

Hillside District Plan post approval appraisal.

Whack-a-Mole Back to the Status Quo.

Article by John Weddleton, 4-15-2010

When the Hillside District Plan finally made its way to the Assembly, the sole remaining issue was a 19 acre parcel. The rest of the 19,000 acres of happy Hillside living warranted little comment. Just this little piece remained to be whacked back to the status quo.

HALO's role in the Hillside District Plan (HDP) goes back to 2002. Scribes have been at it for almost five years. The starting point was the Anchorage comprehensive plan's recommendations to look at locations for stores, more homes per acre in some areas, more public water and sewer, fixing drainage problems, building and maintaining roads, wildfire prevention, enhancing public safety, protecting the natural environmental, access to Chugach State Park, and figuring out where to draw the line between Urban and Rural services. City planners and their consultants stuck dutifully to this list. For many Hillside residents, each issue was like a carnival mole poking its head out of a hole. Keep swinging the mallet in a flurry hoping you can keep the moles down and the status quo up.

And the public vigorously whacked each of these moles on the head, with each whack going badly for the mole. Proposals for locations for stores were hammered down with vigor and there are none in the HDP. There are proposed rules for drainage and steep slope development, but those are essentially the same as existing code so they are the status quo. There are proposals for building and maintaining drainage facilities and roads but they require further study and a vote of approval by Hillside residents. No real change there. The fragile Parks Department chose not to be whacked so it stayed low throughout the process so no changes there. Protection of the natural environment, wildlife and access to Chugach State Park relies largely on existing rules and the kindness of developers. Any hint that troubled onsite well and septic systems might exist on the Hillside was pummeled. Then whacked again for good measure. And then again just to be sure. Unlike the carnival game, when these moles got whacked, they stayed down.

That left lingering proposals for more homes per acre, more public water and sewer and that pesky Urban/Rural boundary. Every whack pushed these further into the hole so at the final round at the Assembly the battle ground was the "Furrow Creek Transition Area," and it all focused on a 19 acre parcel in that area. That parcel is right on the Urban/Rural divide line drawn in the comprehensive plan, is in the last area left to comply with the comprehensive plan's proposal for a mixture of more homes per acre near the bottom of the hill, and is where the idea of troubled onsite septic systems was resilient. The Huffman-O'Malley Community Council got out the big mallet for this one.

Public arguments in this round hinged on the character of the area, feared increases in taxes and burdensome assessments for unwanted public water and sewer. The HDP pointed to the many lots smaller than the area's zoning requires, to the school and church that haul their sewage away, to the area's roads maintained by the City, to its proximity to stores and other urban pleasures. There was testimony that tried to assure that a tax or assessment burden was unlikely. While the Urban/Rural boundary got no overt acknowledgement, its proxy was the proposal to move public water boundary up the hill to Elmore.

Beat on what the HDP might allow on that 19 acre parcel and you beat on all those issues at once. With significant help from Assembly member Jennifer Johnston, the team from the Huffman-O'Malley Community Council whacked away with superb technique and persistence. While testimony was not always crisply factual, it was heartfelt and the mood of the public was clear. Its efforts convinced all but one on the Assembly that the HDP proposals would lead to development on that parcel that was completely unacceptable.

Amendments by Jennifer Johnston removed the last few offending phrases in the HDP and in the final vote, the support was unanimous. The result is the line for public water will remain where it has been for years and the line for public sewers was beat back to match the water line. With that, the likelihood of developing anywhere on the Hillside with more homes on an acre was curtailed. The Urban/Rural Boundary sulked back down the hill to where we've grown used to it. It feels great to have protected the way things are today. If whacking all those moles back into the ground is a victory then we celebrate. If preparing for the slow march to 15,000 more people on the Hillside is the real end game, then our work continues. It's hard to find anything in the HDP more restrictive than "you can if you want to." Sure, there are some steep slope and drainage rules but those come from new land use laws already in place. There are proposals for a well water protection plan, a new road service area regime, a change in the park service boundary and the building service area. But the details have yet to be worked out and they rely on a vote saying we're okay with it.

"Policy 1-E Shift max perimeter of public sewerage to Elmore to match current ARDSA boundary. "

WHAT is the status of this?

The big fear on the Hillside is anything that threatens our large lot living. That puts public water and sewer and the smaller lots needed to pay for it high on the list. A take over of our roads by the city puts fear in the few people who know that the city doesn't do anything with our roads except put up the signs. There are pockets of concern about drainage and traffic but overall on the Hillside, these are of little concern.

Trails

Roads

AWWU sewer line moved --> need RCA approval.

WHERE IS THE AWWU line for sewer? Might still say it's at Elmore? Moved to match water line?

So we got the status quo.

The changes we will need when 15,000 more people move in will have to wait.