

Anchorage Policy Agenda

BASELINE ANALYSIS

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PROJECT OBJECTIVE

Provide a baseline of the local agenda in Anchorage today...

...to inform a forward-facing vision and policy agenda for Anchorage

BIG PICTURE TAKEAWAYS

A majority of Anchorage residents think we are on the wrong track.

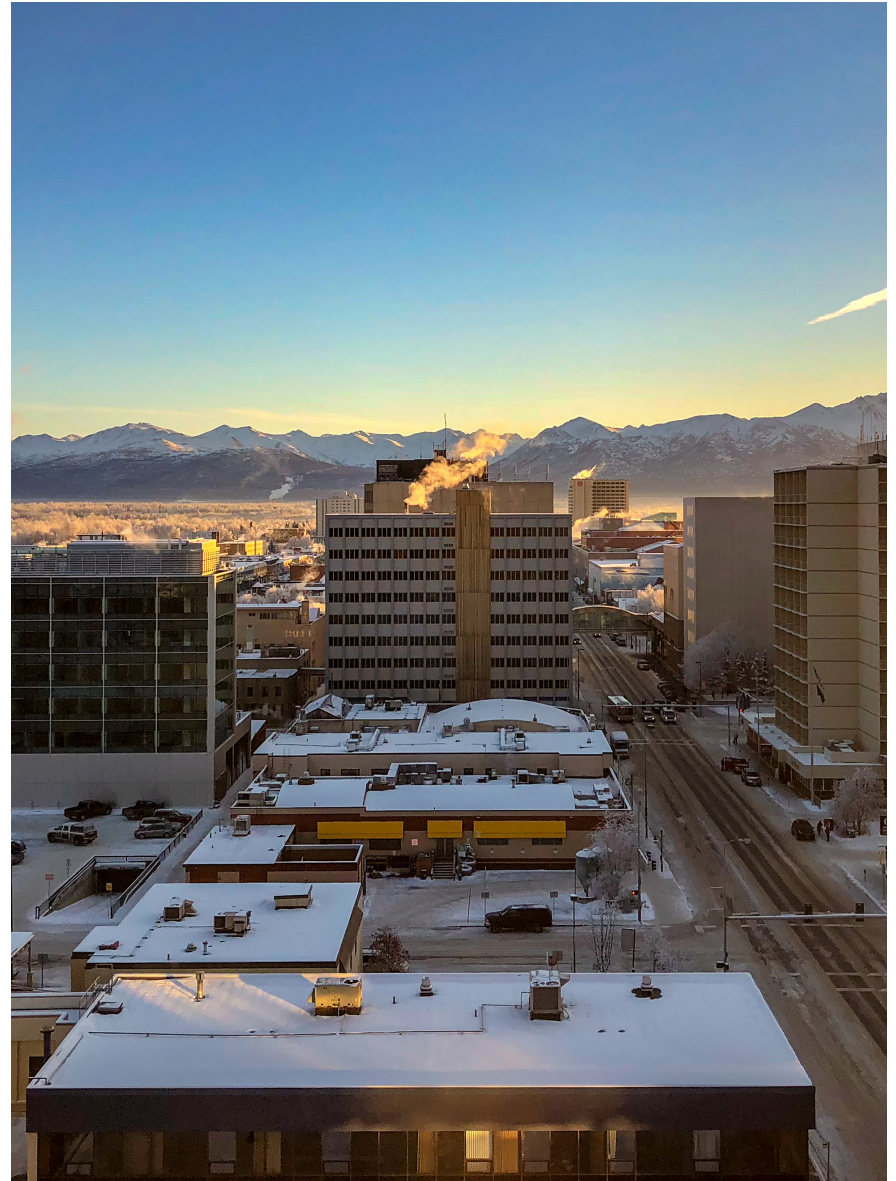
A majority also agree on the big issues holding us back and share values on how to approach them.

But Anchorage has little to no capacity to turn our big issues into policy solutions. We have an under-staffed executive branch, part-time Assemblymembers with part-time staff, and the fewest think tanks of any state.

As a result, local policymaking is reactive to a handful of issues, rather than operating via an over-arching vision and strategic policymaking. Local media covers the same issues, further contributing to a reactive policy agenda.

There is an opportunity to:

- Identify the big issues holding Anchorage back
- Understand the local agenda today and where we get stuck
- Share a forward-facing vision for Anchorage
- Identify the areas to focus on to work toward that vision
- Outline evidence-based, public-supported policies in those areas
- Communicate effectively and build momentum around the vision and policy agenda



KEY TRENDS IN ANCHORAGE

This project seeks to outline a vision and policy platform at the intersection of evidence and relevance. Part of the groundwork is understanding the social and economic trends and what we need to solve for in Anchorage.

Population and working-age population decline

Anchorage's 289,810 residents account for 40% of the state population. The city's population has declined 4% over the past 10 years, but is expected to grow for the first time in six years in 2023, rising .3%. Anchorage has also seen net out-migration of its working-age population for the past five years, with an average net loss of 3,000 working-age residents each year.

Concern about the direction of Anchorage's economy

As of July 2023, confidence in the local economy was at its lowest point since 2010 (42% saying economic conditions are good). Overall expectations for the future of Anchorage's economy are also at a low point, with just 37% expressing optimism.

High cost of living

Anchorage is the 20th most expensive U.S. city to live in, and is 27% more expensive than the average American city. Anchorage ranks 4th highest for health care costs of any U.S. city, 7th highest for grocery prices, 24th for utilities, and 33rd for housing costs.

A series of housing challenges

Due to high costs and other factors, Anchorage struggles to build new housing, particularly new multi-family housing. Housing construction peaked in the 1980s and has been declining since. Today, Anchorage builds just 1 house for every 1,000 residents each year, compared to 5 per 1,000 nationally. As supply outpaces demand, the average house is getting older and the need for renovation is also growing. Housing affordability is also a challenge, as rents, mortgages, and new home sale prices are all rising.

Persistently high rates of homelessness

Rates of homelessness are high in Anchorage, at 105 per 10,000 residents (compared to 30 per 10,000 for the U.S. as a whole). The estimated number of people experiencing homelessness in Anchorage (roughly 3,000) is the same as it was three years ago.

Poor education outcomes and brain drain

As a state, Alaska ranks 47th in education in the country. University funding has also taken a hit in recent years, and enrollment at the University of Alaska Anchorage has declined over 30 percent since 2018.

The good...what people like about living in Anchorage

- Residents cite outdoor amenities and community as two of the things they value most about Anchorage.
- Average income in Anchorage is relatively high, with a median household income of \$88,871.
- Demographically, Anchorage is a relatively young and diverse city.
- Anchorage is also a young city in a young state...there is a sense of possibility and opportunity that residents share.

BASELINE ANALYSIS

Changing the status quo requires understanding it.

The following baseline analysis is an opportunity to understand the agenda setting process and what's on the local agenda today.

WHAT IS A POLICY AGENDA?

A policy agenda is the list of salient issues that elected officials agree to consider.

The agenda has several key components:

- **Media agenda:** What the local media is talking about
- **Public agenda:** What the public is talking about
- **Political agenda:** What candidates and elected officials are running / focusing on
- **Policy agenda:** What local government is working on today

Agenda setting is part of a process to inform, implement, and evaluate policy:



The traditional academic model for agenda setting is linear: It starts with the agenda-setting function of the media, media coverage then shapes public discourse, which influences political agendas, which then shapes policy focus and response. Policy responses then get covered by the media, and the cycle continues.



Figure 1: A Model of Agenda Setting at the Local Level

“The agenda setting process is an ongoing competition among issue proponents to gain the attention of media professionals, the public, and policy elites.”

Recent academic work has challenged this linear process of agenda-setting, and shared a new model where the local agenda can be influenced at different points in the process.

In other words, the media, public, political actors, and policymakers all have a role to play and an ability to impact policy agendas, especially at the local level.

“Local issues are not remote...A person does not need the media to inform him that there are potholes in the road or trash piling up on the curb or that it takes 10 minutes for an ambulance to arrive at their house instead of five.”

WHAT'S ON THE LOCAL AGENDA TODAY

Issues are not represented equally on the agenda today. For instance, homelessness is one of the most-cited issues across polling and focus groups, the subject of the most Assembly work sessions outside of the budget, and one of the most-covered issues by the local media (equivalent to one article every 3 days in the ADN). Public safety is also well-represented across the public, policy, and media agendas. Other issues, such as climate, health, and the local economy, are less covered.

Top Assembly Issues, by number of work sessions

- Budget
- Homelessness
- Housing
- Infrastructure (Port of Alaska)
- Public Safety

Top Media Issues: by mentions in original reporting

- Public Safety
- Natural Resources (Oil/Gas)
- Homelessness

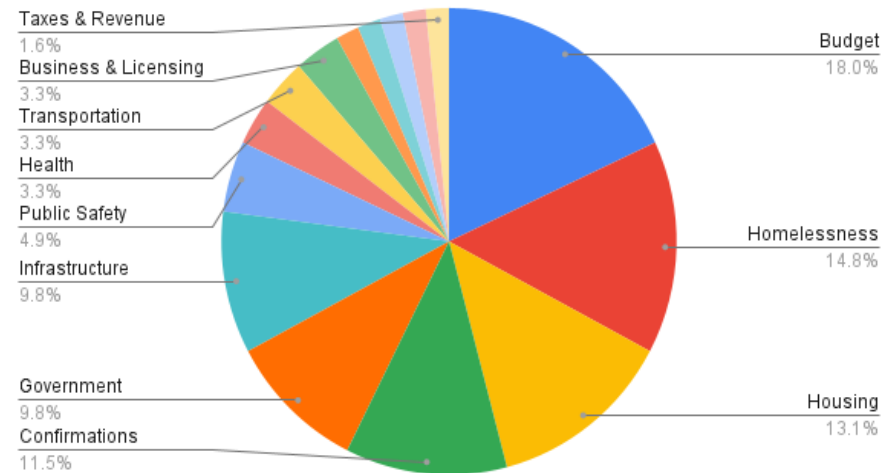
Top Public Issues: Polling & focus groups

- Homelessness
- Crime/Public Safety
- Economy
- Housing
- Education

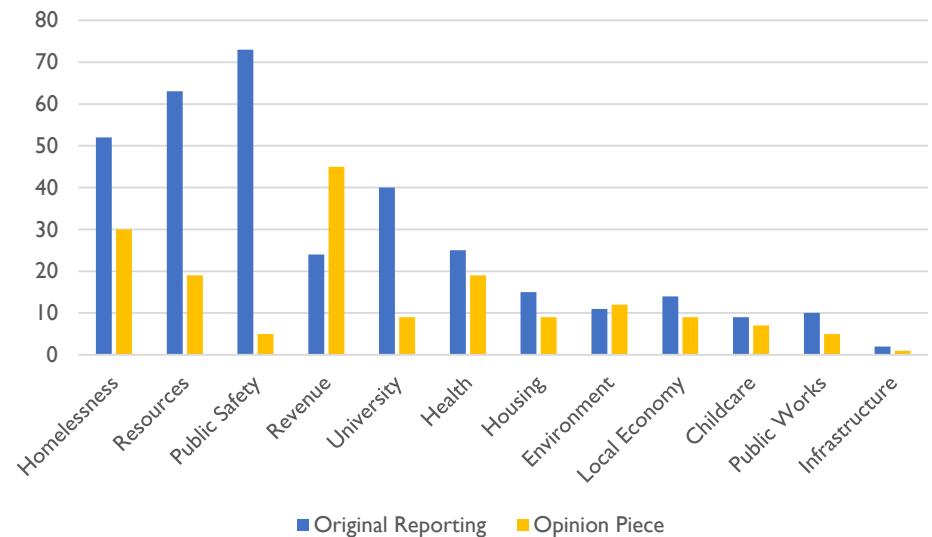
Noteworthy: Issues with More Public Opinion Coverage Than Original Reporting in 2023

- Revenue
- Climate/Environment

2023 Assembly Work Sessions by Area



2023 Mentions in the Anchorage Daily News



ASSEMBLY AGENDA

Filling the void of local agenda setting and policymaking, the Anchorage Assembly has been active over the past several years. The focus of the Assembly has centered around several key issues, particularly homelessness and housing.

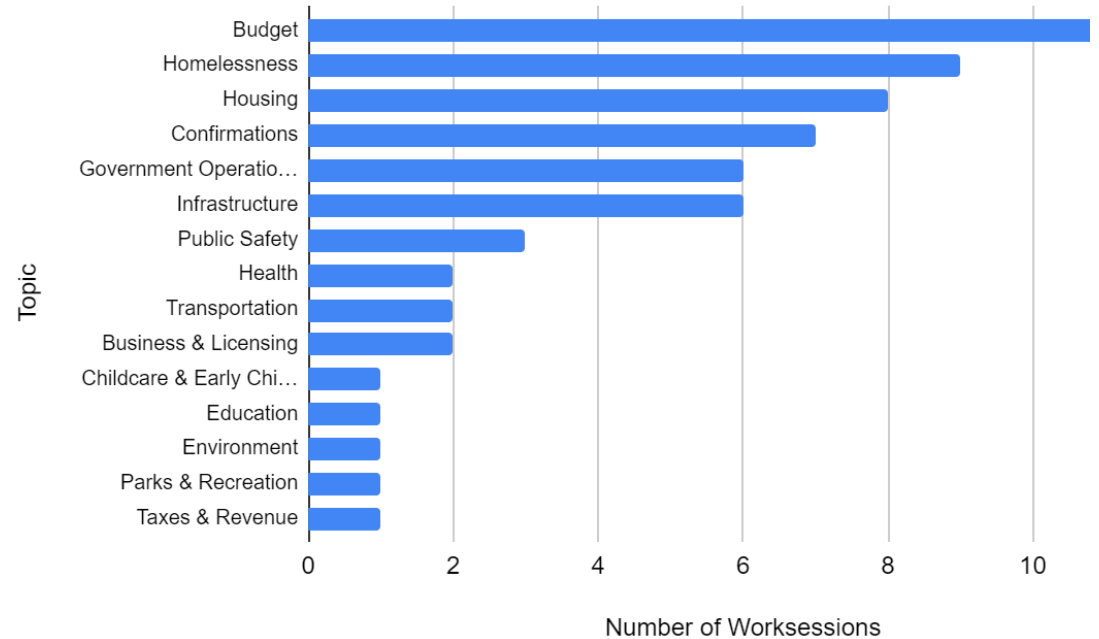
The chart to the right details the number of Assembly work sessions by topic. Work sessions reflect the issues that have reached the point of dedicated focus outside of Assembly meetings, making them a reflection of Assembly priorities.

The chart to the right shows that the budget receives the most work sessions, followed by homelessness and housing. When homelessness and housing are combined, they account for 17 work sessions. The next most common work sessions are around regular business: confirmations and government operations, followed by infrastructure and public safety.

Other issues like education, the environment, childcare, and taxes/revenue had just 1 work session each, marking them as lower priorities and topics of discussion on the Assembly’s policy agenda.

While work sessions and special meetings are weighted toward certain issues, existing Assembly committees (highlighted to the right) provide a structure to consider a broad range of issues.

Number of Assembly Work Sessions by Topic, 2023



Assembly Committees-of-the-Whole

- Budget and Finance
- Enterprise and Utility Oversight
- Public Safety
- Rules
- Transportation

Assembly Committees

- AMATS Policy Committee
- Anchorage Equity Committee
- Community and Economic Development
- Ethics and Elections Committee
- Health Policy Committee
- Housing and Homelessness Committee
- Legislative Committee
- Municipal Audit Committee
- Personnel Committee
- Reapportionment Committee

LOCAL MEDIA AGENDA

The local news media database used to inform this project catalogues over 40,000 local news articles in Anchorage across several sources*: Alaska Beacon, Alaska Landmine, Anchorage Daily News, Must Read Alaska, and The Alaska Current. The database includes articles from January 1, 2019 to August 30, 2023 and can be used to search and sort articles by issue area. **Additional work is being done to include articles from Alaska Public Media and Alaska's News Source.*

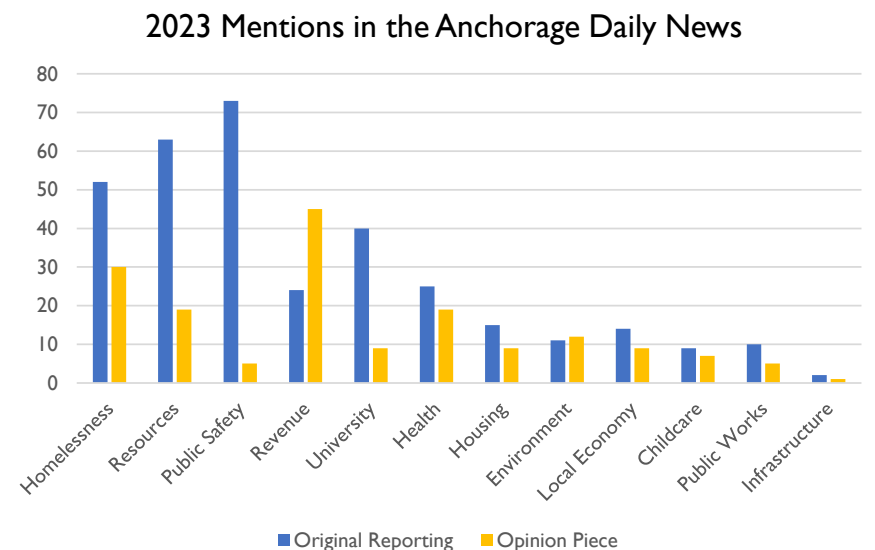
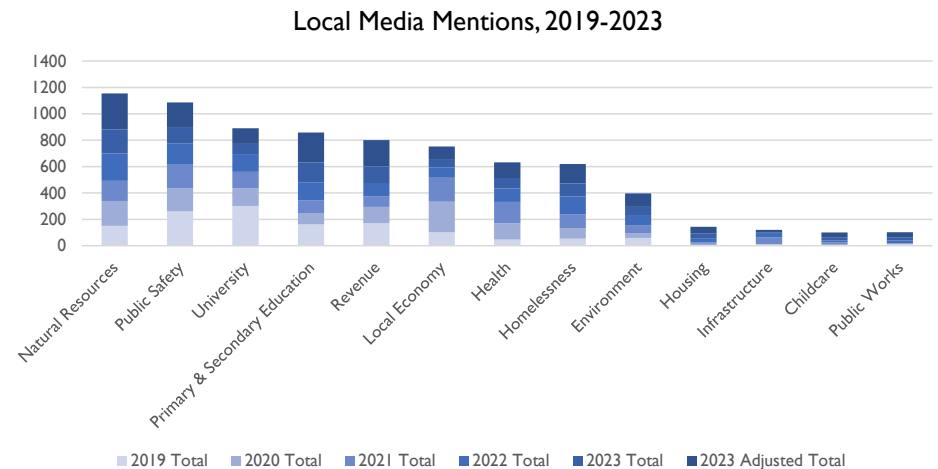
The chart to the right shows the number of local media mentions between January 1, 2019 - August 30, 2023. The bars reflect total articles over the time period, and the shades reflect coverage each year, as indicated in the key.

Over the total period, coverage ranged in frequency: from an article once every 1.5 days on average about natural resources (oil, gas) and public safety, to an article every three days about homelessness and every three weeks about childcare.

Coverage has also changed over time. For instance, while we saw one article a week about homelessness in 2019, we are seeing three a week in 2023 on average. Articles on housing have gone from once every two and a half months to once a week. The PFD has seen the opposite trend, moving from once every two days in 2019 to once a week on average.

Original reporting vs. opinion in the ADN in 2023

The media database also helps us understand whether original reporting or public opinion pieces are driving local coverage. As the chart to the right shows, some issues see greater original reporting coverage than public opinion piece mentions (public safety, natural resources, homelessness), while some receive more coverage in public opinion pieces than original reporting (revenue, climate).



PUBLIC AGENDA

A majority of Anchorage residents agree: Anchorage is on the wrong track.

In a 2023 poll, a majority of residents shared a net-negative rating across a range of issues, from crime and public safety to affordable housing development to education and homelessness.

If Anchorage is on the wrong track, what does the public think will put Anchorage on the right track?

In focus groups, the issues that come out on top include:

- Addressing homelessness
- Crime and public safety
- Diversifying Anchorage's economy
- Creating more affordable housing

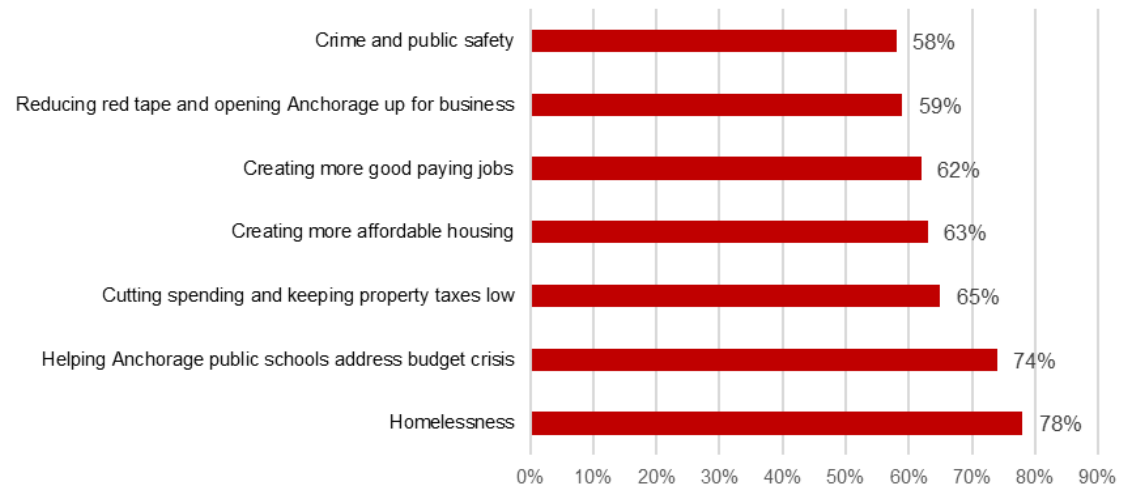
Shared Values & Priorities

A series of shared values and priorities join a majority of Alaskans together:

- Kind and connected communities
- Education and real opportunities for tomorrow
- Right to independence and privacy
- Support for working families
- Access to clean water and the economic benefits of resource extraction
- Workers and local businesses over special interests

These shared values and priorities start to draw a forward-facing vision for Anchorage that the public can believe in: One that addresses challenges like homelessness and crime while also defining a positive alternative: a kind, connected, sustainable city with a strong economy and plentiful opportunities.

Net Negative Job Performance, March 2023



Anchorage residents value being kind, hard-working, and independent, but also value living in community and care about the place they live.

THE ROLE OF THE MAYOR

Anchorage does not have a clear forward-facing agenda today.

Residents express this to be true, and Municipal communications do not point to a clear set of clear focus areas. Homelessness is the issue most highlighted on the Municipality website. The Mayor’s page does not identify policy priorities. Beyond homelessness, other focuses during the Mayor’s term have included basic governance issues (ethics complaints, staffing issues) as well as a recent focus on the Port of Alaska.

Mayors play an important role in local agenda setting, and mayoral candidates have an opportunity to set a forward-facing vision and policy platform for Anchorage.

The case studies below and recent in-state examples, such as Mary Peltola’s campaign platform, provide examples of how compelling messaging and policy directives can align.

Mini Case Studies

The following examples come from other mid-sized cities in the United States. Taken together, they highlight that many cities are facing similar issues to Anchorage, but none are reduced to reacting to a single issue the way Anchorage is. And all are focusing on the future, particularly through some combination of jobs, innovation, and economic development and opportunity.

Lauren McLean MAYOR OF BOISE, ID

Priorities:

Housing
Climate change
Living wage jobs
Transportation

City Profile:

Population: 237,000
+1.73% population
700 people experiencing homelessness (30 per 10k)
50.3% Trump in 2020

Erin Mendenhall MAYOR OF SALT LAKE CITY

Priorities:

Environmental resilience
Economic opportunity
Equity

City Profile:

Population: 200,478
+0.92% population
2,095 people experiencing homelessness (105 per 10k)
54% Biden in 2020

Hillary Schieve MAYOR OF RENO

Priorities:

Downtown investment
Tech / innovation
Economic development

City Profile:

Population: 269,000
+1.53% population
1,690 people experiencing homelessness (63 per 10k)
51% Biden in 2020

Jean Stothert MAYOR OF OMAHA, NE

Priorities:

Public safety
Managing city budget
Job growth and economic development

City Profile:

Population: 487,000
+1.06% population
1,346 people experiencing homelessness (28 per 10k)
54% Biden in 2020

Tommy Battle MAYOR OF HUNTSVILLE, AL

Priorities:

Innovation
Infrastructure
Urban redevelopment
Transportation
Design standards, code, and zoning

City Profile:

Population: 217,000
+1.75% population
560 people experiencing homelessness (26 per 10k)
53% Trump in 2020

KEY TAKEAWAY

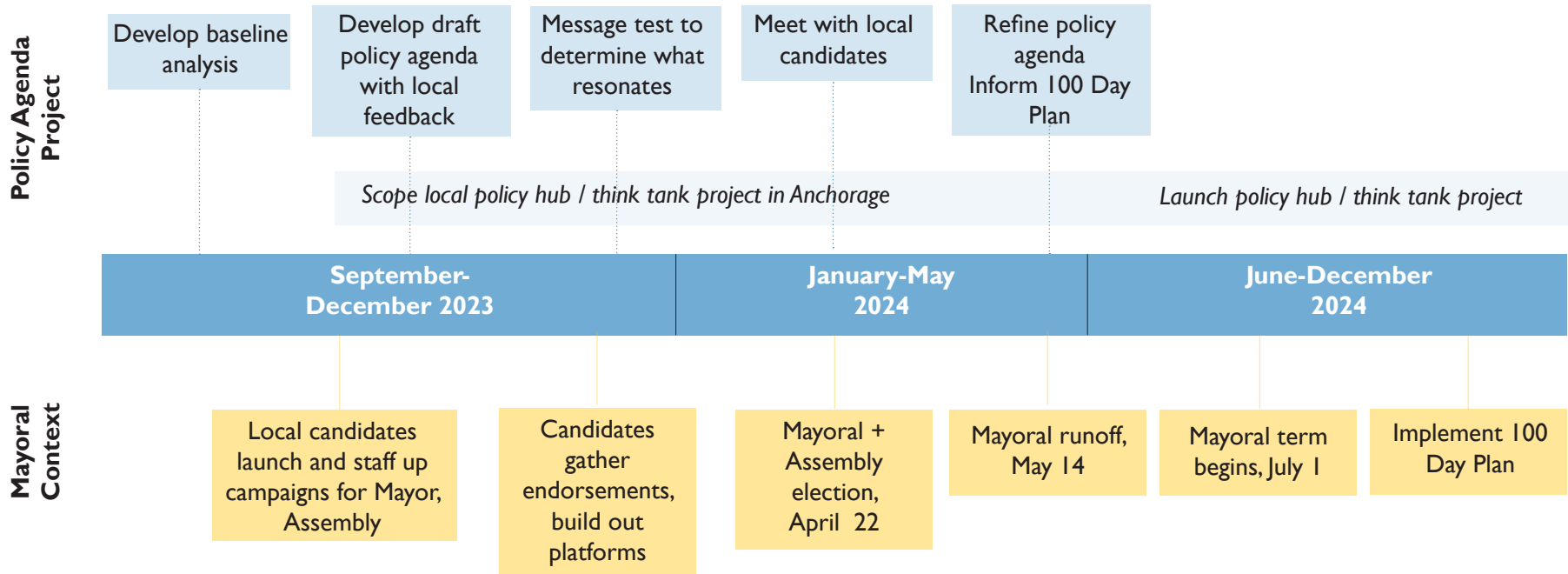
What's on the local agenda matters: It's where the most time, money, and attention go.

The local agenda today is stuck on a few issues. And talking about these issues has not solved them.

We need to think critically about what issues we're working on and what we're doing to solve them.

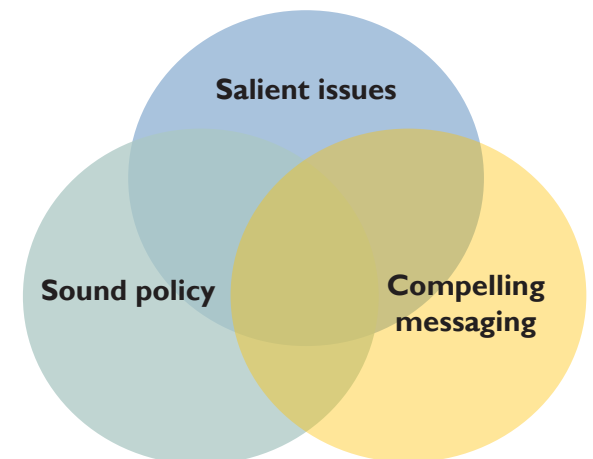
PROJECT TIMELINE: WHERE WE'RE HEADING

This project seeks to inform the local government context while building a useful framework outside of it. The following shows how this work can inform the immediate context of the mayor's race while building a vision and policy plan beyond it.



IMMEDIATE NEXT STEPS

- Stakeholder meetings & review of overall focus (issue areas, key messages)
- Policy development to get more specific about actions in the identified issue areas
- Message testing to build out compelling communications



MODEL FOR A NEW POLICY AGENDA IN ANCHORAGE

