

The Final Frontier: Birmingham Planning Firm Finds Work in Alaska

BY JAY M. GROSSMAN • ECCENTRIC STAFF WRITER • DECEMBER 6, 2009

Bob Gibbs Plans to Bring a Touch of Birmingham to Wasilla.

Home to the wayward moose and a certain rogue Republican, the southern Alaskan city also happens to be experiencing some growing pains. Gibbs said his company was contacted by city officials in Wasilla to help develop a new master plan for the downtown area.

"It's only 7,000 people ... but with some tremendous growth," he said. "A new Target was just built there, a new Walmart, a new Chili's. It's a trading area at the base of two valleys — people will drive a hundred miles to go there."

In October, Gibbs and other members of his team flew to Wasilla and organized a community-wide charrette similar to the one his company held with renowned urban planner Andres Duany for the city of Birmingham in 1996.

"We modeled everything like Birmingham," he said. "We proposed a town square like Shain Park. We proposed they build a city hall and library on the square, and that the private sector build around the square."

"The mayor loved the idea. They already bought the building for the library — they're going to convert an old shopping center into the library. They're already planning a new city hall on the square."

Of course, not everything is like Birmingham. On the second day, the city manager left the charrette to shoot a moose.

"He was pretty excited," Gibbs said. "It was a big moose."

Platted in 1906, Wasilla was the end of the railroad line during the Yukon Gold Rush. But the downtown never really took off. All that stands there are some small buildings and undeveloped parcels.

Gibbs admits it took several meetings before the community embraced the idea of change to its historic downtown. Part of the process will include implementation of building codes to ensure new development reflects the character of the town. By the end of the charrette, his firm was approached by different groups interested in developing a five-story hotel, a new bank and a performing arts theater near the square. He's also been contacted by some of the surrounding cities.



Bob Gibbs is helping to create a new master plan for Wasilla, Alaska.

"It's a frontier state," he said. "They still see themselves as frontiersman. In a way, they're just warming up to urban planning." Sarah Palin served as the mayor of Wasilla from 1996 to 2002 before she was elected governor of Alaska — and eventually became the Republican nominee for vice president of the United States in 2008.

But before she moved on politically, Palin left her footprint on Wasilla. As mayor, she took it upon herself to close down the city planning department and eliminate any zoning or building restrictions.

"It went pretty well," Gibbs said, "until someone wanted to build an office building in the middle of a subdivision."

Also of interest is a city called Palmer that's about five miles away from Wasilla. Palmer was developed in 1935 under Franklin Roosevelt during the Great Depression. As part of the New Deal project, farming families from Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin were paid to move there to help settle the area.

"If you moved there from Michigan," Gibbs said, "they gave you 40 acres and a log cabin."