

CHAPTER 5 TRANSPORTATION

Overview

The purpose of the transportation element is to outline an integrated, multi-modal transportation system for the City of Palmer. The system should enhance the economy and quality of life by supporting the safe movement of people, services, and goods within the City and the surrounding area.

Palmer is a unique Alaskan community with a downtown environment where it is possible to live, work and shop without an automobile. This is a rare advantage and a community attribute, which if it can be maintained, will only be more valuable as the city grows.



Palmer is served by the Glenn Highway, part of the National Highway System and the Palmer-Wasilla Highway, part of the state's transportation network.

Summary of Goals

GOAL 1: Shape the character and use of the Glenn Highway.

See also Land Use chapter.

- Provide efficient, safe access to Palmer while serving the needs of through traffic.
- Maintain the Glenn Highway corridor as an attractive community entry.
- Improve pedestrian and vehicular links between east and west sides of the Glenn Highway.
- Control access to commercial development along the Glenn Highway.
- Maintain and enhance the Glenn Highway's status as a National Scenic Byway.

GOAL 2: Improve the Palmer road system to meet anticipated growth.

- Identify and prioritize specific roads for improvement.
- Identify collector-level streets that are or will be needed to serve future development and traffic.
- Identify future road corridors for acquisition of right-of-way.

GOAL 3: Maintain and improve community sidewalks and trails.

- Make it easier to move around town without a car.
- Identify and prioritize trails for improvement and future trail corridors for preservation.

GOAL 4: Support expansion and improvement of regional transit service.

- Continue to provide and improve transportation services for disabled individuals.
- Improve the "MASCOT" transportation service by establishing smaller node routes that are interconnected to reduce overall travel time.

Goals & Objectives for Transportation

GOAL 1: Shape the character and use of the Glenn Highway.

GOAL 2: Improve the Palmer road system to meet anticipated growth.

Background to Goals 1 & 2

In comparison to most of the Mat-Su Borough, Palmer has a well-developed road system. The average lot size and general density of development in central Palmer makes it possible to serve the community with a low ratio of road miles per household. The general condition of the road system in Palmer is good. The City has focused on converting gravel-surfaced roads to paved roads, and made good progress towards this goal.

Based on experience in communities around the state, when the average daily traffic (ADT) on a local gravel-surfaced road exceeds 250 vehicles, the road should become a candidate for paving. Improvements to local roads such as paving and installing curbs, gutters and sidewalks will further improve safety and reduce maintenance costs on the higher-volume roads. The City should continue to focus on upgrading gravel roads and, to the greatest extent possible, finance these improvements with grants from Borough, State and Federal agencies.

Table 5-1 below presents average annual daily traffic estimates based on traffic counts for major roads in or near the City of Palmer. Traffic has continued to grow over the years as the City has grown. The Mat-Su Borough is currently updating the Borough Long-Range Transportation Plan, with a focus on planning for growth in the Palmer-Wasilla area. Preliminary traffic forecasts are available, based on a continuation of recent trends in the state economy and the borough population. As the table shows, in nearly every location, average daily traffic levels in 2025 are projected to rise to be about 2.5 times the counts made in 2003. This would be a dramatic increase, requiring major improvements in the road system, including a number of significant new roads, and significant widening of existing routes.

Table 5-1: Traffic Counts (Average Annual Daily Traffic) 1991- 2025

Location	1991	1996	2003	2025 Forecast (1)
Palmer-Wasilla Hwy. at Trunk Rd.	7,465	10,080	13,671	36,400
Palmer-Wasilla Hwy. at Glenn Hwy.	8,348	12,000	16,377	22,600
Glenn Hwy. at Palmer-Wasilla Hwy.	7,700	9,996	12,350	30,000
Glenn Hwy at Arctic	5,800	7,376	11,650 (S. of Arctic) / 9,240 (N. of Arctic)	22,200 (N. of Arctic)
Old Glenn Hwy. at South Alaska	7,010	8,749	8,250 (E. of S. Alaska) / 13,480 (W. of S. Alaska)	19,300 (E. of S. Alaska)
Old Glenn Hwy. at Airport	6,330	6,800	7,020	17,900

Source: State of Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities, 1991-2003; Matanuska-Susitna Borough Planning Department, 2025 Forecast. (1) Forecasts from Borough draft Long Range Transportation Plan.

Glenn Highway Bypass/Hemmer Road Extension

The volumes for the Glenn Highway and the Palmer-Wasilla Highway are currently approaching capacity and in 2025 will likely exceed the volumes that can be accommodated on a two-lane road. Addressing this growth will not only impact travel on these two key roadways, but affect the livability and “walkability” of downtown Palmer. Improvements to the intersection of the Palmer-Wasilla and Glenn Highways were completed in 2000. Nonetheless, putting most north-south traffic on the Glenn Highway and most east-west traffic on the Palmer-Wasilla Highway will result in the need for expanded roadways by the year 2025. It is difficult to reconcile multi-lane, high-volume roads and large channelized intersections with a comfortable, pedestrian-oriented, downtown commercial district.

There has been some discussion of construction of a “Palmer bypass” for the Glenn Highway. Bypasses often are a sensible solution where traffic volumes are increasing on a road running through the center of a community. The Glenn Highway in Palmer, however, is a special case. Although traffic on the Glenn Highway in the midst of Palmer is at or above 10,000 ADT and growing, north of Farm Loop Road the volume (2003) drops to less than 3,000 ADT.

Consequently, the challenge in Palmer is how to move traffic into and *disperse* traffic in Palmer, rather than how to move traffic *through* Palmer on the Glenn Highway. The primary strategy to achieve this objective is the creation of an arterial-level street on the north-south section line (see **Proposed Road Improvements** map) that is currently partially occupied by Hemmer Road., Blunck Street., and N. Werner Road. A new arterial on this or a similar route would allow traffic from south of Palmer destined for a point along the Palmer-Wasilla Highway or Bogard Road to avoid the congested Glenn Highway-Palmer-Wasilla Highway intersection entirely, and should reduce overall traffic volumes at that location. The new arterial should extend from the Glenn Highway at Blunck Street north to cross the Palmer-Wasilla Highway, and to cross Bogard Road Extension, and eventually connect with Palmer-Fishhook Road at North Werner Road.

Glenn Highway Improvements

In order to meet current and future transportation needs, improve pedestrian circulation east-west across the Glenn, maintain community character, and to improve the entrance to Palmer, the Glenn Highway should be designated as a four-lane, limited-access, “boulevard-style” arterial with a generous planted median. The City will be responsible for maintaining median plantings. The plan intends that new development along the Glenn Highway be served by separate, perpendicular roadways that leave the highway and serve multiple businesses, rather than by direct driveway access, or frontage roads (see land use chapter for a diagram explaining this concept).



Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOT&PF) is in the initial design phase of upgrading the Glenn Highway from the Parks Highway interchange to Palmer. The City should work closely with DOT/PF to ensure this project meets state and community goals. See *Goal 7 of Land Use chapter*.

Glenn Hwy Improvements – Nat’l Scenic Byway Designation

In 2000, the Glenn Highway from Anchorage through Palmer to Eureka Summit was designated a State Scenic Byway, and in 2002, a National Scenic Byway. The national designation followed an energetic organizational effort led by residents of the Glenn Highway corridor and supported by the Alaska

DOT&PF. The Scenic Byway organization for the Glenn Highway (The Glenn Highway Scenic Byway Association) meets regularly along the highway, to organize byway improvements and marketing activities.

Bogard Road Extension

Another key road project is the extension of Bogard Road east to connect to the Glenn Highway, and continuing east into the greater downtown area. Bogard Road is a key Core Area arterial that helps carry east-west traffic that uses the Palmer-Wasilla Highway. The extension of Bogard Road to Palmer has state funding of 13 million dollars. The project will be managed by the Mat-Su Borough.

Downtown – East West Connection

Another important road project is to develop a new, improved east-west connection across the railroad in downtown. The most promising route is to connect existing street segments of Dogwood Street to create an urban street running east of Denali Street, across the Alaska Railroad right-of-way. This road would then connect with the segment of Dogwood west of the railroad, jog north of Fred Meyer, cross the Glenn Highway and run as a new road west to connect with an extended Felton Street. These additions would improve east-west circulation throughout the community, improve downtown circulation for vehicles and pedestrians, and provide alternative access to the new commercial development at the intersection of the Palmer-Wasilla Highway and Felton.

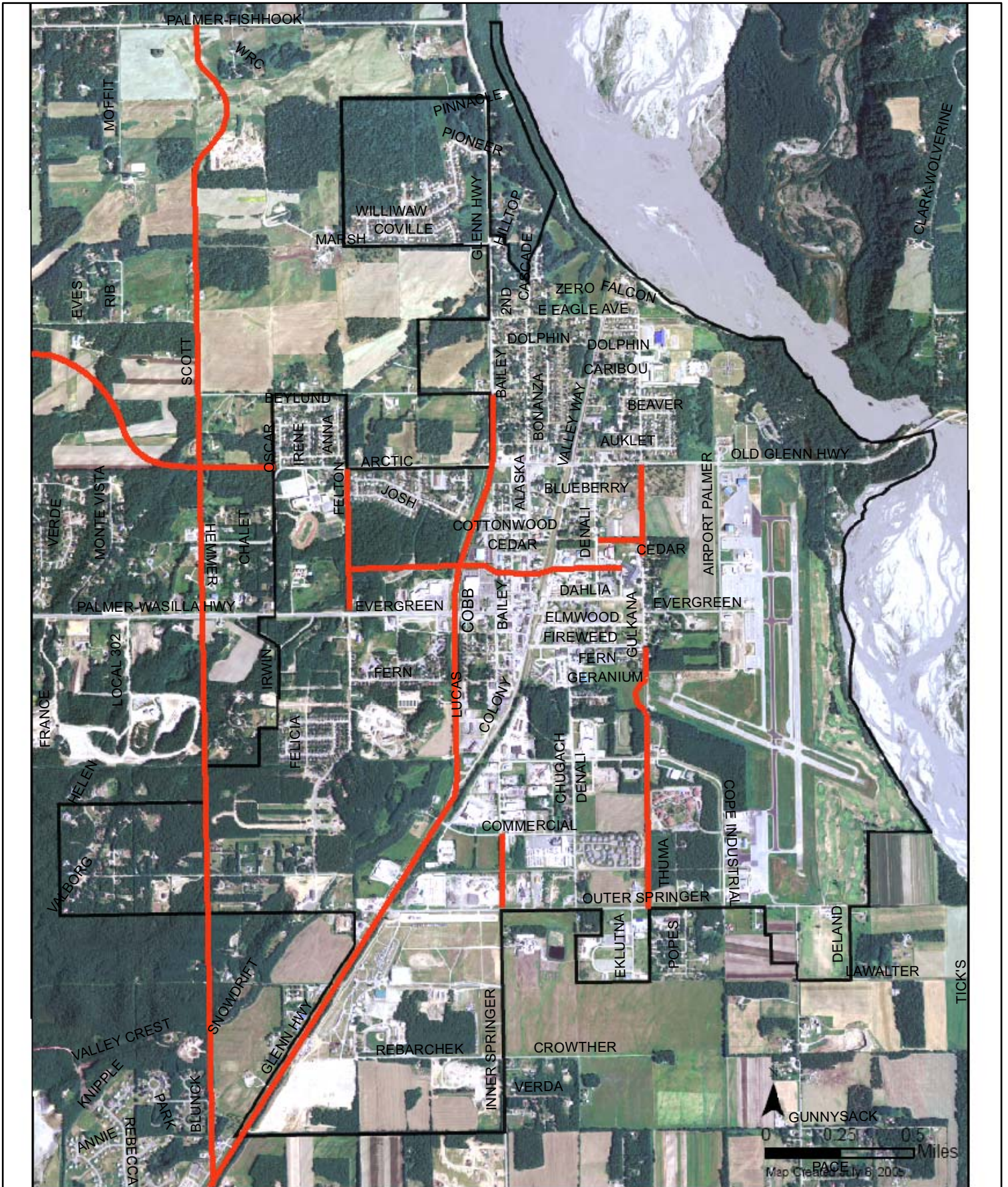
Felton Extension

The Felton extension would connect Evergreen (Palmer-Wasilla Highway) with W. Arctic Avenue, and be connected to the planned extension of Dogwood. This improvement will create an important, more direct north-south link, reducing travel times and congestion on the Glenn Highway. This route crosses steep, varied terrain and will have to be designed accordingly.

Other Road Connections/Road Projects

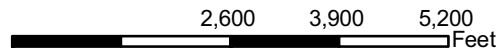
- The City should continue with its successful efforts to pave all roads within the community. Highest priorities should be streets with the greatest use, particularly in the downtown commercial and mixed use area.
- In general, collector streets are needed on an approximate one to one half mile grid. Specific decisions on routes will need to be made as subdivision takes place. An absence of connections can contribute to traffic congestion on major routes because of a lack of internal circulation. Although a grid street pattern is probably neither suitable nor desirable in these areas, it is recommended that the City require subdividers to consider the relationship of their developments to adjacent subdivisions.
- Additional minor road connections needed include connecting the north and south sections of Gulkana Street coincident with the development of adjacent property. In addition, subdivisions developed west of the Glenn Highway should be interconnected by road and trail easements.
- Work with DOT/PF and the State of Alaska to reserve and/or acquire land at key intersections where more lanes will likely be needed to meet predicted growth in traffic volumes.

The City will work closely with the Mat-Su Borough and the State to ensure new development outside the City but within the sewer service district has adequate roads and trails. Reaching this goal will require the coordination of plans for land use, infrastructure and transportation. Initial planning is taking place through the City's annexation study, and the Mat Su Borough Core Area plan and Long Range Transportation Plan. The City may want to work the State and Borough to prepare more detailed plans to provide for efficient expansion of services in this area.



**Palmer Comprehensive Plan
Figure 1
Proposed Road Improvements**

— Proposed Roads or Road Improvements
(Conceptual Locations)



GOAL 3: Maintain and improve community sidewalks and trails.

Developing a quality trail system and integrating of the system with the existing trails and sidewalks serves transportation, economic, recreation and quality of life goals. The public identified improvements to trails and sidewalks as a high priority during the preparation of the plan. For walking, biking and other non-motorized uses to offer a realistic option to driving, Palmer must retain and improve its network of paths and trails. This goal clearly applies in downtown, where a pedestrian-friendly environment is a key attraction, but extends to providing trail connections throughout the community, linking residential neighborhoods, with shopping, transit facilities and schools, parks, open space and other public facilities.

Existing Trails and Sidewalks

A number of pedestrian facilities, trails and separated paths exist or are under development in the Palmer area. Please see **Proposed Trail Improvements and Proposed Sidewalk Improvements** maps on the following pages.

Sidewalks have been constructed on most of the streets in the downtown area defined as generally west of Gulkana Street, east of the Glenn Highway, south of Arctic Avenue and north of Fireweed Avenue. More isolated sidewalks extend beyond this core area.

Existing paved separated paths located along roads include the trail on the north side of the Palmer-Wasilla Highway from Felton Street west, the trail near Palmer High School connecting West Arctic Avenue with Hemmer Road, the trail along the west side of the Glenn Highway from the Palmer-Wasilla Highway to Arctic Avenue, and the section of trail along E. Cope Industrial Way that connects E. Outer Springer Loop with the Palmer Middle School. Improvements to sidewalks and trails should improve pedestrian connections community wide, including links between residential neighborhoods, and between residential areas and schools, parks and open space, and downtown and other shopping areas. Specific recommendations are presented below.

Improved Sidewalks

Responsibility for constructing new sidewalks will be split between the City and subdividers, depending on the setting. In general, the City shall be responsible for sidewalks connecting different areas of the community, with individual subdividers responsible for sidewalks and trails within subdivisions.



As Palmer grows, sidewalks should be extended or added to all streets within the area bounded by the Glenn Highway to the west, Eagle Avenue to the north, South Airport to the east and E. Commercial Drive to the south. New sidewalks are also needed to link downtown and the airport, to provide several safe, convenient places to cross the Glenn Highway, and to connect subdivisions to trails along the Glenn Highway and the Palmer Wasilla Highway. As discussed in the Downtown section of the Land Use Chapter, there is a particular need for improved sidewalks running east to west across the railroad tracks and through the Depot area.



All subdivisions shall make adequate provisions for safe, functional pedestrian circulation. This includes:

- Safe, effective and enjoyable pedestrian circulation within the subdivision – including on-street sidewalk and off street trails. In some locations, pathways should be reserved between lots to provide “short cuts” linking streets.
- Connections within the subdivision that lead to pedestrian routes linking to community destinations, including schools, parks and commercial areas.

The specific form of pedestrian improvements will vary depending on housing density and current and expected traffic levels. Where traffic is light, such as on a short cul-de-sac, sidewalks may not be required; where traffic is heavier, sidewalks typically will be required. In some instances, off street trails may be substituted for sidewalks.

Rehabilitate Sidewalks and Improve Sidewalk Maintenance

Many Palmer sidewalks, particularly in downtown, need rehabilitation. Numerous stretches of sidewalks are overgrown with vegetation, and/or cracked. Sections of these sidewalks have obstacles that make them difficult to use by people in wheelchairs. In addition to improving these sidewalks, and ensuring they meet handicapped access standards, there is a need for better regular maintenance including snow removal. This action may best be done in partnership with the planned Business Improvement District.

Proposed Trails¹

With the addition of key links to the existing trail network, Palmer would enjoy a well-connected network allowing reasonably comprehensive travel through town by foot or bicycle. Many of these trails are not in the City, requiring coordination with the Mat-Su Borough and Alaska DOT&PF. The Borough’s adopted Trail Plan provides a valuable description of Mat-Su Borough plans for

¹ The distinction between trails and sidewalks is not black and white. As used here, “sidewalks” refers to street-side, paved pedestrian routes, primarily serving the needs of immediately adjoining properties. “Trails” refer to a range of pedestrian routes, paved and unpaved, single-use and multi-use trails. In general trails serve community-wide transportation and recreation needs. Trails can run along or separated from roads.

trails in the Core Area and the southcentral Borough generally. Please see **Proposed Trail Improvements** map. Recommended trails are listed below:

- Along the Alaska Railroad right-of-way from the Glenn Highway north past the Palmer depot to Moose Creek (initial phase), south to the Alaska State Fairgrounds and on to Sutton (second phase). This project was formally endorsed as part of the Palmer Urban Revitalization Plan.
- Along the Glenn Highway from E. Sienna Street to the Palmer-Wasilla Highway, constructed as part of the Glenn Highway upgrade.
- Connecting the Old Matanuska River Bridge trail to existing sidewalks along Arctic Ave.
- From the Old Matanuska River Bridge trail to an upgraded trail along the Matanuska River Park connecting to Swanson and Sherrod Elementary schools, and then to E. Eagle Avenue.
- South from the Old Matanuska River Bridge along or near the Matanuska River, past the golf course to E. Lepak Avenue (extended). More work is needed to determine if this trail is possible. A trail along the river in this area was proposed as part of the golf course development in 1989. Two options are currently being considered:
- Select one of two alternatives for a connection from the Old Matanuska River Bridge to the southern end of the golf course.
 - Option A would depart the Old Glenn Highway at the northeastern edge of the airport and then turn east at the north edge of the Palmer Golf Course and run along the river bluff of the golf course. A similar trail was proposed as part of the golf course development in 1989. Reconfiguration of several holes of the golf course would be necessary.
 - Option B would depart the Old Glenn Highway and head south on S. Airport Road to East Evergreen, to E. Fireweed, to S. Chugach, to E. Cope Industrial to E. Outer Springer.
- Along E. Lepak Avenue, E. Outer Springer Loop, N. Inner Springer Loop, and E. Moore Road to Hemmer Road extended. This separated path would include a grade-separated crossing of the Glenn Highway.
- From the end of the existing trail along Cope Industrial Way west to the Alaska Railroad right-of-way.
- Along the extension of Bogard Road from W. Arctic Avenue to Trunk Road or beyond.
- Along the full length of the proposed extension of Hemmer Road.
- Along the Inner and Outer Springer Road system.
- Trail connections and an associated trailhead linking the Palmer-Wasilla Highway area and Downtown Palmer with the trail system in the Kepler Bradley Lakes and Crevasse Moraine area. Trail connections into this large open space park will add greatly to the value of remaining city trails, and provide an important amenity to the community. One possible route is along N. France Road beginning at a grade-separated crossing of the Palmer-Wasilla Highway and extending past the alternative school into the Crevasse-Moraine trail system.

In order to better define these routes, determine appropriate trail types and trail users, set priorities among different projects, and develop funding and maintenance strategies, the City should develop a comprehensive trails plan, for use by a variety of user groups. The City should work with ATV users to serve appropriate areas for ATV use. The Borough will need to be an active participant in this process.

GOAL 4: Transit and Rail Service

Mat-Su Community Transit (MASCOT)

Mat-Su Community Transit or MASCOT was established in 1999 as a private, non-profit corporation. MASCOT is open to the general public and is coordinated with a number of non-profit, governmental and human service agencies throughout the Borough to provide more specific transit services.

MASCOT operates both local and commuter fixed route service on seven separate lines, and can deviate up to $\frac{3}{4}$ mile off the route. MASCOT also provides a number of transportation services for non-profit agencies throughout the Borough, both on a regular and semi-regular basis.



Total ridership on the system for the calendar year 2002 was just over 57,000. Steady expansion of the MASCOT system with the support of the Borough and the cities of Palmer and Wasilla is recommended and will, over time provide an alternative to travel by private auto.

The City will encourage transit use, working with MASCOT, through the following policies:

- Encourage compact development near primary transit facilities
- Encourage MASCOT to coordinate bus schedules and routes with work schedules, particularly for large employers.
- Encourage carpooling and van pooling.

The Palmer Senior Citizens Center

The Senior Center operates a fleet of 16 vans providing transportation and in-home meals services to seniors in the Palmer area. In the fiscal year ending June 30, 2005, the Center provided 22,388 passenger-trips and 29,000 home-delivered meals. Service is focused on medically-oriented trips, with recreational trips provided on a pre-scheduled or space available basis. Service mileage grew approximately 10 percent over the previous year and rides were up 12 percent. A significantly greater number of trips could be provided if funding were available.

The Alaska Railroad

Rail service to Palmer is limited at present to four to six roundtrip passenger trains per year during the State Fair, and one passenger train in December for the Colony Christmas event.

There is interest in expanding the frequency of service, particularly in the summer, in order to provide a new venue for visitors and a potential economic boost to Palmer businesses. In addition, a regional transportation planning organization between the Mat-Su Borough and the Municipality of Anchorage has been formed and has discussed the creation of bus and rail commuter service between the Valley and Anchorage. Should such service be

implemented, Palmer is also a natural terminus of such rail commuter service. A park and ride intermodal facility has been constructed on the Alaska State Fairgrounds. *See Land Use chapter for details about rail use downtown.*

