authenticity that we 'ARE' as Alaskans.*
  - *Midtown is the southern gateway into Alaska's largest Alaska Native Village; no one recognizes that*
  - *Good/effective zoning enforcement*
  - *Lighting and signage that protects*
- Today's meeting is about generating a preliminary list of ideas that will eventually become our vision. This is the "what" of community building or creative placemaking. The outcome of the October visioning session will be a cohesive vision that we can then apply in the early December Strategy Lab to real places – this is the "where" of community building.
  - The next two meetings will be very different from this one, they'll be more workshop style in which we'll be asking you to roll up your sleeves and do some work.
6. Steve Noble gave a brief overview of the MCR PEL Study that catalyzed the CBWG.
- The MCR PEL Study has been finalized and the state is taking the steps to implement recommended projects. There were some community council resolutions, assembly resolutions, and additional feedback that support continuing the dialogue about Midtown and the creation of public places.
  - This initiative is not just about the Seward Highway. Midtown is really a crossroads for Anchorage.
  - There are several Municipality of Anchorage (MOA), AMATS, and DOT&PF projects planned or underway in the Midtown area. The CBWG efforts will create a vision that provides context for these initiatives as they go forward.
  - This effort is not only about the public spaces, it's also about the private spaces.
  - *A CBWG participant asked how travel patterns are changing due to the pandemic, and if/how planning is taking these new trends into consideration.*
    - i. The pandemic is only a few months old and long-term impacts on travel are difficult to determine. A lot of roadway projects that are underway or planned are multimodal. Planning for the community is continual process. We get these snapshots in time when we print a document, but in a lot of ways the



community doesn't revolve around our planning process. It's always changing.

7. Renee Whitesell gave a brief overview of the Anchorage 2040 Land Use Plan and the MOA's vision for Midtown
  - The MOA 2040 land use plan is particularly informative because it provides strong guidance for future land uses and future growth in Midtown.
  - *A CBWG participant commented the head of Chugach Alaska Corporation has a vision to turn an area along 36<sup>th</sup> Avenue between A St. and C St. into an Alaska Native Cultural Corridor. He suggested the CBWG should coordinate with them.*
8. Leo facilitated a brainstorming discussion to generate a preliminary set of elements/themes that could contribute to development of the vision for Midtown. The goals of this exercise were to:
  - Begin developing parameters for community building priorities and achievable goals.
  - Discuss how projects can be vehicles for positive change and discuss what those changes could be.
- Leo presented an overview of the pre-meeting survey answers to the question of "Midtown is...?" and the group brainstormed additional answers. Below is a summary of the group's answers.
  - *Crossroads for community entertainment, services, and employment.*
  - *The southern gateway to Anchorage, Alaska's largest Alaska Native Village.*
  - *A showcase for good northern design and contributes to a more livable Winter City. Remember winter is six months long.*
  - *Connector between midcentury neighborhoods and important community resources, shopping, entertainment, banking, restaurants.*
  - *It grew through the 70s and 80s with a very automotive focused layout.*
  - *Midtown competes with Downtown.*
  - *Crowded.*
  - *Parking lots and high- speed roadways.*
  - *Fragmented.*
  - *An area without a clear identity.*
  - *Difficult to navigate if on foot or on bike.*
  - *Noisy.*
  - *Sidewalks are used for snow storage in the winter.*
  - *The traffic moves very quickly, so I'd imagine that pedestrians feel overwhelmed, same with bicyclists.*
  - *Seward Highway is a destination unto itself on the scenic byway system. Midtown can welcome scenic byway visitors. Opportunities for experiencing the road should be readily available along this road when people arrive at our gateway.*
  - *Placemaking is important because Anchorage has run out of room for suburban sprawl. Bounded by water and the mountains, urban space has to be*



*redeveloped to contribute to the economic vitality and quality of life for residents and visitors.*

- *The sidewalks are right next to high speed traffic, there are no barriers between the streets and sidewalks and the sidewalks are narrow.*
  - *Taking your life in your hands.*
  - *No wayfinding or signage to popular destinations or trails.*
  - *Dusty.*
  - *A destination everyone (gets in their cars) to visit.*
  - *Provides essential employment and mixed-use housing.*
  - *There has been a sense that roads pass through Midtown so destinations in Midtown are important.*
  - *An urban hub with quality spokes to the other distinctive sub-areas of town.*
  - *No outdoor space that gives any desire to linger.*
  - *An urban hub with quality spokes to the other distinctive sub-areas of town.*
- **Leo presented an overview of the pre-meeting survey answers to the question of “What would make Midtown a better place?” and the group brainstormed additional answers.**
    - *Reducing roadway speeds (number of lanes, lane width, etc.) and capacity.*
    - *Safer connectivity for pedestrians, bicyclists, and bus use; improved walkability.*
    - *Better use of spaces instead of parking lots and more public gathering spaces and green spaces.*
    - *Redesign present one-way couplets so they do not foster racing of cars and motorcycles.*
    - *Noise reduction.*
    - *Ease and safety getting across A/C Streets and the Seward Highway.*
    - *Safe, consistently available and accessible public transportation.*
    - *Better snow/ice removal.*
    - *Enhanced and safer/more secure connections for multi modal transport into adjacent areas of Anchorage.*
    - *Explicit consideration of winter mobility and quality of life.*
    - *Need to preserve neighborhoods of residents.*
    - *Respect for the land and surrounding area.*
    - *Easily reached by bike through some type of enhanced trail network.*
    - *Outdoor dining, trees, real sidewalks; not geared toward vehicles.*
    - *Mainstreet: some residential above retail, food.*
    - *Lanes divided by a center median with trees or grass.*
    - *Pedestrian corridor/square concept, area for congregation, events, etc.*
    - *Consider adding the Midtown area to Fairview’s “Innovation Zone” concept.*



- *Separate sidewalks from roadway and widen them, make them continuous, and don't plow snow on them.*
- *Improved construction materials – the typical asphalt construction degrades rapidly and becomes a hazard, especially when in close proximity to trees/roots that spread out.*
- *Place lighting and other utilities in the right places that don't impede pedestrian use, especially for those physically or visually impaired.*
- *Subsurface roads allowing for at grade community and natural amenities where practical.*
- *Have snow removed from our neighborhoods and streets. Currently its just plowed and berms are left, making roads narrow and dangerous as well as sidewalks, which is treacherous.*
- *Honoring first peoples in placemaking and creating an identity for Midtown.*
- *Bring back the road diet for Fireweed Lane to allow room for pedestrians.*
- *Integrate distinctive Winter and Summer Spaces.*
- **Leo asked a follow up to the question of “Midtown is...” with: “Midtown should...?”**
  - *Midtown is also a great area to celebrate midcentury modern architecture.*
  - *Be a place that adds value to the Anchorage's sense of place.*
  - *Integrate with other parts of town - other planning projects.*
  - *We should definitely get input from indigenous people. We should also remember that although this is Dena'ina land, there are people representing the full range of Alaska's indigenous people.*
  - *Get rid of the Northern Lights/ Benson couplet.*
  - *Be safe, support jobs, provide more mixed-use housing, allow bike riders to commute to work and play.*
  - *Not be a dividing line.*
  - *Be more than the place you drive thru to get to / from work if you live outside the area.*
  - *Be a place where it is enjoyable to walk.*
  - *Be designed as an extension of downtown. We should have an area of non-big box stores with sidewalks and amenities that give you that downtown/small-town feeling that represents your midtown area. parking and walking areas that are close to each other. Currently it's not conducive to walking because everything is too far from one another.*
  - *Peak hours traffic should not drive what this area becomes.*
  - *Have an urban fabric where at the end of the day, people are valued at the same level as vehicles.*
- **How do we achieve the things identified in the “what should...” exercise? How do we go from where Midtown is now to where we want it to be in the future? We'll dig more into this in the visioning session.**



- *When I think of an extension of downtown, I think of mini downtown centers where local people can go and walk to shops and have things to do rather than everyone having to go downtown for that flavor, that feel.*
  - *Not having as many parking spaces might open the possibility of dining or gathering spaces.*
  - *Identify what economic development opportunities exist if the freeway is depressed and development with amenities is constructed on the covers.*
  - *The N. Lights/Benson couplet is doing all the things we're talking about undoing. We need to get rid of it.*
  - *We need to invest in Anchorage to make the city more than just "5-minutes from Alaska" or a place to be gotten away from because historically we've been unwilling to invest in ourselves (short of having excess monies during the oil heydays).*
- Leo talked about "Tactical Urbanism," or short-term/temporary projects that might last a weekend and usually don't require a lot of money. The pandemic has seen many communities adopt tactical urbanism solutions, such as turning parking lots into stages or restaurants. This encourages people to think about using space in different ways. The Strategy Lab will consider these kinds of change, short and long term.
9. Leo then facilitated a discussion on what short-term, reasonably achievable steps can happen next. How can we build small with near term, realistically achievable action that works toward the longer-term vision?
- *Examine outdoor dining, beautification and other tactical urbanism strategies.*
  - *Gather input from area businesses, residents, schools.*
  - *Look at what other communities have done to solve similar issues.*
  - *Examine current policy (e.g. parking) and partnerships that can be refined and/or developed.*
  - *Examine economic development opportunities.*
10. Katie and Leo wrapped up with information about the next meetings, and some homework assignments.
- Ideas Wall: <https://dowl.mysocialpinpoint.com/midtown-home>. Continue to think about the values you want incorporated into a cohesive vision for Midtown, and how that vision can be applied to elements or aesthetic improvements.
    - i. The ideas wall will be a repository for all those great ideas you come up with before we meet again in October.
  - Visioning: You are a time traveling scout for the Better Futures Travel Agency. You've been placed in Midtown in 2030 and are asked to report back about your experience there. As you go around Midtown:
    - i. What do you see, hear, smell or sense?
    - ii. What words would you use to describe the place?
    - iii. What's still there from 2020?
    - iv. What's new? What's changed?
    - v. What's being built, or what might happen by 2040?
    - vi. What do you like best about Midtown in 2030?
  - **Visioning Session: Thursday, October 8, 2020, 4:00 – 6:00 PM AKST.**

