DT Code Update Subcommittee – White Paper #8

Meeting 4/25/2022 at 3p.m. SEED Lab Downtown

Please note that this meeting will be both in-person and online

Overview

At the April 11, 2022 meeting, the working group discussed design standards and talked through ways to address height, wind, and solar access. A subset of the group worked further to develop standards for the three downtown zones.

DT Code Revisions Working Group meeting, April 11th, 2022.

Upon review of draft code changes pertaining to building step backs and tower mass reductions, the Downtown Code Revisions working group determined that there were several issues with the proposal, including the following:

- The universal 20' step back at the top of the "street wall" in the three districts penalized small developments by requiring them to reduce their building footprint by a larger percentage than larger developments.
- There were questions about the dimensions of the step back and many thought it was too large.
- The building mass reduction guidelines resulted in a "wedding cake" tower and left the architect very little room for problem solving and design.
- For very tall buildings, the "wedding cake" form had a high impact on the size of the floorplate from the middle to the top of the tower and left very little developable space.
- There were questions about how the step back functioned in the different districts and the purpose behind the different heights.

The working group discussed the necessity of the step back and its purpose. They decided that the step back protected the public realm at the street level in different ways in the different districts, and that the step backs should remain in the draft in some form.

- In B2C the step back at 52' provides the B2C streets with a more comfortable, residential feel. Restricting the "street wall" to approximately four stories before requiring the step helps maintain a human scale at the street level.
- In B2B and B2A, the purpose of the step back is to provide sky exposure access and protection from wind downwashing.
- The height of the step back in B2B is approximately halfway between that of the B2A and B2C, which fits the district purpose as the transitional district between B2A and B2C and signals the change from one district to another at the pedestrian level with its mid-level step back height.

The working group approved of the use of feet, rather than floors, to determine the location of the step backs and the maximum height of the buildings. After some study, they settled on the following heights for the initial building step backs:

- 52' in B2C, which is the equivalent of a four-story building with a generous first floor ceiling height and three 12' tall stories. This increases the by-right base height of the building from current code by approximately one floor.
- 76' in the B2B, the equivalent of a six-story building with a generous first floor height. This increases the by-right base building height of the B2B building form by approximately one floor.
- 112' in B2A, the equivalent of a nine-story building, which matches the by-right base height in current code.

As a remedy for the issues with the step back outlined above, the working group decided to explore using a reduction in the percent of lot coverage instead of minimum dimensions as a basis for the measurement of the step back.

The group also discussed using angled planes measured from the center of the ROW or from the lot line to help define the shape of tall towers and provide a higher percentage of sky exposure both in the vertical and horizontal directions, in other words, providing opportunities to view the sky and the horizon both looking up and looking through the downtown skyline.

The architects in the group also supported the idea of allowing a wind study as an alternative to the step back requirements. There was much discussion about how the wind study might be codified in a way that would set clear parameters for permit review.

The working group organized a subcommittee to explore the step back and tower mass reduction options and the following are the results of the subcommittee meeting.

DT Code Working Group Subcommittee Meeting, April 18th, 2022

The subcommittee proposes a step back and tower mass reduction solution that combines the ideas and information gathered in the April 11th working group meeting with earlier working group discussions about street type and street level characteristics.

The proposed approach will be to require a reduction in the building size at the setback heights the working group set for the three districts during the April 11th meeting. The setback will be a percentage of the building lot size, rather than a set dimension.

The step back requirement will vary depending on the street classification at the lot's frontage and it will be cumulative if the building fronts more than one street (see attached draft illustrations and sketches).

The advantages of this approach include the following:

- The step back no longer penalizes small developments.
- The step back is tailored to the building size. Larger buildings will have deeper step back requirements.

- The tower mass reduction will only occur once, at the step back, removing the "wedding cake" incremental reduction of the tower form from the draft code, while still providing opportunities for variable and interesting building design.
- The variation in the depth of the step back from building to building will articulate the "street wall" and help reduce the canyon effect.
- There will be a greater break in the building mass at intersections, providing more opportunities for views and solar access.
- The percentage reduction may be applied to individual floor plates differently, which will allow the architect more freedom and flexibility in the design of the building tower while also providing the wind downwashing protection at the street level.

As of April 19th, the subcommittee is still exploring a requirement for an angled plane that intersects the building at a height near the Merrill Field height limits. This will provide more sky plane access and will also encourage architects to create a "top" on the towers, similar to the "building top" design requirement used in Toronto.

RWDI, a national engineering firm that specializes in wind studies and environmental engineering, has provided some information and research on wind studies. The working group is reviewing the material and will discuss it at the next meeting.

Current Tasks

Please review the illustrations and the proposed solution to the issues identified during the April 11th meeting and bring any questions or comments to the meeting.

Additional topics of discussion for the meeting:

1. Do we need to consider requiring a minimum number of stories or a minimum FAR in the DT districts to encourage higher density development and prevent single story development?

The Downtown Plan can be found here: About, Documents, & FAQs | Our Downtown Anchorage
Questions: Kristine.bunnell@anchorageak.gov

ANC Downtown Code Working Group
Monday, April 25, 2022 3:00 PM-4:30 PM
Anchorage SEED Lab: 111 W 6th Ave, Anchorage, AK 99501
If you prefer to join the meeting online, please use this link