

"I may not agree with a word you say but I will defend unto death your right to say it" - Voltaire

Knowles' wrecking ball

Heard a comment from a disgruntled fellow on Anchorage's Lower Fourth Avenue the other day. He said "You can't stand around and visit in this part of town any more; you have to keep moving and not because the police tell you to either. If you stay in one place too long here, the building near you may come tumbling down around your ears."

He, of course, was referring to Mayor Tony Knowles' latest campaign to "clean up Fourth Avenue." That campaign involves a wrecking ball poised for action at any time, very little notice to the public of demolition schedules, outright defiance of the Anchorage Assembly, and sometimes a little secrecy about price tags and financial negotiations. - Mayor Knowles, in his eagerness to become "Man of the Hour" before the upcoming October Municipal Elections is also completely disregarding the effect his actions is having on the people, who for various reasons, populate Anchorage's East Fourth Avenue.

In less than a decade, Fourth Avenue in Anchorage, came to be known—especially to the City's police force and downtown business owners—as a "breeding ground for violence," or a "showcase of human misery." No thoughtful person who has had an occasion to observe some of the activities associated with the string of bars, pawnshops, and similar type establishments can deny the unpleasantness of such sights.

After the Pipeline Boom in the early '70's, Fourth Avenue acquired an aura of evil, and its destiny for falling victim to "Tony's Wrecking Ball" was probably cast in those days. Before the furious economic impact of the "TAPS" Construction Days brought an element of meanness to Fourth Avenue, however, it was socially acceptable to visit there.

People from Alaska's rural villages often went to the "Big M," the Denali, and to the Panhandle to see a familiar face from back home, to find friends and relatives or just to leave messages for them there. The relaxed atmosphere of those places has been gone for some time now, and most of our people shy away or are cautioned to stay away from Fourth Avenue in Anchorage.

It is a sad fact that some of our Native Brothers and Sisters are among the horde of homeless who have remained on Fourth Avenue, using the bars there for a bit of warmth and comfort; sometimes a little corner to sleep in. Every society has a certain percentage of its members who fall in the "less than fortunate" category, and ours is no different. Those people, who populate Fourth Avenue today, sometimes described as "street people," are not all Native nor are they all White. They are just people who need our kindness and understanding.

We think Mayor Knowles should put away his wrecking ball for a while and re-think his plans and actions. Even if Anchorage is our State's biggest city, we are still all Alaskans after all, which means we can demonstrate some compassion for those who need it and still have progress too. We think Mayor Knowles should adopt the Alaskan way.

When the dust literally settles on Fourth Avenue in Anchorage, Mayor Knowles may become a hero because we will have some new parking garages, a few other slick modern buildings and even an attractive park maybe. The stink of Fourth Avenue as it is today will be consigned to memory, and the fate of those homeless few among us will be ignored.

Mayor Knowles may be, thoughtlessly, setting a precedent for other ambitious politicians to follow; that is, plunging toward development no matter the cost in human suffering (especially in an election year). So far, Alaskans have simply not accepted such cavalier attitudes from elected officials, but we may be seeing the beginning of a new era and in danger of becoming like any other big city in the Lower 48. Let's hope not.

smc