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PLANNING MAGAZINE

How Anchorage Effectively Eliminated Single-Family-Only Zoning

Elected officials (including a planner) and a housing advocate share in their own words what it took to adopt zoning reform and turn a “no” vote into “yes.”

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The Housing Opportunities in the Municipality for Everyone (HOME) Initiative, passed by the Anchorage Assembly in June, allows duplexes as a permitted use in every residential zoning district and redefines two-family dwellings to include detached structures. The aim is to spur housing options in the city, like the multifamily housing found in Grass Creek Village

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By JON DEPAOLIS

How do you fix a housing crisis?

The simple answer — build more housing — isn't always possible. Construction costs, labor shortages, land acquisition, and even shipping delays can make a project infeasible. There may not be a public or governmental appetite for rentals or multifamily developments. Anchorage, Alaska, faces several of these challenges — some of which don't impact communities in the Lower 48 nearly as often.

Solutions do exist, however, and over the past year, three Anchorage Assembly members — including Anna Brawley, AICP, an urban planner who was elected in April 2023 — worked hard to overcome NIMBY attitudes and a hard-to-change zoning code to pass the [Housing Opportunities in the Municipality for Everyone \(HOME\) Initiative](https://www.muni.org/Departments/Assembly/Pages/HOME-Initiative.aspx) (<https://www.muni.org/Departments/Assembly/Pages/HOME-Initiative.aspx>), which essentially eliminates single-family-only zoning in most of the city.

It was a bold move — and an uphill battle. Read on for the story of how they did it, in their own words.

Assembling the team

Affordable places to live in Anchorage are hard to come by, with the [median home price estimated at \\$415,000](https://www.redfin.com/city/781/AK/Anchorage/housing-market) (<https://www.redfin.com/city/781/AK/Anchorage/housing-market>). It follows a [trend nationally](https://www.redfin.com/news/housing-market-tracker-april-2024/) (<https://www.redfin.com/news/housing-market-tracker-april-2024/>), as Redfin reported a record high for home prices in April 2024.

For Assembly Member Daniel Volland, an Anchorage optometrist, some of the key issues that drove him to run for political office — creating more affordable housing and eliminating parking minimums — sure make him sound like a planner. But his support shows that zoning reform issues impact everyone.



Assembly Member Daniel Volland, standing in his district outside the recently completed Block 96 Flats apartment complex, ran for office to try to create more affordable housing and eliminate parking minimums in Anchorage's zoning code.

DANIEL VOLLAND: "We've had a sort of a general trend, a slow decline in population over the last decade, and I really want to reverse that. I think housing is part of that. Folks aren't going to come to Anchorage if they can't find housing that meets their needs."

It's also hard to build in the city because the housing of the 1970s and '80s has not been kept up to code, making it difficult to reuse existing buildings. Brawley says rules also were designed to prioritize greenfield subdivisions, not infill.

ANNA BRAWLEY: "And the cost of new construction in Anchorage is super high. I mean, it's twice the cost per square foot of a lot of other cities."

In May 2023, Assembly Vice Chair Meg Zaletel put forward [a proposal](https://www.muni.org/Departments/Assembly/PressReleases/Pages/Assembly-Members-Cross,-Zaletel-Introduce-Residential-Zoning-Reform.aspx) (<https://www.muni.org/Departments/Assembly/PressReleases/Pages/Assembly-Members-Cross,-Zaletel-Introduce-Residential-Zoning-Reform.aspx>) to revise the city's land use plan and consolidate all 15 residential zoning districts into just two. To Zaletel, a local lawyer, it was intended to start a very serious conversation about what zoning did or didn't do for the community.

MEG ZALETEL: "What I have found is that until someone affirmatively puts something forward, you don't necessarily get real traction."

To say the proposal caused a stir would be an understatement. Volland says it was referred to by some in the community as a "zoning bomb." While it did spur dialogue, it was too much for the community to even consider. For the [second attempt](https://www.muni.org/Departments/Assembly/PressReleases/Pages/Members-Volland-and-Zaletel-Propose-HOME-Initiative,-a-Refined-Residential-Zoning-Reform.aspx) (<https://www.muni.org/Departments/Assembly/PressReleases/Pages/Members-Volland-and-Zaletel-Propose-HOME-Initiative,-a-Refined-Residential-Zoning-Reform.aspx>), introduced in August 2023, Volland helped pare the land use plan down from the 15 zoning districts to five.

VOLLAND: "Effectively, the biggest thing we would do would be to get rid of single-family zoning."

The August draft also had a new co-sponsor in Brawley. Originally from Columbus, Ohio, the Cornell planning grad was eager to put her skillset to use on this issue.



Anna B. Brawley, AICP, standing outside a newly developed duplex built this past summer in her district of West Anchorage, put her planning background to use when engaging community members during the process to get HOME passed this past year.

BRAWLEY: "It's unusual for somebody who is usually a policy expert or someone working in that field to come in and be a decision-maker. So, I feel like that really helped me jump in and not have to ask, 'What is the most effective solution?' I know those things already, so it was [more] knowing where to focus."

Knowing the path forward was a leg up, especially since Brawley and Co. would see plenty of potholes along the way.

Activating advocates for zoning reform

While they worked through the process, the sponsors put forward two substitute versions of the ordinance in September 2023 and January 2024. During that time, they tried working with city staff and the mayor's office but found resistance.

BRAWLEY: "It's not common for an assembly member to initiate a change to our zoning code.

"We continued to make attempts to work together, but we were not willing to simply slow the process down or make it take another year. We did what we could to keep it on track."

However, that created an impression in some residents' minds — as well as some assembly members' — that they were working around the city instead of with them. Brawley says they made good faith efforts, but if there wasn't going to be support from staff, they would need to be proactive in gathering help and taking their message directly to the people.

Zaletel credits Brawley for the robust community engagement efforts.

ZALETTEL: "The planner in her really came through."



Anchorage Assembly Vice Chair Meg Zaletel got the ball rolling for HOME in 2023. Her initial proposal consolidated Anchorage's 15 zoning districts to just two.

The sponsors held about two dozen meetings with the public, including groups that hadn't been typically brought into land use conversations — like the [Alaska Black Caucus](https://www.thealaskablackcaucus.com/) (<https://www.thealaskablackcaucus.com/>) and the [Alaska Native Brotherhood and the Alaska Native Sisterhood](https://www.anbangc.org/) (<https://www.anbangc.org/>) — and heard their stories on the difficulty of finding housing. They also [wrote op-eds](https://www.adn.com/opinions/2024/06/21/opinion-what-we-heard-about-the-home-initiative-and-residential-zoning-reform/) (<https://www.adn.com/opinions/2024/06/21/opinion-what-we-heard-about-the-home-initiative-and-residential-zoning-reform/>) in the *Anchorage Daily News*.

ZALETTEL: "Young professionals [are] unable to have the housing they want even though they are working hard. Alaska is a great place for young professionals, and there aren't enough people to do the work. You get great opportunities [here] that you wouldn't get to do for maybe a decade down in the Lower 48. But if you can't find housing that works for you, then that opportunity isn't there."

These issues were exacerbated by COVID-19. Erin Baldwin Day — a member of the Anchorage Housing Club, a group of residents who meet to discuss critical Anchorage housing issues — has seen it firsthand while organizing mutual aid services.

ERIN BALDWIN DAY: "Post-pandemic, there was a really troubling uptick in the number of folks who were having to make these really untenable decisions, particularly around either paying for food and basic necessities or paying their rent."

"Anchorage has something like a 97 percent occupancy rate right now in rental properties, which is wild. And, with that, the housing stock in Alaska is also aging. We have not built enough housing in Anchorage to keep up with the decline in the stock that we already have, plus just general demand for housing."

Adding to the problem are the rental properties that aren't maintained, including those that are unsafe or unhealthy due to issues like mold. But a lack of other housing choices means tenants stay put. Meanwhile, rents have skyrocketed, with some complexes raising rents 20 and 30 percent year over year. Day knows teachers and other essential workers in the community who are struggling to find housing.

DAY: "You can't build a town, and you can't sustain a city without workers — and you can't have workers without housing."



Erin Baldwin Day, lead organizer of the Mutual Aid Network of Anchorage, stands outside of Z.J. Loussac Library, which houses the Anchorage Assembly Chambers. Day and other pro-housing advocates were key in building momentum to get HOME passed.

On the other side of the spectrum, the sponsors saw editorials in the newspaper decrying their proposal and heard from residents who were not supportive of any change to the zoning code. While there were typical concerns, like impacts to neighborhoods, traffic, and noise levels, they also heard uglier complaints.

BRAWLEY: "I wasn't quite prepared for how much of a backlash there would be and how it was basically what I would call the elders of the city saying . . . 'This was already decided, and you don't have our permission to change it.'"

"There was so much demonization of renters or this assumption that if a renter moves into your neighborhood — setting aside that they are probably already there — that it was going to ruin the neighborhood."

Public hearings on HOME were held before the Planning & Zoning Commission in March and May. Then, at the P&Z meeting in early June, the commission members voted to recommend approval of the ordinance by the Assembly. The stage was set for a final hearing on June 25, 2024.

Getting across the finish line

On the night the Assembly was to have its final discussion of HOME, Brawley and her cosponsors believed the item would fail by a split six-to-six vote and were strategizing their next move. This, even though they revised the proposal (https://www.muni.org/Departments/Assembly/SiteAssets/Pages/HOME-Initiative/AO%202023-87%28S-1%29%2c%20As%20Amended_Clean%20Copy.pdf) to take out the language consolidating the zoning districts and just focusing on making duplexes a permitted use by right in every residential zone and redefining two-family dwellings to include detached structures.

Then, the testimony started — and those in favor of the change outnumbered the detractors by a two-to-one margin. People like Brandy Bowmaster (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hUQ7BMVFOZg&t=7801s>), who rents a duplex in the North Star community and spoke to the challenges of finding a place to rent that fits her needs and budget. People like Will Walker (<https://youtu.be/hUQ7BMVFOZg?si=2R9khqZf48-B74cK&t=8028>), a duplex renter in Spenard who dreams of being able to buy his first house in Anchorage. People like Catherine Rocchi (<https://youtu.be/hUQ7BMVFOZg?si=wVHYz4AQ6Y4Xtzod&t=8117>), who rents a single-family home in Lower Hillside and lives there with a group of other young adults, illustrating how single-family zoning already serves more than just single families.

The show of support was meaningful to Assembly Member Karen Bronga, who taught in the area for two decades and raised her children in Anchorage. Her experiences gave her unique insight into the housing challenges of young adults, some of whom contacted her in the lead-up to the meeting begging her to get rid of single-family-only zoning.



Karen Bronga, an Assembly member representing East Anchorage, cast the deciding vote for HOME. Initially against the proposal, Bronga switched sides because she felt compelled to "honor" community feedback and the HOME sponsors' willingness to compromise on aspects of the plan.

She was not in favor of HOME, but she still met with a housing reform advocate to hear his thoughts. In that conversation, she homed in on an area of town that she felt didn't mesh with the proposal. It was on a hillside and had just one road in and out — a potentially dangerous situation, especially in Alaska. The housing reform advocate suggested Bronga propose an amendment, and when she did, the sponsors agreed to it.

KAREN BRONGA: "I just felt at that point that they have compromised so big from their start and have worked so hard. I have to honor that."

BRAWLEY: "I think that this is exactly how the legislative process works, ideally. There's value in compromising."

With Bronga's support, HOME had the votes. It passed 7-5 (<https://www.adn.com/alaska-news/anchorage/2024/06/26/anchorage-assembly-narrowly-approves-zoning-initiative-allowing-duplexes-in-single-family-areas/>).

In the days after the meeting, Bronga received an email from a former student of hers, who is now studying law in Seattle but trying — and struggling — to find a home back in Anchorage.

BRONGA: "He just thanked me profusely, saying that if he doesn't see that he has the ability to purchase a home or find [one to] rent here, then coming back is not attractive."

'A generator of hope'

HOME's sponsors know it won't solve the housing crisis, but it may make incremental improvements over time.

ZALETTEL: "In the short-term, the win is that there's the opportunity to do it [and add] more housing units. You can only solve a housing crisis with more housing units."

BRAWLEY: "[Another] success is really continued engagement from those folks who have felt disenfranchised or whose voices just aren't heard at the table in these conversations — because that was the missing piece that has made the difference. I think that is the only way to move forward and truly have policy that is representative of our community's priorities."



Tiny houses constructed in the South Addition neighborhood. The HOME initiative allows multiple structures, like these tiny homes, to be built on a single lot by right.

VOLLAND: "I think we're at this moment in Anchorage right now where a lot of young people are realizing that they have access to their assembly members, and they can drive a positive vision for their city."

Brawley also sees some lessons planners can take and apply to their own efforts, like partnering with the organizations already doing advocacy work.

BRAWLEY: "Community organizing is completely compatible with community planning. I think to the extent that they use public engagement techniques that planners use, we should also think about how [to] use community organizing techniques."

Meanwhile, Anchorage Housing Club member Day thinks HOME's success story is a win for the community.

DAY: "I think we're living at a point in time . . . where hope is in really short supply. I think that people engaging in the public square on these kinds of issues and seeing that their voice and their presence makes a substantive difference is a generator of hope. It's a catalyst for people to feel that there is still room for your Average Joe citizen to make a meaningful impact in their community and to do something positive for [their] neighbors."

Jon DePaolis is APA's senior editor.