

CHAPTER 6 LAND USE

Overview

This chapter presents background information and policies to guide development in Palmer. The first goal gives the plan's overall land use policy. The second goal addresses the need to revise the community's zoning ordinance, including new standards for the form and character of development. The goals that follow focus on specific land use categories, including commercial development; downtown; and residential, industrial, agricultural and open space uses. Goal 10 addresses annexation and community growth. Consistent with the approach presented in Goal 10, this chapter focuses on uses within current City limits, but also presents the City's general policy direction for development within the sewer and water service district that extends beyond those boundaries.

Summary of Goals *Note: order of goals does not reflect priority*

GOAL 1: Guide growth to make Palmer an increasingly attractive place to live, work, invest and visit.

GOAL 2: Maintain high quality residential neighborhoods; promote development of a range of desirable new places to live in Palmer.

GOAL 3: Support the continuation of institutional and appropriate industrial uses.

GOAL 4: Encourage new commercial development, so residents of Palmer, residents of surrounding areas, and visitors can find the goods and services they need in Palmer.

GOAL 5: Guide the form and character of growth to encourage high quality buildings and site development that reflects Palmer's history and setting.

GOAL 6: Support efforts by the Downtown Business Improvement District to help ensure Palmer's traditional downtown is lively, attractive and inviting for residents and visitors.

GOAL 7: Maintain and improve the visual quality of the Glenn and Palmer-Wasilla Highway corridors, and other major community roads.

GOAL 8: Sustain Palmer's agricultural traditions.

GOAL 9: Maintain a positive connection with Palmer's natural setting; maintain the quality of the natural environment - particularly stream corridors, lakes, and watershed areas.

GOAL 10: Annexation – plan for the phased expansion of City boundaries.

Context: Land Use in Palmer & Surrounding Areas

Land Use in Palmer

Palmer's overall land use pattern owes much to the manner of its settlement in the 1930's, the routing of highway and railroad corridors, and the fact the City has a long history of sound planning.

Palmer has a concentrated, mixed use core. Residential areas are generally buffered from adjoining incompatible uses. Most industrial uses are located within a long-established industrial park. Most residential development is in the form of single family housing, although by valley standards, Palmer does have a relatively large amount of multi-family housing. The municipally-owned Palmer Airport borders the eastern edge of town and is the single largest consumer of land in the City. Two major regional recreation amenities, the Palmer Golf Course, on City property next to the airport, and the Matanuska River Park, held by the Mat-Su Borough, are also located along the eastern edge of town. The southern area of the City includes the state fairgrounds. Palmer has retained a traditional "Main Street" business district as well as accommodating highway-related commercial uses.



Approximately three-quarters of the land in the City is used for industry, institutions, and parks and recreation. Palmer has long been the institutional center for the Matanuska-Susitna Valley and a relatively large amount of land is taken up by institutional uses. The importance of these uses in Palmer is reflected in the City's zoning, which designates over half of the City for public purposes.

The City of Palmer has guided land use through use of a zoning code since the City was incorporated in 1951. The City's current zoning plan, shown on the **Current Zoning Districts** map, reinforces the pattern of existing uses. Downtown and land along the Palmer-Wasilla Highway is zoned for a combination of limited commercial (allows "intermingling of commercial and housing") and general commercial (allows all uses in limited commercial, plus additional, more intensive commercial activities). Interspersed in this area are lands zoned for somewhat higher density residential (R-2, allowing four units per lot), and areas for government/institutional uses. North of downtown, along East Arctic, land is designated R-4, allowing higher density, multi-family housing. The area south of downtown and just east of the Glenn Highway is zoned industrial; between this area and the airport uses is an interesting mix of different housing densities including senior and affordable housing, commercial areas, education, government and agriculture.

Land Use in the Area Surrounding Palmer

Two maps on the following pages show the development just outside Palmer's boundaries. The **Palmer and Surrounding Area** figure presents an aerial photo; the **Water and Sewer Service District** map shows the location of roads and subdivisions. Together, these two maps give a good picture of the significant amount of residential development in this area, much of which has taken place in the last 10 – 15 years. With the exception of the rough terrain in the southwestern portion

of this area, the great majority of undeveloped land in this area is physically well-suited for development.

This rapidly growing area is an important consideration in the development of this plan for several reasons. Most importantly, the water and sewer service districts operated by the City of Palmer extend into this area. Residents of these areas use a variety of City public and commercial services, from police and fire to shops and restaurants. Planning for future land use and increased needs for City-provided services requires understanding current and likely future uses in these areas. As outlined under Goal 10, portions of these areas may be annexed to the City in the future.

The section below summarizes the existing and likely future uses of this area:

Springer Loop System – This area, located south of Palmer and east of the Glenn Highway, is still mostly in agricultural uses, but is rapidly being developed into residential subdivisions.

Glenn Highway/ Parks Intersection/ Regional Hospital – This area is on the southwestern section of the City's water and sewer service district boundary. Until recently this district was largely agricultural; more recently this area has become the site of the new regional hospital (to be served by City water and sewer). A number of new office and residential projects are also being proposed for this area.

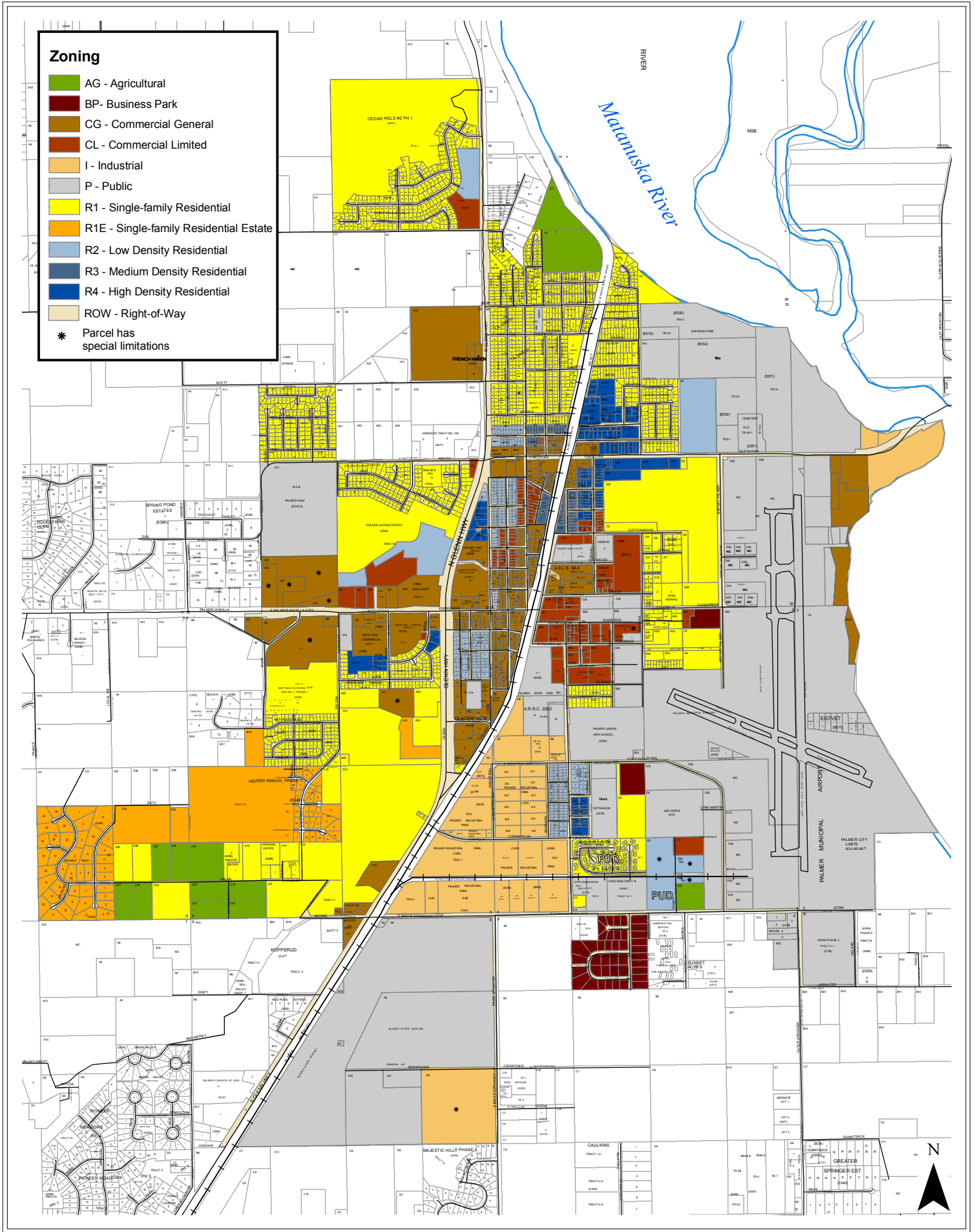
Park Land – A large area west of the Glenn Highway is undeveloped open space. Much of this area is used for recreation, including Kepler Bradley State Recreation Area, and the Crevasse Moraine area hiking, mountain-biking and cross country ski trail system.

Palmer-Wasilla Highway Corridor – This busy road, which carries more traffic than the Glenn Highway, is becoming a major commercial corridor. Frontage along this road today is a mixture of larger commercial properties and residential uses.

Glenn Highway Corridor, South – Land along the Glenn Highway has traditionally been used for the gravel mining, farming, and the State Fair. Development east of the highway is restricted by the Alaska Railroad tracks. In more recent years, a significant portion of this land west of the highway has been subdivided for residential uses. The large presently vacant properties on the west side of the highway are suitable for commercial development, particularly where utilities are available.

Glenn Highway Corridor, North – This area extends north of the city. Land in this area slowly climbs in elevation, providing excellent views over rolling terrain towards the Mt Matanuska and Pioneer Peak. East of the road is a narrow strip of land between the highway and the Matanuska River. West of the road is a mixture of fields, woodlots, individual homes and a few small subdivisions.

Northwest of Palmer/Lower Palmer Fishhook area – As a result of its slightly higher elevation and rolling terrain, it is known for offering particularly attractive views of farmlands and views south and east to snow covered peaks. Like other areas surrounding Palmer, this area has long been a quiet rural district, but is now seeing a steady increase in residential development.






City of Palmer

Current Zoning Districts
as of July 1, 2005

"Alaska at its Best!"



Key

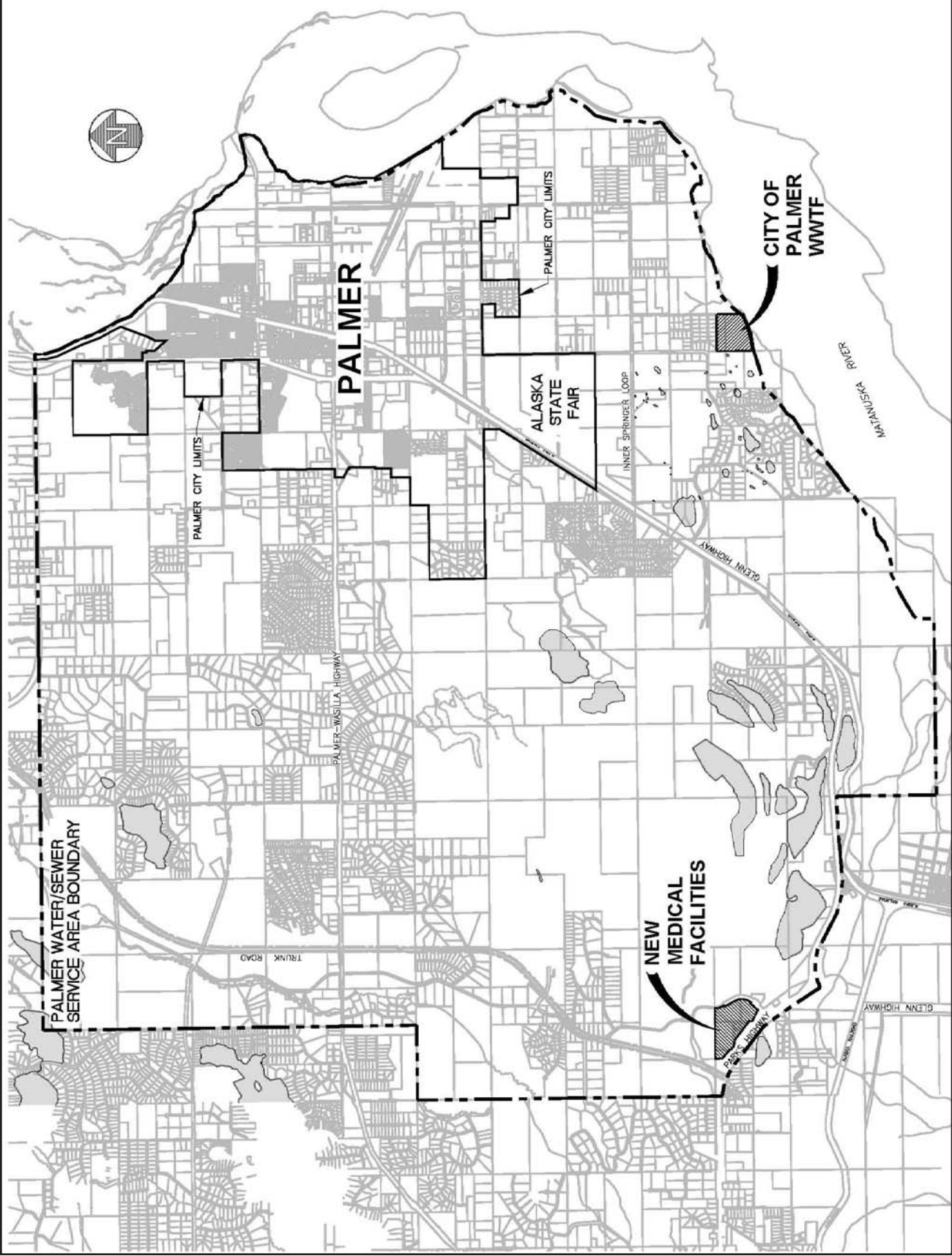
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City of Palmer & Surrounding Area

City of Palmer Comprehensive Plan



Map Created July 8, 2005



City of Palmer
Comprehensive Plan

Water & Sewer Service District

Goals & Objectives for Land Use

GOAL I: Guide growth to make Palmer an increasingly attractive place to live, invest, work, and visit.

This is the primary goal for land use in the community, taken from the 1999 comprehensive plan. Objective A below establishes a broad strategy to meet this goal; more specific strategies are presented in the remainder of this chapter.

Objective A: Guide growth so the overall development pattern for the community has the following characteristics:

- Adequate space for expansion of commercial uses, primarily in downtown and along the Palmer-Wasilla Highway, and along the Glenn Highway.
- A concentration of institutional uses, primarily in downtown, but extending into other parts of the community.
- Space for new residential neighborhoods, primarily around the outer portions of the community, but also within mixed use areas in the downtown core. Residential areas include internal open space, parks and connecting trails.
- Industrial and similar uses are generally separated from residential areas.
- Convenient access to places to work, commercial services, schools and other public facilities, both by vehicle, sidewalk and trail.
- A high quality system of community parks, open space, trails and other recreation amenities.
- Compact, walkable, dynamic, mixed use downtown core.
- A clear sense of town entry, with open space and/or less developed areas separating Palmer from surrounding communities.
- Agricultural heritage and history that continues to be visible.
- The right balance of residential and commercial uses, to ensure the City maintains its fiscal health¹.



¹ In general, the net revenue to the City (that is, tax revenue generated vs. services consumed) is greater from commercial uses than from residential and institutional uses.

GOAL 2: Maintain high quality residential neighborhoods; promote development of a range of desirable new places to live in Palmer.

Palmer has many assets that will continue to attract residential development. In addition to the general attractions of the southern Mat-Su Borough, Palmer offers water and sewer connections which permit higher density housing. Another unique asset is “urban living” – the chance to have a home within walking distance of stores, restaurants and places to work. Finally, Palmer is surrounded by vacant land, providing extensive areas for residential development. Developers built significant amounts of new residences in this area over the last 10 years. As long as the state economy remains healthy, this trend is likely to continue.

Objective A: Promote a diverse range of quality housing, from attractive higher density housing in or near downtown, to outlying housing in more rural settings.

Palmer offers a greater range of attractive residential environments than other Mat-Su communities, including downtown single family homes and small apartments, a range of senior housing, as well as lower density subdivisions. This diversity should continue. Among the most important characteristics that create “quality” are well built homes, safe neighborhoods, compatible adjoining uses, good schools, public infrastructure including water, sewer, power and telephone and internet connections, and access to amenities including trails, open space, and shopping. Categories of housing the City in particular wishes to promote are listed below, and covered in more detail in the following objectives:

- Single family detached housing appealing to the mid and upper end of the market
- Quality, higher density housing in downtown
- Senior housing

Objective B: Provide areas for single family housing appealing to the upper end of the housing market.

One type of housing not widely found in the Palmer area is more costly homes appealing to the upper end of the housing market. Certain lands surrounding Palmer offer promising locations for this type of residential development. Topographic constraints caused by kettles and moraines in the area immediately south of the Palmer-Wasilla Highway are likely to make the extension of sewer services there unfeasible. Large lot residential development with high-end single family units may be more practical in such areas. This would help broaden the variety of Palmer's housing stock and make the City a more desirable place to live for a broader segment of the Valley's population.

Objective C: Encourage infill and higher density housing in and around downtown. Prepare new zoning standards and design guidelines to ensure higher density housing is high quality, to benefit the residents and the community.

Palmer has little undeveloped residential land within its present corporate limits, particularly east of the Glenn Highway. Future development will include in-filling and redevelopment of currently developed sites. These residential developments will be compact, with relatively high overall densities. Palmer already has sufficient area zoned multi-family to accommodate foreseeable near term needs for higher density residential development. More land will be needed to meet demand associated with mid and longer term growth.



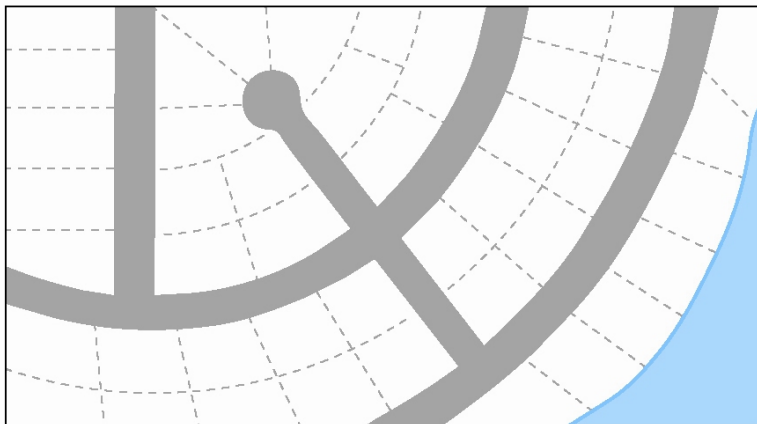
Example of recently built subdivision just outside of Palmer City limits

Around the country, a growing body of experience shows that higher density housing can offer very desirable places to live, *if* this housing is well designed and constructed, and has pedestrian access to amenities like open space, parks and shopping. In response to changing demands and tighter land supplies, developers are building many different types of attractive higher density housing, including traditional townhouses, stacked flats and other forms of attached housing, as well as more innovative forms such as

detached single family homes on land held in common. New City policies are needed to encourage high quality, higher density housing, including:

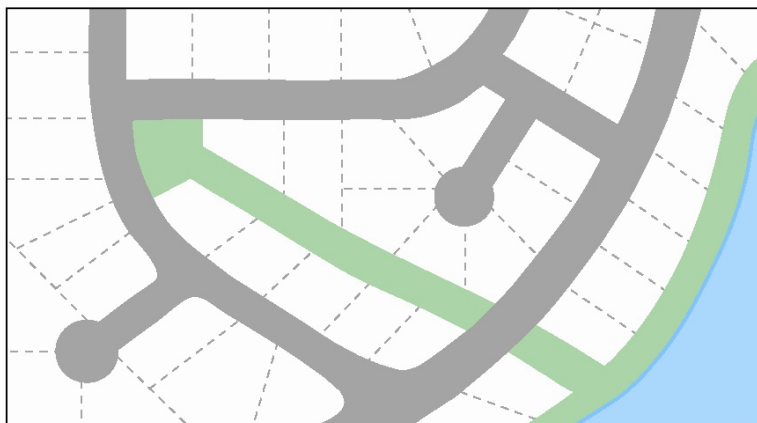
- changes to the zoning code including greater provision of amenities for higher density housing such as on-site open space, landscaping
- rules for “site condominiums” that allow flexibility in standards but ensure quality
- design guidelines that encourage attractive buildings to harmonize with the City’s traditional architectural styles
- development of community trails, parks and other amenities in the vicinity of housing

Objective D: Develop “open space/clustered housing subdivision” standards to encourage new subdivisions to cluster development and provide open space, trails, stormwater management and other community amenities.



Standard Subdivision (Top)

Approx 45 lots, 1-2 acres each. All available land is used for lots.



Open Space Subdivision (Bottom)

Same number of lots as above. Average lot size is slightly smaller. The difference is used to retain land for open space, trails, and stream buffers. Done correctly, this approach increases access to amenities and produces higher average values for all lots.

Residential land near Westchester Lagoon in Anchorage is an urban example of this concept. Lots located two-to-three tiers away from the waterfront are highly desirable because of their ready access to the lagoon, and its trails and picnic areas.

To be most successful, open spaces need to be aligned with similar open space in adjoining properties, e.g. to establish a contiguous river or trail corridor. The City of Palmer, Borough, a Homeowners Association or similar party needs to manage and hold legal title to the land.

Objective E: Encourage Rehabilitation of Older Residential Structures

In addition to new construction, it is likely that some of Palmer's older housing stock, particularly in downtown will need rehabilitation. There are several possible futures for older houses in downtown. Much of this land is currently zoned commercial, and one scenario is that older homes will be converted to commercial use such as professional offices. Another scenario is older buildings will be removed, and replaced with new commercial structures, preferably with residential units on upper floors. The third scenario is for these structures to remain in residential use.

The older residential structures in downtown are an important part of the community's character. While many of these structures will be removed for more intensive commercial development, the community will benefit if a number of these buildings are retained and rehabilitated. In the downtown neighborhoods zoned residential, it is hoped that a majority of the older structures will remain in the future. The City should encourage the downtown business improvement district, local financial institutions, and agencies to take full advantage of this valuable community asset. The improvement of local streets including paving, curbs, gutters, and sidewalks would greatly improve the appearance of these areas. The City should contemplate a paving formula for internal residential streets which combines City funds and local improvement districts (LID).

GOAL 3: Support the continuation of institutional and appropriate industrial uses.

Objective A: Provide for the continuation and expansion of Palmer's traditional role as a center for institutional and governmental users for the Mat-Su Borough and State. *See also Goal 1 in the Economic Vitality chapter.*

The City should take a proactive role to ensure Palmer maintains and enhances its role as the Valley's institutional center. Institutional uses create good local jobs. Their employees shop in Palmer and contribute to the overall economic health of the city. In addition, institutional uses like the Post Office and Library attract a regular flow of people to downtown who in turn patronize local businesses.

Means to accomplish this objective include monitoring the needs of existing institutions and working with these organizations to meet their needs. Continuing to improve Palmer as a place to live and a setting for institutional activities is also important. One specific strategy, appropriate in some instances, is for the City to help secure lands required to accommodate new institutional development, as it did to meet the needs of the Alaska Job Corps Center and the Mat-Su Juvenile Center. The passage of a City bond measure to acquire land for the State Troopers headquarters is another past example of the City's role in retaining institutional users.

The magnitude of existing public investment in Palmer, together with the availability of superior local public facilities and utility services, tends to discourage larger agencies from relocating elsewhere. Nevertheless, the City needs to work actively to ensure that institutional functions do not drift away.

The city should develop a plan for working with the institutional users: State court system and related services; Mat-Su Borough; State Troopers and Fish & Game; State Departments of Transportation, Public Facilities and Environmental Conservation; State Division of Motor Vehicles; State Division of Agriculture, State Recording Office, State Bureau of Wildlife Enforcement, State Pioneer and Veterans Home, United States Department of Agriculture, United States Tsunami Warning Center, United States Postal Service, Federal Aviation Administration, Alaska Job Corps, Mat-Su School District Headquarters, MEA and MTA. The plan should help to establish a point of contact with the users groups and work to identify projected growth and programming changes which will impact future space requirements and identify how the city can help meet those needs.

Since 1936, Palmer has been identified as the medical center for the Valley. With the construction of the new regional hospital near the junction of Parks and Glenn Highways, the future of the existing Valley Hospital in downtown Palmer is uncertain. Several concepts for the use of the building have emerged including a state-wide medical training facility, conversion of the space for university purposes, and the consolidation of state department and services with emphasis on the judicial and public safety offices. The city should support actions that meet the present and future needs of government offices in Palmer in the long term.

Another potential site for expansion of institutional uses is the old Mat-Maid block and vacant lands a short distance north and east of the downtown area. Matanuska-Susitna Borough offices are overcrowded. In the next several years the borough is likely to need to either expand at its current location, or develop a satellite office. The City should work closely with the borough to ensure it has room to grow, and that the borough continues to be a preeminent institution in the community. Options that have been suggested include expanding borough offices at their existing location, and housing new borough offices in the proposed renovation of the Mat Maid building.

The State Court system is currently expanding the courthouse but has identified the need for further expansion after five years. The old Valley Hospital site is adjacent to the court house and for that reason offers many advantages for future expansion. Should the hospital site be converted to another use, Palmer should continue to work to meet the future needs of the justice system in Palmer.

The Palmer Pioneer Home has shifted functions and now focuses on veterans, and currently has no plans for expansion. Currently 75% of the people residing in the Pioneers Home are veterans. The Alaska Job Corps Center, currently ranked among the top five in the nation, may require additional land for future expansion. Its existing 20-acre site is almost fully developed. The Credit Union is another important local institution that needs room to expand.

The University of Alaska Anchorage and Alaska Pacific University both have facilities in the valley. Universities provide jobs, generate trained employees, support research that can contribute to local economic development, and offer amenities that enhance quality of life. The City should encourage APU and UAA to expand their facilities in the Palmer area.

Objective B: Support continued industrial use, consistent with other plan goals

The City welcomes industrial activities and the jobs and associated tax revenues these uses generate. Industrial activities need to be located and managed so they are good neighbors to adjoining uses. .

The City's industrial park has been established for many years and all lots are in private ownership. However, large areas of the industrial park are not fully developed. Lots in the nearby Palmer Commercial Center should be able to accommodate anticipated future demands for light industrial land.

The proximity of Palmer's airport is an important resource for potential industrial developers. Lands surrounding the Palmer Airport offer one of the most promising areas for expansion of industrial activities. Ideally, growth in this area would take advantage of the air access, for example businesses that might distribute or assemble value-added products for use around Alaska.

The primary role for City in encouraging industrial expansion is to zone land for this use, and ensure compatibility between industrial and adjoining uses. Large tracts of land immediately to the east of the industrial park along South Chugach Street and the Springer system, inside and some outside Palmer's present City limits, are being developed for institutional and residential use. Ensuring compatibility between uses will require appropriate locations, appropriate site and building design, and managing ongoing operations. Examples of such policies, intended to maintain the value of both residential and industrial areas, include adequate setbacks, retention of buffers on new residential subdivisions, use of vegetation as screening, and performance standards regarding noise and light.

Today Outer Springer Loop defines the southern boundary of Palmer's industrial lands, except for the Palmer Commercial Center and additional screening is needed along this route. Similarly, screening around the Palmer Commercial Center should be required to protect existing and future residential development in adjoining areas.

Palmer should also make an effort to phase out industrial areas in other parts of town over the next twenty years. In particular, Service Oil and Gas on South Valley Way and the Borough facilities on East Auklet should be relocated to established industrial areas.

GOAL 4: Encourage new commercial development, so residents of Palmer, residents of surrounding areas, and visitors can find the goods and services they need in Palmer.

This goal addresses a range of commercial activities including retail, service and restaurants. Early in Palmer's history the community was isolated, and people shopped for all of their needs in town. Over the last several decades, shopping opportunities outside of town have expanded dramatically, while commercial uses in Palmer have grown more slowly. Residents of "greater Palmer" must now travel to Wasilla or Anchorage to purchase many of the goods and services they desire.

Public input during this planning process made clear that residents want growth in commercial uses in Palmer, so the community is more self-sufficient. At the same time, residents want to guide the location and form of commercial development to maintain the community's character.

The result of these two intentions sets the stage for important changes in Palmer's commercial landscape. Over the next 10-20 years, Palmer should seek significantly expanded commercial activity, to better serve existing and new area residents, as well as out-of-region visitors.

Background – Existing Commercial Use

Retail and office uses can be found in several different locations in Palmer, reflecting different types of demands and neighborhood conditions. Over the years, downtown has evolved and expanded south, north and west. In mid-century, downtown Palmer was dominated by the Mat-Maid dairy facilities, and the territorial school. Today, the former use sits vacant, the school is now the offices of the Mat-Su Borough, and downtown offers a wide range of businesses serving nearby residents and modest numbers of out-of-town visitors. Businesses include convenience retail, restaurants and bars, several hotels, specialty and gift shops, beauty salons and other personal services, gas stations and car repair. The Palmer-Wasilla Highway includes a diverse, growing collection of commercial activities. Two full-service grocery stores, located at the intersection of the Palmer-Wasilla and Glenn Highways, serve Palmer and the surrounding area.



Palmer also has many professional offices, interspersed in all the community's commercial districts. The Palmer Industrial Park, on the south side of town, is fully occupied and houses two major cooperative utilities, Matanuska Telephone Association and Matanuska Electric Association, as well as the City of Palmer Public Works Department. The Palmer Business Park located off the Glenn Highway a short distance south of S. Colony Way, is a former shopping center. It now houses a number of State Agency offices.

To meet the broad goal for high quality commercial development, five distinct locations and styles of commercial development are required. Intentions for commercial development in each of these areas are presented below.

Objective A: Expand institutional, commercial and mixed use areas in downtown east of the Alaska Railroad.

This historic area includes the mix of institutional, office and limited commercial areas east of the Railroad, and east of the Alaska Street business area. A portion of this area is a designated National Historic District, requires special attention regarding renovation and construction of buildings. The district includes the Palmer water tower and the Mat-Su Borough office building – Palmer's two defining landmarks. Residential neighborhoods are located north and east of this area. This district includes several vacant or empty buildings with historical interest and potential for redevelopment, such as the Mat-Maid buildings.

This district is well located to support expanded institutional development that would help strengthen the downtown core and benefit the community, with commercial activities as an important, but secondary use. Development objectives for this district include:

- Through use of the design guidelines and the City zoning code, encourage building forms and styles that complement this area's historic character. Consider developing an explicit overlay zone to guide development in the historic district. Elements of the character include buildings that are set back from street, include landscaped open space, and have well defined, gabled roofs. Large floor area "big box" retail buildings are not

- permitted in this district, however, larger commercial developments under a single owner are acceptable if buildings are broken into smaller, more human-scaled components.
- Commercial uses in this area should strengthen the area’s attraction as a setting for institutional uses, and attract workers in nearby office buildings as well as residents and visitors. Examples include restaurants, a brew pub, specialty grocery stores, specialty retail, and professional offices.
 - Designs for parking and the relationship of buildings to the street should make this area an extension of the pedestrian-oriented character of the downtown core. Parking areas should be broken into smaller units with landscaping. Require safe, attractive pathways from the street and parking areas to building entries.

Objective B: Encourage high quality, larger scale commercial uses along the Palmer-Wasilla Highway, and several other local highways. *See below for Glenn Highway policies.*

The Palmer-Wasilla Highway is the center of a major, steadily expanding commercial corridor connecting Palmer and Wasilla. This area is appropriate for highway-oriented commercial uses, such as larger floor area, higher traffic developments, for example, larger grocery, and department or home-improvement stores. Other road corridors with similar general intent, but with smaller lots and therefore smaller buildings, include the southern end of S. Colony Way, and E. Arctic Avenue. Development objectives for these districts include:

- Landscaping for parking areas and along the highway/property interface
- Shared access
- Controls on size, appearance of signs
- Screened service areas
- Good pedestrian circulation, within and through these areas

See Goal 7 of this chapter for a more complete discussion of Glenn Highway/South Town Entry.

Objective C: Strengthen Palmer’s traditional downtown core.

This district, between the Glenn Highway and the Railroad, is the traditional center of Palmer. Lots and buildings are generally small and pedestrian-oriented. In addition to retail and commercial services downtown includes a number of residences and former residences now used as offices. Development objectives in this district include:

- On Alaska Street and S. Colony Way – Encourage Main Street style buildings, with minimal or no front and side setbacks. Ensure the zoning code maintains downtown’s pedestrian-friendly character.
- Areas outside of Alaska Street commercial area – These areas should continue to be mixed use neighborhoods. New and refurbished buildings should have retail, office or other commercial uses on the ground floor. Residential uses are encouraged on the upper floors. New or rehabilitated buildings should maintain the positive architectural characteristics of the residential buildings traditionally found in this area, for example, well defined entries and entry porches, detailed facades, human-scaled doors and windows, use of natural materials and styles that echo traditional residential styles.

See Goal 6 of this chapter for a more complete discussion of Downtown.

Objective D: Allow for attractive commercial use along the Glenn Highway corridor.

The plan seeks to maintain the attractive entry into Palmer, characterized by a passage through a tree-lined road and areas where there is presently little development, followed by arrival in the more developed community center. The plan recognizes that new commercial use will most likely occur along the Glenn Highway south of downtown with the installation of the southwest water and sewer extension.

See Goal 7 of this chapter for a more complete discussion of Glenn Highway/South Town Entry.

Objective E: Allow for neighborhood commercial uses.

The plan allows for smaller nodes of commercial use in residential areas. Examples of such uses include a small neighborhood store, coffee shop or video rental shop. Allowing such uses adjoining residential neighborhoods is a convenience to residents and helps reduce the need for driving. Development objectives for these areas include:

- Control the location, size and design of such uses so the neighborhood commercial facility does not disrupt neighborhood character, or generate excess traffic.
- Allow this type of use only to a limited degree, and in carefully selected locations, such as intersections of collectors or arterials. Locations can either be identified in advance on the zoning map, or be proposed by a developer and then be considered under a special, conditional review process.

GOAL 5: Guide the form and character of growth to encourage high-quality buildings and site development that reflects Palmer's history and setting.

Background

The community of Palmer expects to continue to grow, but wants to guide growth to maintain Palmer's positive qualities - the community's small town feel, mix of uses, pedestrian scale, attractive buildings, and links to history. New policies are needed to guide the form and character of development, particularly of commercial and industrial buildings. These policies will include advisory design guidelines and a zoning code that continues to set high standards for development.

Palmer needs to modify its zoning code to better achieve the following goals:

- recognize the differences between commercial development in downtown and in other commercial areas
- provide clear standards for new types and scales of development coming to the community, particularly for projects with community-wide impacts; provide predictable, objective criteria for evaluating projects
- find a balance between encouraging high quality development while not establishing unreasonable burdens on developers

Strategies to Achieve this Goal

Objective A: Revise zoning code to allow for growth and encourage quality development, and to shape development to reflect Palmer's unique identity.

1. Ease of Use – As recommended in the University of Washington (UW) study, make changes to simplify use of the code, for example, provide tables that summarize permitted uses.
2. Incentive Zoning – The City should establish a “two-tier” zoning system that offers incentives to developers to provide community amenities. In certain parts of the City, this would allow the choice of using the standard “first-tier” zoning system, or a more flexible, “second tier” approach. Under the latter approach, in exchange for more amenities than otherwise would be provided (e.g., a mini-plaza with seating, a trail), the developer could be allowed more flexibility in meeting standards (e.g. increased intensity of development).
3. Form and Character of Building and Site Development – This plan presents objectives to be translated into revisions and new sections of the Palmer Zoning code. A list of topics and references to the plan sections where these changes are described is presented below:
 - Downtown – regulations that encourage appropriate commercial, institutional and mixed use development, including pedestrian scaled, “main street” commercial in the core area, and mixed institutional and commercial uses east of the railroad. *See Goals 4 and 6 of this chapter.*
 - Commercial adjoining Glenn and Palmer-Wasilla Highways – regulations that require commercial buildings to maintain the visual quality of these primary entries to the community, including standards for setbacks, landscape buffering, use of shared access roads and shared signs. *See Goal 4 and 7 of this chapter.*
 - Highway Commercial along other roadways outside of downtown – regulations reflecting an automobile-oriented use pattern (e.g., front parking). *See Goal 4 of this chapter.*
 - Higher Density Housing – rules for higher density housing and mixed use projects that include residential that encourage high quality development. *See Goal 2 of this chapter.*
 - Landscaping standards – rules setting minimum standards for landscaping buildings, parking lots and other developments
4. Locations and Intensity of uses. *See Goal 2 of this chapter.*
 - Rural Residential – a new zoning district to be used as City boundaries grow, to be applied in areas of very low density residential use, where rural standards for development and for services and facilities are appropriate.
 - Cluster or “Open Space” subdivisions – the PUD ordinance should be revised to create more requirements and incentives for developers to include open space, stormwater drainage and other community amenities in their subdivisions. Incentives could be offered in exchange for higher densities than would otherwise be permitted.

Objective B: Adopt policies to keep Palmer a visually attractive community, including maintaining good views of surrounding mountains

- Design guidelines – Work in partnership with affected businesses and landowners to develop advisory design guidelines. Guidelines should present community goals and give examples regarding site development, landscaping and building styles, scale and mass.

One important goal of these standards is to encourage building styles that reflect Palmer's unique history and location.

- Building height restrictions – Retain existing height restrictions in downtown. In other commercial districts develop standards to allow buildings up to 5-6 stories. In developing these standards, the City should consider the benefits of retaining winter sunlight, and the differences of views in different directions. For example, views of mountain to the south, east and north of the City are more valuable than views to the west.
- Sign Ordinance – rules allowing a range of sizes and styles of signs, to maintain the community's visual quality, help businesses be successful, and respond to the different character of different commercial districts.
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GOAL 6: Support efforts by the Downtown Business Improvement District to help ensure Palmer's traditional downtown is lively, attractive and inviting for residents and visitors.

Residents and visitors treasure the small town feel of Palmer, with its array of locally-owned businesses, sense of history and open space. This character, shared by very few other Southcentral Alaska communities, is a valuable economic asset. It helps downtown businesses attract customers, helps sustain property values and creates a clear image for the community. Downtown provides a center for community public life, a place to meet friends and acquaintances, and amenities and infrastructure that attract office and institutional users.

Downtown is defined as the area bounded by N. Arctic Avenue on the north, the S. Colony Way entrance on the south, the Glenn Highway on the west, and roughly the Mat-Su Borough office building on the east. This broad boundary encompasses areas with different characteristics and different goals, including the predominately institutional district east of the railroad, areas that are primarily residential and the core "main street" commercial district.

After years of stability and in some instances decline, in recent years much of the land in downtown has turned over to new ownerships. Odds are good the area will experience substantial change in the next five to ten years. This plan establishes six objectives to guide downtown economic development. The **Downtown Opportunities** map summarizes these objectives.

Objective A: Create Demand – Expand the base of downtown users within walking distance of downtown, including more residential and office uses and more tourist accommodations.

Successful downtowns compete with single purpose shopping destinations by appealing to a diverse range of users. Particularly important is having a large market of people who live and/or work in downtown. To be more successful, Palmer needs to encourage more of the following uses downtown:



- **Residential.** Promote housing development and redevelopment in walking distance of downtown. Spending by residents supports downtown merchants. Regular use by residents helps make evenings and weekends livelier.
- **Offices & Institutional.** Retain and attract new office and institutional users. Increasing the number of these uses supports downtown restaurants and other businesses, and strengthens the tax base which generates funds for a range of community needs.
- **Tourism.** Promote new and improved accommodations in downtown to encourage more visitor spending.

Objective B: Make downtown “the place to be” - Give residents and visitors new reasons to spend time and money in downtown. Encourage more commercial development, upgrades of existing facilities, new attractions and new events.

To become a stronger commercial center, downtown Palmer needs to offer visitors and locals more reasons to visit. Major opportunities to achieve this include:

- **Diverse Shops, Stores, Restaurants.** The core attraction of small downtowns remains a diverse, concentrated set of businesses. To compete successfully against big box discount stores and shopping malls, downtown needs to offset its comparatively lesser convenience by offering a greater mix of unique specialty shops, services, restaurants and night spots, as well as public amenities. To encourage this expansion, the City supports improvements to make downtown more attractive for private investment, including improved roads, trails, parking, events, public attractions and all the other actions outlined under this goal.
- **Public “Anchor” Facilities** – Shopping malls have anchor tenants; in downtowns, facilities like the post office and library play a comparable role, attracting significant regular use which leads to more spending at adjoining downtown businesses. The City will work to ensure these valuable uses remain in downtown.
- **“Bridge the Barrier”** - The railroad tracks and depot area provide an open space with both positive and negative impacts on downtown. On the plus side, this area offers an open, park-like corridor in the center of the city. On the less positive side, because this area is largely unimproved, it acts as barrier that splits downtown, and creates a ‘dead space’ in what should be the heart of the heart of the community. Even in good weather, pedestrians are disinclined to cross this undeveloped area.

The depot/railroad area is undergoing a change to become a focal point of activity that unites and energizes downtown. The improvements will have to retain the railroad link and accommodate the use limitations within the railroad right-of-way. The City, Alaska Railroad Corporation, and other affected land owners need to continue to work together to meet the needs of all parties and maximize the value of this key location. Specific actions include:

- carry out Downtown Revitalization Plan, which sets out specific plans for improving the depot and the rail corridor.

- reserve the rail connection south from Palmer to Anchorage, however, work with Alaska Railroad to de-activate the rail tracks north of the Depot up to Arctic, and to permit new road and pedestrian crossings on the section of rail line between downtown and the gravel pits, at least until such time as rail traffic increases and these crossings may need to be removed.
 - work with Alaska Railroad to find way to reduce constraints on downtown development linked to the presence of the rail line. Ultimately this rail line should be modified to urban rail standards, (comparable to light rail standards) which permit development and pedestrian activities to immediately adjoin rail activities. This may include reducing the height of the existing berm.
- **New Attractions** – Both for visitors and residents, downtown needs the kind of attractions that make people go out of their way to visit. Once there, the other aspects of downtown – its shops, public spaces, people – create reasons people choose to linger. Priority improvements are listed below:
- Rail Corridor. Implementation of the Downtown Revitalization Plan will turn the rail corridor s into a greenbelt park with a trail connecting the downtown with surrounding residential areas, recreation destinations and the Fairgrounds. Other planned actions include improvements at the depot, improved landscaping, developing a new east-west road, and improving east-west sidewalks (with signage, benches, kiosks, other features plus improved maintenance).
 - Agriculture. Visitors come to Palmer wanting to see the giant cabbages, to learn about colony history and see Alaskan farms. Residents take pride and pleasure in sharing this heritage. Palmer has a unique opportunity to use this story to revitalize the downtown, but this effort needs to go well beyond photos and exhibits. This initiative should involve the Museum, the proposed Business Improvement District (BID), the Borough, the City and other parties. Ideas to explore include: improvements at the visitor’s center and vegetable garden, cabbage art, restaurants serving local produce, local produce and meat market at the Matanuska-Maid Creamery site or horse carriage farm tours that leave from downtown.
 - Mat Maid. The vacant Mat Maid historic creamery and its three-acre site have the potential to be a major mixed use development. For example, this facility could house expanded offices of existing local institutions, and also include specialty shopping, dining, a museum or art galleries, all done in a way that evokes the town’s history.
 - The Quad. Palmer’s historic Quad is an asset that can become an interesting secondary downtown attraction, and a venue for events. At a minimum, construction of structures that diminish its historic, open character should be discouraged. Over time, efforts should be made to bring out its classic, original design.
- **Small Town Feel**. Maintain the small town atmosphere by upgrading existing buildings and providing advisory design guidelines and standards to ensure quality construction when new buildings are built.

- **Comfort, Reasons to Linger.** Provide public restrooms, benches, trash cans and similar public amenities along Palmer’s downtown streets.
- **Events.** In recent years, Palmer has taken important steps to develop and enhance events and activities downtown, largely through the hard work of local volunteers. This process should continue, using events to further add vitality to downtown. Specific actions include improving event venues for multiple uses, and adding capacity better accommodate growing crowds.

Objective C: Improve downtown circulation, starting with the entries to the City, to make access, parking, and walking efficient, safe, enjoyable, and inviting year-round.

- **Gateway Arrival.** Improve the major gateway entry points to downtown, to create a better sense of arrival and better brand for the community.
- **Easy to Park.** Without adequate parking downtowns wither for lack of customers. But too many large surface parking lots force downtowns to spread out and sacrifice the ease of walking that is the heart of their appeal. Downtown Palmer currently has good parking, but significant parking improvements will be needed as downtown grows. The critical need is to help businesses provide more parking off-site, so that buildings remain close together for easy walking. The City has recently adopted a new parking ordinance that makes major strides in these directions. Specific actions to improve parking include:
 - Identify and reserve land for future public parking lots, paid for in part by fees in-lieu of on-site parking.
 - Maximize on-street parking.
 - Work with owners of select existing private parking lots to retain these lots for parking use.
 - Consolidate separate lots to increase efficiency and improve management and maintenance.
 - Working with the future BID, encourage downtown business owners and employees to leave the best parking for customers. Establish dedicated outlying areas for employee parking.
- **Easy to Walk.** Make it easy to walk throughout downtown on a year-round basis. The City will support sidewalk rehabilitation, improved trails, better pedestrian links across the railroad, and improved year-round maintenance.
- **Trail Hub.** Make downtown a hub for paved and un-paved trail connections that will attract visitors and locals visitors. Establish the trail as called for in the Palmer Urban Revitalization Plan along the rail line north up the Matanuska River Valley and south to the Fairgrounds; link this trail to the City-wide trail system to provide good trail access to businesses, neighborhoods, parks and schools.
- **Downtown Road Improvements.** Downtown will function better if strategic road improvements are made, including a second link across the railroad north of the Depot. As is explained in the Transportation Chapter, Dogwood appears to be the logical extension, but further study is needed to ensure this is the preferred route.

- **Urban Rail.** The rail line into downtown is only used rarely, for special events. A recent study concluded that commuter rail service between Anchorage and the valley is feasible in terms of quality of service, but too expensive on a per rider basis given current demand. In the future, however, commuter rail may become much more practical, as energy costs rise, and more jobs and housing concentrate in downtown Palmer and Anchorage. The Alaska Railroad Corporation intends to retain the rail link into Palmer. As is discussed in “bridging the barrier” section above, in the near term, the City should work with the railroad to minimize the impacts of the rail-related restrictions on downtown activities. One option, as has occurred in many other downtowns, is to use urban rail standards, which allow for adequate safety in the rail corridor, but also supports other downtown goals.

Objective D: Use the power of informational tools and branding to tell Palmer’s story, improve name recognition, catch visitors’ attention and leverage increased economic returns.

Palmer’s a unique history and setting gives the community a distinctive statewide and even national image. This can translate into real economic benefits for businesses and the community as whole. Many cities spend hundreds of thousands of dollars trying to conjure up an equally compelling public image. Specific actions to build on Palmer’s strengths include:

- **Historic District.** A portion of downtown Palmer has been designated a National Historic District, formally acknowledging this area’s national significance. Palmer needs to do more to retain and enhance this resource, including inventory historic resources, assist building owners who want to use tax incentive programs to restore historic buildings, and consider an overlay zoning district to maintain the area’s historic character. A grant to the Borough from the State Historic Preservation Office may assist in this process.
- **Stories and Interpretation.** The Palmer “story” should be more fully integrated into the experience of the historic district, downtown and the community as a whole. The City is already moving in this direction. Additional steps should include themed attractions and events; improved interpretive signs, photos, and art in public places; and brochures, maps, websites and other promotional materials crafted to convey the “Palmer brand”.
- **Signature Signage, Way finding and Maps.** Many towns, visitor attractions and campuses (University of Alaska Anchorage for example) attract and direct visitors through a cohesive program of custom signs and well-conveyed graphic and text information. Palmer’s historic district and downtown would benefit from a similar approach.
- **Selling Palmer.** To draw more use to downtown - tourists, residents, developers, business entrepreneurs, and employers - Palmer needs to promote itself and keep its strengths intact as it grows. This should be done in partnership with the Chamber, Mat-Su Convention and Visitors Bureau (MSCVB), and future Business Improvement District. *See Economic Vitality chapter for details.*

- **Support effort to establish Business Improvement District – Create a “Downtown Champion.”** Palmer is well known for its volunteer can-do spirit and effective City government in the traditional realms of fire, police, safety and basic services. The City actively supports the current movement by downtown property owners to establish a formal Business Improvement District (BID). The City can work with this group to advocate and see through implementation on the measures outlined in this section.

Objective E: Identify near term actions as first priorities for improving downtown

Building momentum for large scale downtown improvements requires first moving forward with more modest, achievable actions. Priorities for City action are listed below:

- Implement the Downtown Revitalization Plan – improve the Depot and establish trails along the rail line
- Support efforts to create a Business Improvement District
- Work with partners to provide a memorable, fun, year-round way to meet entirely reasonable question – “where can I see a giant cabbage?”

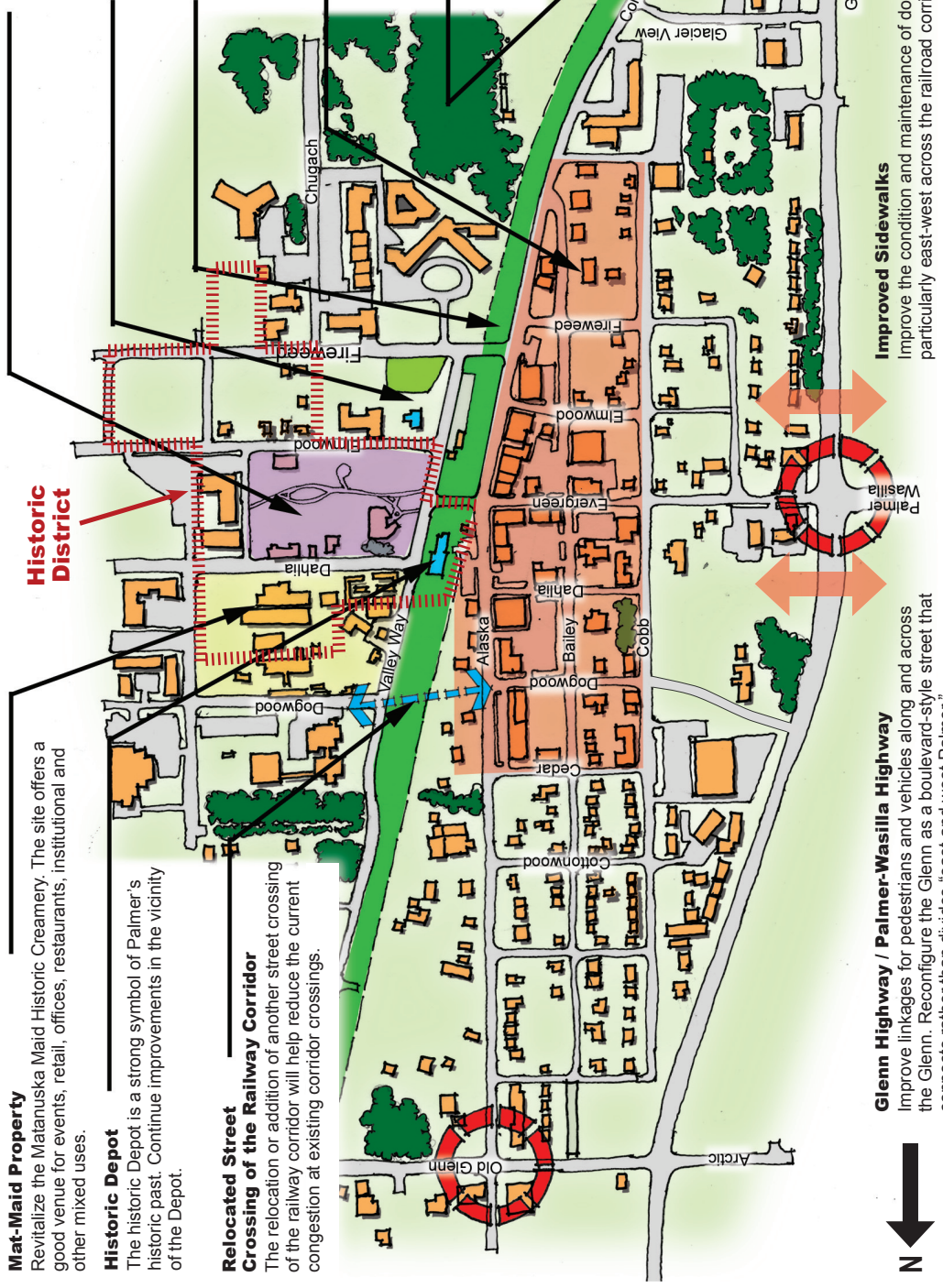
The Quadrangle
Palmer's historic Quad is an asset that will best serve downtown if its original design is strengthened and more active uses are implemented.

Visitor Center and Garden
Use the Visitor Center and Garden to reinforce Palmer's agricultural traditions. Provide a year round answer to the question: "Where's the giant cabbage?"

Railway Corridor
Better utilize the rail corridor for a variety of community benefits. The corridor can provide trail and walkway links, serve as a community green belt, and host future light rail service.

Downtown Core
The Downtown core is a vital resource for Palmer that could be strengthened. Work toward improving the variety of shopping, attractions, and experiences for Palmer visitors and residents. Utilize the downtown as a hub for an extensive trail and walkway system and identify private-public parking options to serve growth.

Gateways
Reinforce Palmer's identity with gateway features at key entry points. Incorporate screening of the electrical substation into the gateway feature at the "Y".



Mat-Maid Property
Revitalize the Matanuska Maid Historic Creamery. The site offers a good venue for events, retail, offices, restaurants, institutional and other mixed uses.

Historic Depot
The historic Depot is a strong symbol of Palmer's historic past. Continue improvements in the vicinity of the Depot.

Relocated Street Crossing of the Railway Corridor
The relocation or addition of another street crossing of the railway corridor will help reduce the current congestion at existing corridor crossings.

Glenn Highway / Palmer-Wasilla Highway
Improve linkages for pedestrians and vehicles along and across the Glenn. Reconfigure the Glenn as a boulevard-style street that connects rather than divides "east and west Palmer."

Improved Sidewalks
Improve the condition and maintenance of downtown sidewalks, particularly east-west across the railroad corridor.



Downtown Opportunities

Land Use Goal 4, Objectives B & C

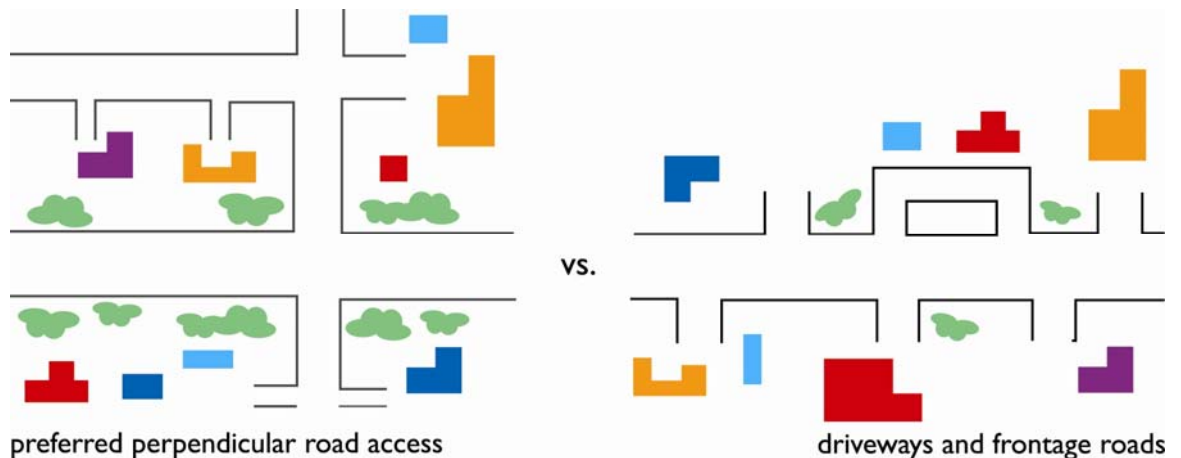
GOAL 7: Maintain and improve the visual quality of the Glenn and Palmer-Wasilla Highway corridors, and other major community roads.

Community members expressed a strong desire to maintain the attractive entry into Palmer. Making the Glenn Highway into a “boulevard-style” road is the primary strategy to reach this goal. An attractive, tree-lined boulevard will help maintain visual quality, better serve the needs of uses along the highway, and connect rather than divide the community. The Transportation Chapter describes the role of the Glenn Highway as part of the community, regional and statewide circulation system; this section focuses on the design characteristics of the road and adjoining uses.



This boulevard-style road will differ in two separate stretches of the highway:

- Southern Glenn Highway Corridor (south of Outer Springer Loop) - The highway in this area should serve as an attractive entry to the community, with a handful of intersections providing access to current and future development. Specific design and access standards include:
 - add trees on the sides of the road to screen expected future commercial and residential development (both within the right-of-way by the state, and along adjoining properties)
 - minimize driveways and use of frontage roads, instead provide access to adjoining properties by way of limited numbers of perpendicular roads (see sketch below)



- limit commercial signage; encourage several businesses to use a common sign
- establish a pedestrian bikepath along at least one side of the road

- Glenn Highway in Downtown Palmer (north of Outer Springer Loop) - In this area the highway should make the transition from a high speed road that carries through traffic, to a lower speed road, that helps connect the areas east and west of the highway. Design standards to reach this goal are outlined below:
 - establish a planted median, as well as landscaping along the right-of-way
 - provide space for improved entry sign or monument
 - establish signage and lighting standards appropriate for a roadway with slower traffic speeds (smaller than in the southern stretch of the Glenn)
 - minimize driveways and use of frontage roads, instead provide access to adjoining properties by way of perpendicular roads
 - add additional pedestrian and vehicular crossing points between Glacier View and Arctic Avenue
 - provide for safe, enjoyable pedestrian circulation along and across the road

GOAL 8: Sustain Palmer’s agricultural traditions.

Palmer is the center of Alaska’s longest established and most successful agricultural region. The Palmer area has good soils, access to markets, a favorable climate and skilled farmers. Like many fast growing communities, Palmer is facing the challenge that lands that are excellent for agriculture are also attractive for residential development. Many of these lands have already been converted to non-agricultural uses, and a number of farms have recently been purchased for residential development.

Objective A: Support creation of mechanisms to preserve high quality farmlands. Encourage retention of agricultural lands, recognizing that not all existing agricultural lands will remain in agricultural use.

The community has long wished to preserve portions of Palmer’s agricultural lands for agricultural uses, to provide jobs, provide agricultural products, and preserve the community’s character. The City supports the effort of local groups to retain agricultural lands, although the City will not be the primary leader of this effort. Options to protect farmlands for agricultural use include:

- Form a land trust or partner with an established trust to work with land owners to acquire development rights on agricultural land.
- Establish an open space district with the capacity to raise funds for land acquisition.
- Support efforts of groups like the State Fair who may be able to acquire and hold farmlands as part of their ongoing operations.
- As the City expands, apply land use zoning and property tax policies that encourage retention of agricultural lands where property owners wish to keep land in agricultural use.

Objective B: Support and maintain Palmer’s rural, farming identity and traditions.

The creation of an Agricultural Processing and Product Development Center is being proposed by the Mat-Su Borough. The borough hopes to combine the facility with the School District Central Kitchen already in Palmer. The City supports this effort to promote and provide incentives for using local agricultural produce in the development of new products at the center. There are other goals

in this Land Use chapter and the Economic Vitality chapter which present additional strategies to achieve this objective, including, developing community gardens and expanding the Farmer's Market at Friday Fling.

GOAL 9: Maintain a positive connection with Palmer's natural setting; maintain the quality of the natural environment - particularly stream corridors, lakes, and watershed areas.

Objective A: Encourage retention of open space, park lands and agricultural lands.

Community members have consistently emphasized the value they find in Palmer's open space, views, trees and overall sense of connection with its natural setting. Strategies to protect and enhance these characteristics are outlined below.

- Retain existing community parks lands. *See Parks, Recreation and Culture chapter.*
- Revise existing zoning code to:
 - encourage improved landscaping of commercial development.
 - where practical, encourage retention of areas of existing vegetation when sites are improved and discourage clearing of sites until the time they are developed.
 - retain open space within future subdivisions. *See Goal 2 of this chapter.*
- Encourage more voluntary planting of trees on private property
- Require retention of buffers and development setbacks adjoining water bodies.
- Provide a list of plant species that are well suited to local conditions
- Encourage retention of agricultural lands. *See Goal 8 of this chapter.*

Objective B: Encourage development practices that protect water quality and habitat

Currently there are limited natural areas within Palmer community boundaries. As the community expands, more such areas may be included within the City. As development takes place, developers are encouraged to follow accepted best management practices for protecting water quality and wildlife habitat through setbacks from water bodies, and use of drainage swales and onsite infiltration of storm water runoff to reduce erosion.



GOAL 10: Annexation – plan for the phased expansion of City boundaries.

This plan recommends that Palmer adopt an active annexation strategy to guide future development. Overall objectives are:

- Plan for phased annexations to guide growth, and provide for effective delivery of municipal services which benefit land owners, residents and businesses currently on the periphery of Palmer City limits.
- Actively work with the Matanuska Susitna Borough to develop shared plans for future growth, including residential and commercial activities and extension of services.
- Set general goals for land use in areas proposed for annexation prior to annexation.
- Establish a procedure to obtain input from interested persons regarding what City services are appropriate for areas that may be annexed.
- Coordinate annexation proposals with the Mat-Su Borough, e.g. provision of services, shared development standards such as road standards, and land use policies.

Palmer's ability to plan for and control future growth is presently constrained by its very small physical area. Of Alaska's sixteen mid-sized (2,000 to 6,000 residents) cities, Palmer has the smallest area and greatest population density. Palmer's land area takes in only 5.2 square miles, significantly smaller than the average area of Alaska's mid-sized cities. Palmer's 2004 population density (993 persons per square mile) was double that of the next most densely populated city (Soldotna) and more than ten times that of the average mid-sized city.

Palmer's boundaries are even more constricted when the relatively large amount of non-residential land within the City taken up by the airport, golf course, the Alaska State Fair and other institutional uses is considered. Unlike most of the other mid-sized cities, Palmer is not an isolated community. A significant share of the Palmer area's recent growth has taken place in the urban fringe outside the City's municipal boundaries.

Not only can the City make a very strong case that it needs additional area for community expansion, but it also has a great deal to offer urbanizing areas outside its corporate limits. No other place in the Mat-Su Borough matches the breadth and quality of municipal services that are enjoyed by Palmer residents. Among Palmer's many assets, four services in particular stand out:

- High quality local law enforcement services provided by the City police department. The presence of Alaska State Troopers in the community is an additional asset. Urban growth requires more services than the Alaska State Troopers can provide.
- Exceptional fire protection services, which in combination with the citywide piped water system and the enforcement of local building codes, are reflected in a very good fire insurance rating of 4, the best in the Mat-Su Borough. The good fire rating, in turn, results in significantly lower fire insurance premiums for Palmer residents than for people living outside the City, and at a distance from the city water system.
- Good street maintenance and snow removal services. Palmer's compact form enables these services to be provided more efficiently than is possible in less densely developed areas.
- Planning and zoning land use policies. Palmer residents have some certainty that structures within the City limits were built to code. Their neighborhoods are also protected from the intrusion of incompatible uses because Palmer has enforced local

zoning for many years. These conditions have not always been considered to be assets in the Mat-Su Borough. However, increasing densities and land use conflicts in the "Core" area are changing attitudes toward land use regulation. Increasingly, Borough residents are recognizing that reasonable planning and zoning policies help ensure the quality of neighborhoods, and maintain and increase property values.

Annexation Policies

This plan adopts a phased approach to annexation, and identifies the certificated sewer service area as the boundary for the expansion of the City. (This boundary, which extends well beyond the existing City boundary, takes in all the land included in the water service district boundary.) This concept should be filed with the Local Boundary Commission and individual annexation petitions should be used to implement the concept. *See Appendix A.*

The implementation of this concept will serve the needs of the City and the land owners in areas of possible annexation. By providing advance notice to land owners and residences in areas of possible annexation, and working with the Mat-Su Borough, they would be in a stronger position to prepare for annexation into the City. Land developers would have the opportunity to work with the City and plan land uses.

Municipal Policies in Future Annexation Areas

Existing land use in the area surrounding Palmer's existing City limits is a mix of residential, agriculture and some commercial, industrial and institutional uses. The City of Palmer supports continued agricultural activity, but recognizes that as the limited amount of remaining vacant land within Palmer is built out, the financial incentive for owners to convert nearby agricultural land will lead to increased residential and commercial development in these areas.

The City of Palmer is using this plan to state its interest in eventually annexing lands within its existing sewer service area boundary. Annexation boundaries should follow topographical features when possible as opposed to section lines.

While the City of Palmer has no direct jurisdiction over how development will occur in areas currently outside the city, because the City's sewer service district extends into the areas, the City has strong interest in when and how development takes place. The City, the Mat-Su Borough and State should work together closely to guide development within the sewer service area, particularly for major developments such as new roads, major subdivisions, park and open spaces and community facilities. One good way to achieve this goal would be to prepare a cooperative Borough/City plan to guide land use and infrastructure decisions in this area.

It is also important that the City obtain input from landowners, residents and businesses in possible annexation areas, and that the City is clear on the process for setting land use policy in future annexation areas. This will assist Palmer in planning for its future overall growth, and enable land owners and businesses outside Palmer to have input into the process and to understand how annexation may affect them.

The following specific annexation policies will be implemented by the City of Palmer.

1. Cooperative Planning with the Borough

The City and Borough should investigate options for cooperative approaches to guiding land use and infrastructure development within the Sewer Service area boundary.

2. Site Specific Annexation Planning Studies.

Prior to proceeding with any annexation petition the City, working with the Borough will undertake a planning study of the area proposed for annexation. This will include providing public notice and public meetings to discuss and help delineate recommended future land uses, and to indicate how and when municipal services (including public safety, utilities, streets and trails) will be extended to the area, together with any estimated associated costs. Particularly when significant changes in land use are contemplated, factors such as topography, drainage, traffic impacts and utility requirements may be considered. The recommendations of the study will be incorporated into any annexation proposal submitted to the Alaska Local Boundary Commission.

3. General Land Use Policy for Annexed Areas.

As made clear above, it is not possible or appropriate for the City of Palmer to prepare specific land use policy for potential annexation areas. At the same time, the City needs to convey general intentions for the future use and zoning of annexed lands. This intent is established through the general policies of this Comprehensive Plan and other City land use policies, which are intended to describe the City's general intentions for land use in future annexation areas. Examples of general policies that apply City-wide, and would be extended to annexed areas, include creating and maintaining quality residential neighborhoods, requiring on-site infiltration of stormwater, using setbacks and buffers to ensure compatibility between different types of uses, providing open space and trails, and providing roads built to City standards. The annexation planning studies called for above will build from the general framework in the comprehensive plan and other City policies, and take into account the uses and opportunities and constraints of specific locations, and the perspectives of affected property owners and residents.

4. New Development in Annexed Areas.

Following annexation, new development will comply with all applicable City of Palmer codes.

