

CHAPTER 8 PARKS, RECREATION & CULTURE

Overview

Palmer is fortunate to have wide open spaces, great views, and a well-developed system of recreational facilities, and parks and cultural facilities, including facilities owned by the City, the Borough and other organizations. Palmer is an active community, with large numbers of residents involved in softball, baseball, soccer, golf, ice hockey, and other sports. Within City boundaries there are an unusually strong, diverse set of recreational facilities, including a city-owned golf course and indoor ice arena; softball, baseball and soccer fields, a number of smaller parks and a borough-operated swimming pool and campground.



The City also benefits from several nearby public recreational destinations, including Hatcher Pass, Crevasse Moraine Trails, Lazy Mountain, the Butte, and Knik River and Knik Glacier areas. The Borough is moving forward with development of the Hatcher Pass Ski project, which, if successful, could bring a new influx of winter visitors to the area. The Glenn Highway corridor is a National Scenic Byway. In the long term, Palmer could increasingly be seen as both a destination, with great in-town facilities and attractions, and a “gateway community” offering a good place to stay or shop with easy access to out-of-town recreational areas with statewide and even national reputations.

Community parks are managed under the City Public Works Department. City staff for maintenance of facilities and parks rises to 5-6 part time people in the mid summer and falls to 1-2 people in other parts of the year. In 2002, the City took over responsibility for managing most local parks from the Mat-Su Borough. Under this arrangement, park lands remain in Borough ownership and management belongs to the City. The City recently established the progressive policy of requiring developers to include land, or money in-lieu of land, for local parks as part of all new residential developments.

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

GOAL 1: Obtain funding for and complete the Palmer Urban Revitalization Plan in downtown. Establish, improve, and maintain all downtown open spaces and parks.

GOAL 2: Establish, improve, and maintain city-wide parks, and recreation facilities and programs.

GOAL 3: Enhance area-wide recreational trail systems, and connections between residential areas, downtown, schools, institutional areas, recreational areas. *See Transportation chapter.*

GOAL 4: Continue to improve local arts and cultural opportunities.

Goals & Objectives for Parks, Recreation & Culture

GOAL 1: Obtain funding for, and complete the urban revitalization project in downtown. Establish, improve, and maintain all downtown open spaces and parks.

Background

Downtown needs a set of attractive, well maintained public parks, plazas, event spaces and other public open spaces, and is currently well on the way towards that goal. The center of town has a pleasant open feel, with substantial undeveloped areas. These include lands in public ownership, such as the “park quad” area in front of the Mat-Su Borough headquarters, the grounds of the library, the railroad right-of-way including the space surrounding the depot. Also important are large areas of open space, commonly landscaped in a park-like form, surrounding several churches and other institutional uses and the Mat-Su Borough baseball fields.

Strategies to Achieve this Goal

Plans for downtown open spaces and parks are covered under Goal 6 – Downtown, in the Land Use Chapter. Recommended projects include the improvements listed below. All of these projects fit under the general umbrella of the downtown urban revitalization project now underway. The first two of these projects are expected to take place in the next few years.

- Improve open space and facilities around the Depot.
- Improve open space and a trail along the rail line.
- Working with community organizations, support improved space for events, including a farmer’s market and a downtown vegetable garden, and rehabilitation of the Park quad.

GOAL 2: Establish, improve, and maintain city-wide parks, and recreation facilities and programs.

Background

A diverse, high quality system of parks, trails, sports and cultural facilities is increasingly seen as a high priority for local governments, supporting quality of life and helping to attract and retain local business. In addition, quality recreational facilities and programs are a critical part of the nation-wide effort to combat obesity and encourage more active, healthier lifestyles, particularly for kids. The City shares responsibility for providing such programs and facilities with a number of partners, including the schools, the state and borough, sports clubs, and community volunteers.

Existing recreational facilities in Palmer are listed below:

- Municipal 18-hole golf course (city)
- Indoor ice arena (city)
- Tennis courts (city)
- Football, soccer, baseball and softball fields (city and school property)
- Hermon Brothers Mat-Su Miners semi-pro baseball field (Alaska State Fairgrounds)

- Swimming pool (managed by the Mat-Su Borough)
- State Fair horse show grounds, other recreation and event space (state fair)

In addition, the City manages a set of smaller parks and playgrounds, listed below. Until 2002, these facilities were part of the Borough-wide parks system, and the borough still owns these lands. In 2002, management authority was passed to the City of Palmer. Sherrod Park was built with Land and Water Conservation Funds from the National Park Service. This program requires these areas to remain dedicated as parks in perpetuity.

- Sherrod Park 41.00 acres
(little league, soccer field, multi-use)
- Amoosement Park 3.53 acres
- Ken Soule Fields 3.00 acres
- Eagle Street 1.36 acres
- Highlands .32 acres
- John Bugge Tot Lot .26 acres
- Bill Hermann Tennis Court .25 acres
- Merritt Long Park .10 acres



Also located within City limits is the Matanuska River Park, managed by the Mat-Su Borough. This large park includes camping areas, trails, and day use recreation facilities. The City assists in the maintenance of the ball fields next to the borough headquarters and the Bill Hermann Tennis Courts.

Local civic organizations commit volunteer labor which is an important in keeping the parks well maintained. The “Amoosement Park” provides a good model for the public private partnerships that can lead to the development of new parks in the community. This facility was built in one week through a massive, community-led effort, bringing together service clubs, sports organizations, corporate donors, schools, and residents.

The community is also getting new neighborhood parks developed under the City’s ordinance requiring residential developments to dedicate land for, or contribute to, a neighborhood park. Typically these parks are small and provide play equipment, lawn, and space for picnics. The Daron Street Park was the first to open in the summer of 2005. Neighborhood parks in the Brittany Estates, Mountain Rose East, and Fairfield Park subdivisions will open by 2007.

Important parks and open space areas outside City limits include:

- Kepler Bradley State Park
- Crevasse Moraine Trails (borough)
- Matanuska River Park (borough)
- Matanuska River Trails (trails on state owned land between ordinary high water marks and railroad corridor)
- Alaska Railroad corridor (north to Sutton)
- Hatcher Pass Recreation area (state)
- Lazy Mountain area (state)
- Butte Trail system (borough)

Strategies to Maintain and Improve Community Recreation Facilities and Programs

Objective A: Continue to Maintain and Improve the City Parks System

As stated above, the City currently has a very good parks system. A big challenge for all communities is ensuring resources are available to adequately maintain parks. City parks are currently well maintained. Resources for park maintenance will need to grow as new parks are developed, particularly as new subdivisions dedicate lands for new parks. Continuing to work with volunteers and service organizations is one important means of maintaining local parks. In the longer term, the City may wish to establish a park endowment fund, as was recently done in Anchorage. This allows private citizens to donate funds for the ongoing maintenance and improvement of the City's park system.



Other strategies to maintain and improve the City park system include:

- Plan for priority future recreational needs. Two identified priorities for improvement are needed are listed below:
 - Skateboard park
 - Additional sports fields, particularly for soccer
- Improve the Land Surrounding the Ice Arena – The ice arena sits on approximately 14 acres of land which the city plans to develop for recreational use.
- Encourage multiple activities in the same park so a number of activities can occur at the same facility. For example, include trails and exercise areas as part of a sports field, and schedule activities to make maximum use of the facility.

Objective B: Encourage high quality sports programs for youth and adults. Use sports as a means of attracting visitors to spend time and money in Palmer.

A wide range of facilities are available for organized sports in and around Palmer. These activities are important to the quality of life of the community, and promote healthy lifestyles. In addition, sports activities contribute to the community's economic health, as sports events bring spectators, families and participants into Palmer from surrounding communities and around the state, for regular scheduled competitions, and also for special events and tournaments.

More could be done to expand events and sports programs, to increase the associated quality of life, health, and economic benefits. In general, this is not a direct City function. These responsibilities largely lie with local schools and sports clubs. In addition to continuing to provide programs and facilities for which the City is directly responsible (e.g., golf, ice arena), the City could partner with

schools, non-profit organizations, and other community groups, for example by providing and helping to maintain land for parks and other recreation facilities.

Objective C: Support Development of a Youth Council and Youth Center

The City supports community-based efforts to increase opportunities for youth to build their physical, emotional, and intellectual strengths through a variety of development programs in a safe environment. Two specific near term actions are encouraged:

- Support development of a Youth Council
- Explore options for developing a Youth Center

The Youth Council should consist of residents of the City of Palmer or the Palmer service district and include mostly youth with several adult mentors. The Youth Council will assist in development of the local sports facilities and events, including, but not limited to, ice arenas, tennis courts, ballparks, playgrounds, and skateboard parks. An important function of this group is to encourage coordination among different sports programs, for example, coordinating use of and maintenance of sports facilities.

The City recognizes the need for improved facilities for youth activities, and supports the efforts of local groups working to develop a dedicated youth center. One option is to incorporate this function into an existing building, or have it be one element of future multi-purpose facility. Palmer Youth Council could solicit funds to design, build, and maintain a youth Activity Center, or remodel a currently existing facility. The center would host a variety of activities for the whole family and make people feel welcome. The center should act as a community information center to publicize current regional activities and coordinate with other organizations.

The City's role in this objective includes providing political support for the establishment of the Youth Council, and assisting the Council secure space in an existing building or a site for the proposed youth center.

GOAL 3: Enhance area-wide recreational trail systems. Improve connections between residential areas, downtown, schools, institutional areas, recreations areas.

This goal is addressed in the Transportation chapter.

GOAL 4: Continue to improve local arts and culture opportunities.

Background

Arts and cultural activities have a similar set of benefits for Palmer as do sports facilities and programs: they contribute to quality of life, and provide economic benefits. Like sports activities,

the City is not the primary party responsible for continuing and expanding cultural activities, but can be a helpful partner.

Current cultural facilities and activities in the community include the Palmer Public Library, Colony House Museum, the downtown historic district, the state fairgrounds, and the newly formed Palmer Museum of History and Art. Several local businesses have performing and cultural arts programs, and have a growing regional reputation as good places for music, poetry and other cultural events.

Community comments expressed during the process of preparing this plan showed strong support for improvements to arts and cultural opportunities in Palmer. Strategies to achieve this goal include:

Objective A: Develop a Palmer Arts and Culture Plan

Palmer has excellent potential to become the center of a growing Mat-Su Borough cultural scene. As the southern borough continues to grow, area population will begin to demand and be able to support a richer range of locally-based cultural facilities and programs. Palmer is well suited to become the hub of borough art and cultural activities, by virtue of its attractive setting, compact downtown, convenient location, state fair facilities, rich history, and energetic and creative population. To harvest this potential will take effort and imagination. One first step would be to prepare a Palmer Arts and Culture Plan. The City is not the organization to take the lead in this effort, but can be a partner. Other key players include the Mat-Su Borough, the Borough Convention and Visitors Bureau, Palmer Museum of History and Art, Chamber of Commerce, and the downtown business improvement district. This plan could inventory current facilities, activities and programs; and identify near term and longer term strategies to accelerate development of cultural resources; and find ways to maximize the community benefits of these developments.

Objective B: Develop a Multi-Purpose Arts Center

Palmer's downtown would benefit from being able to offer an expanded range of arts and cultural programs, so people would be drawn to some specific event, and then choose to linger and spend time and money at local restaurants and shops.

In the near term, the Greater Palmer Chamber of Commerce, Mat-Su Borough Convention and Visitors Bureau, and downtown businesses would benefit by better documenting and marketing existing arts and cultural opportunities.

Over the long term, a number of residents have suggested exploring options to establish a multi-purpose performing and cultural arts center located near restaurants, shopping, art galleries, bars, and other complementary business activities. The City recognizes the value of having a performing and cultural arts facility either within the City limits or nearby. Such a facility would be particularly beneficial to Palmer if located downtown. An alternative would be to create a facility managed jointly with other communities and the Borough, perhaps in the vicinity of the new hospital.

Establishing this type of facility is a large-scale undertaking, requiring a coordinated effort of the private sector and other organizations, which the City supports.