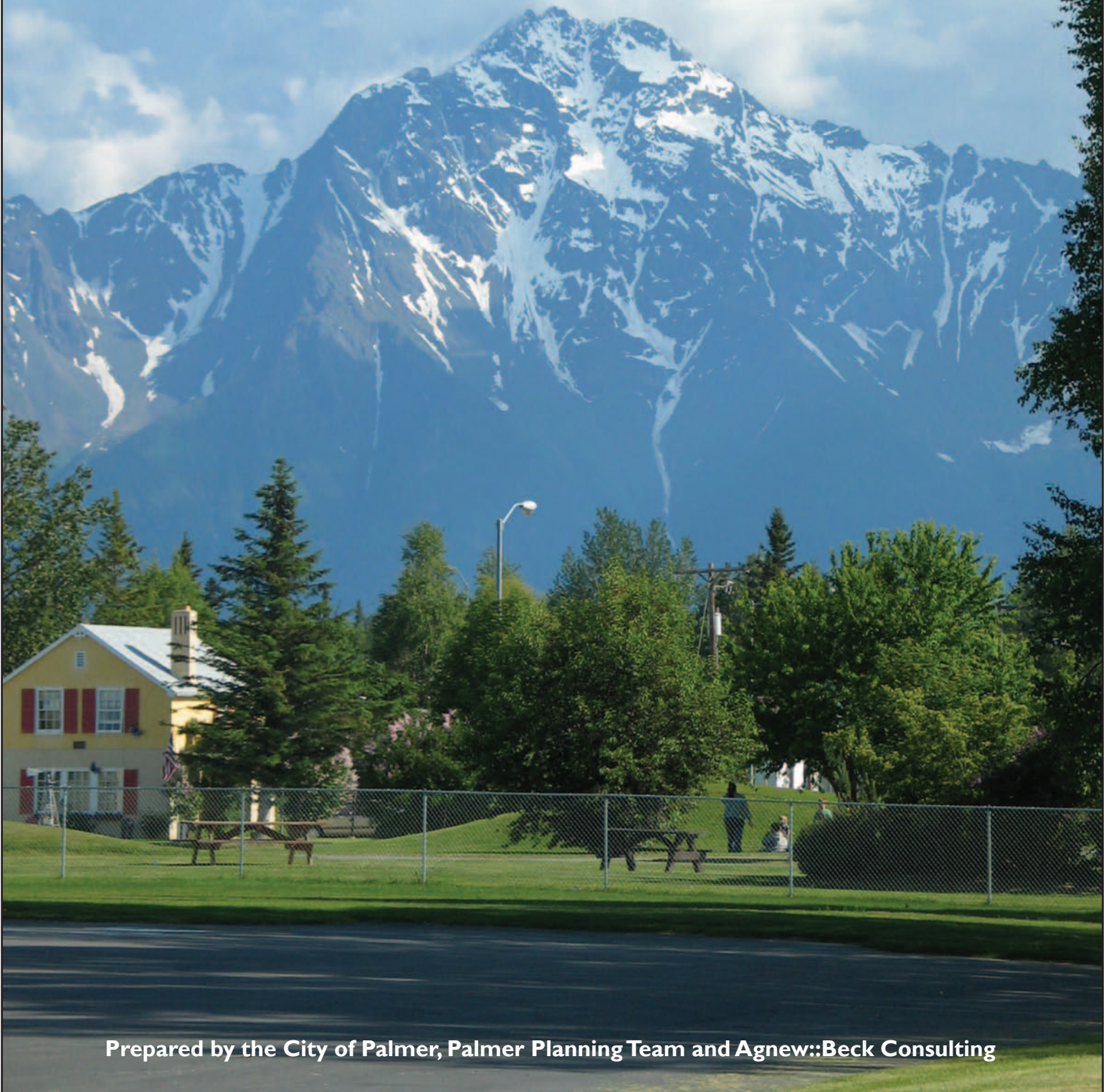


City of Palmer Comprehensive Plan

APPROVED SEPTEMBER 2006



Prepared by the City of Palmer, Palmer Planning Team and Agnew::Beck Consulting

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A community planning project was conducted by a team of twenty graduate students from the University of Washington, College of Architecture and Urban Planning, Department of Urban Design and Planning, Alaska Studies Program over a six month period in late 2004 and early 2005. That planning effort contributed base information to the update of this plan.

CODE ORDINANCE ADOPTING PLAN

CODE ORDINANCE

By: Borough Manager
Introduced: 09/05/06
Public Hearing: 09/19/06
Adopted: 09/19/06

MATANUSKA-SUSITNA BOROUGH ORDINANCE SERIAL NO. 06-183

AN ORDINANCE OF THE MATANUSKA-SUSITNA BOROUGH ASSEMBLY AMENDING MSB 15.24.030(B)(3), COMPREHENSIVE PLAN AND PURPOSES; CITY OF PALMER.

WHEREAS, Palmer City Council voted to approve the updated comprehensive plan in May 2006; and

WHEREAS, Planning Commission Resolution Serial No. 06-42, adopted August 7, 2006, recommends the inclusion of the updated Palmer City Comprehensive Plan into the overall Borough Comprehensive Plan.

BE IT ENACTED:

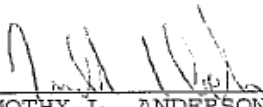
Section 1. Classification. This ordinance is of a general and permanent nature and shall become a part of the borough code.

Section 2. Amendment of section. MSB 15.24.030(B)(3) is hereby amended to read as follows:

(3) City of Palmer Comprehensive Plan (Ord. 82-37 dated July 1982, as amended by Ord. 85-104 dated January 1986, Ord. 87-65 dated July 1987, Ord. 88-12 dated February 1988, Ord. 93-01 dated January 1993, Ord. 99-071 dated June 1, 1999); as amended by Ordinance 06-183 dated May, 2006.


Section 3. Effective date. This ordinance shall take effect upon adoption by the Matanuska-Susitna Borough Assembly.

ADOPTED by the Matanuska-Susitna Borough Assembly this 19 day
of September, 2005.



TIMOTHY L. ANDERSON, Borough Mayor

ATTEST:



MICHELLE M. MCGEHEE, CMC, Borough Clerk
(SEAL)

PASSED UNANIMOUSLY: Woods, Allen, Colberg, Kvalheim, Bettine,
Colver, and Vehrs

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION (Chapter 1)

This plan was prepared with extensive public involvement. This included a series of meetings with an advisory planning team, interviews with residents and businesses, and two well attended community meetings – an open house in May and a workshop to review the draft plan in October 2005. The plan builds from the 1999 City of Palmer Comprehensive Plan, as well as the work completed in winter 2004-05 by a team from the University of Washington Urban Planning College.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION (Chapter 2)

Palmer is in the midst of profound transformation. While features from Palmer's history – its agricultural character, small town feel, and sense of community - continue to define Palmer's identity, the town now faces a different future. Palmer is embedded in the phenomenally rapidly growing southern Mat-Su Borough. In the 1960's the Mat-Su Borough had a population of just over 5,000 people. By 2000 the population had grown ten-fold to 59,322. During the 1990's Borough population grew 49 percent versus 13 percent statewide. If the State economy remains strong, the Borough is projected to grow to over 108,000 people by 2015. In the span of 20-30 years, this region has evolved from rural, to bedroom community, to what is becoming an increasingly self-sufficient service and employment center.

This growth presents Palmer with great opportunities and challenges:

- Pressures for expansion - a tide of subdivisions, offices and shopping centers transforming the area's traditionally rural landscapes
- A level of population growth that allows the area to support a new scale of commercial and public services, from 'big box' retail to a new regional hospital
- Traffic growth that is rapidly outpacing the capacity of the road system
- A downtown that has changed little over the years, in contrast to the dramatic growth of nearby commercial districts, but appears to be on the cusp of significant construction and redevelopment
- An escalation of community expectations - growing pressures for new public services and facilities to be provided by the City of Palmer, from within and outside City boundaries
- A subtle shift in perspective, from pride in the past to a growing focus on the future

These changes present challenges to the historic character of Palmer and opportunities to emerge as a new kind of community – one that keeps the best of its historic character *and* embraces the need to grow and change. The purpose of this plan is to establish a framework to reach this ambitious goal.

COMMUNITY VISION (Chapter 3)

The overall vision for the community is to “Keep Palmer a vital community, a place that seeks opportunities for growth, and retains what is best about Palmer's history and traditions.” Specific priorities include:

- Keep focused on City fundamental responsibilities: roads, police and fire, water and sewer.

- Facilitate the expansion of the local economy and local business, so residents of Palmer and surrounding areas can find more of the goods, services and jobs they need in Palmer.
- Strengthen downtown Palmer – “the heart of community public life.”
- Promote and enhance what is unique about Palmer to benefit residents and attract visitors.
- Encourage high quality, attractive development, with ready access to parks and green space.
- Improve connections within and out of town, by road, trail and transit.
- Accept and encourage growth, but guide development to benefit the community and maintain what is special about Palmer.

PUBLIC SERVICES, FACILITIES & INFRASTRUCTURE (Chapter 4)

Cities like Palmer provide a wide range of services. The services addressed under this chapter, including police, fire, water and sewer, along with the local road system, are the core of the City’s responsibilities. The City of Palmer provides a high level of public services and facilities, including an airport; community water, sewer and stormwater service; and fire, police and emergency services. The City needs to continue to efficiently maintain and expand these services as population and community boundaries grow. Particular challenges for the future include:

- *Overall* – Continue to strengthen the City’s infrastructure, to meet the needs of a growing community.
- *Coordination* - Work cooperatively with the Matanuska Susitna Borough to coordinate expansion of infrastructure, roads, and new development within the City of Palmer Sewer Service District.
- *Sewer* – The City’s sewer system has the capacity to meet expected growth over the next 5-10 years. Further out, the community will have to invest \$20-30 million to expand the plant’s capacity and reduce time required for treatment.
- *Water* – The City has sufficient well capacity to meet future needs, but in the next 5-10 years will need to construct several major water mains to serve predicted growth. Two specific needs are a main in the Inner Springer Loop area (approximately \$5 million), and service to the area north of the new regional hospital (approximately \$10 million).
- *Stormwater* – More development and impervious surfaces will require more effort to manage stormwater flows. The plan supports increasing open space in future developments to promote on-site infiltration, reduce public storm water management costs, and as a side benefit, provide open space for recreation.
- *Fire and Police* – Work to maintain quality service to new developments within current City boundaries and in outlying areas. For fire, one priority is to improve fire protection downtown, where the concentration of structures creates higher risks. In the longer term, the community will have to confront the challenge of providing quality fire service outside the existing town boundaries. In these areas, providing fire service will cost more than within the existing town, due to lower densities and the need to build new water mains.

TRANSPORTATION (Chapter 5)

Plan policies, summarized below, will improve the range and quality of Palmer transportation options, to better serve current needs and respond to projected growth.

Shape the Character and Use of the Glenn Highway - The Glenn Highway carries steadily increasing traffic, but little of this traffic continues past the community. Consequently, the challenge is to *disperse* traffic within the community, rather than move traffic *through* Palmer. Plan actions to improve the Glenn Highway are listed below.

- Create an arterial-level street on the north-south section line that is currently partially occupied by Hemmer Rd., Blunck St., and North Werner Rd. This route will connect the Glenn Highway with development along the Palmer-Wasilla Highway and Bogard Road and avoid the congested intersection of the Glenn and Palmer-Wasilla Highways.
- Change the character of the Glenn Highway in Palmer. Establish a limited access, boulevard-style road with a landscaped median and right-of-way, and with improved pedestrian and vehicular links between the east and west sides of the highway.
- Provide access to development with perpendicular access roads rather than direct driveway access or frontage roads.

Improve the Palmer Road System to Meet Anticipated Growth

- The plan proposes two new east-west collector level streets:
 - Extend Bogard Road east to connect with the Glenn Highway and continue into the greater downtown area.
 - Connect Dogwood Avenue to the east over the Alaska Railroad and connecting to the west across the Glenn Highway to an extended Felton Street.
- Work with the State of Alaska and the Matanuska Susitna Borough to reserve land for other key transportation-related improvements, including reserving routes for collector streets on approximately a 1/2 mile grid, and reserving or acquiring land for expansion of key intersections.

Maintain and Improve Community Sidewalks and Trails – A good trail system is an increasingly valued element of successful communities, supporting quality of life, economic and circulation goals. The plan identifies needed new and improved trails and sidewalks. Two priorities are upgrades and better maintenance of downtown sidewalks and a trail along the railroad right-of-way from the State Fairgrounds through the City and north to Sutton.

Work on a Regional Basis to Expand and Improve Transit Service – Increasing housing densities and climbing gas prices will increase the feasibility and desirability of transit improvements. The plan recommends continued support of these services.

LAND USE (Chapter 6)

The Land Use Chapter includes ten goals to guide growth to make Palmer an increasingly attractive and successful place to live, work, invest and visit. The first goal of this chapter sets out the desired, overall pattern of community land use; the remainder of the chapter goes into more detail on the specific goals for individual land uses. Highlights of the chapter include:

- Maintain the quality of existing neighborhoods, and provide space for diversity of new residential uses, including housing for the upper end of the housing market, higher density housing in around downtown, and housing for seniors.
- Ensure Palmer remains the institutional center of the Borough. Work proactively to help institutions find space for needed expansion, for example, offices of the Matanuska Susitna Borough and the State Court, so Palmer remains the Borough's institutional hub.
- Encourage expansion of commercial uses, primarily in downtown and along the Palmer Wasilla Highway and along the Glenn Highway.
- Work with the planned Business Improvement District, to help maintain and enhance downtown as a compact, walkable, dynamic, mixed use center.
- Encourage expansion of industrial uses while guiding this type of use to reasonably mitigate impacts on surrounding uses.
- Coordinate planning for transportation and land use, so residents and businesses have convenient access to places of work, commercial services, schools and other public facilities, by vehicle, sidewalk and trail.
- Maintain and improve a high quality system of trails, parks, and open space and other recreation amenities.
- Maintain a clear sense of town entry, with open space and/or less developed areas separating Palmer from surrounding communities.
- Support Palmer's agricultural heritage and history and work so it continues to be visible.
- Guide development so there is the right balance of residential and commercial uses, to ensure the City maintains its fiscal health.

The Comprehensive Plan calls for an active, phased approach to annexation, focused on provision of high quality services, and advance land use and infrastructure planning, including cooperative planning with the Borough. Ultimately, the City of Palmer is expected to expand to the existing sewer service area boundary, which extends 6-7 miles west and south of the existing City limits.

ECONOMIC VITALITY (Chapter 7)

Palmer benefits from a diverse economy. This includes institutional and office uses, local-serving retail and service businesses, and modest contributions from tourism and agriculture. While the private sector drives the community's economy, the City can play a role in keeping the economy strong and diverse. Strategies to reach this goal capitalize on the community's history and small town character, and encourage high standards for development.

Strengthen Palmer's competitiveness as the region's institutional center - Work with institutions to understand and meet their needs, including, where possible, help secure land needed for growth. Develop and implement specific strategies with key institutions.

Encourage expansion of high-tech and research-related economic sectors and other well-paid professional jobs – Encourage growth in these sectors, by maintaining and improving Palmer's high quality of life, and ensuring space is available for forms of economic development that provide good jobs that fit well with community character. In particular, encourage research-related economic activity linked to University of Alaska facilities located in the Palmer area.

Strengthen Palmer's role as a place to shop for Palmer residents and visitors - Zone sufficient land for commercial growth, and support continued public investments in infrastructure in commercial areas.

Strengthen Palmer as a tourism destination - Palmer has solid potential to attract travelers and more could be done to take advantage of this potential. Over time, the community could become both a destination in its own right and a "gateway community" providing a base for Hatcher Pass skiing, and trips into the spectacular backcountry that surrounds Palmer. Downtown and trail improvements are the keys to this transformation.

Do more to market Palmer's Attractions - Palmer's distinct character is a real economic asset, derived from the community's unique natural setting, buildings, views, history, people, and stories. The City should actively support efforts by the Greater Palmer Chamber of Commerce, the Matanuska-Susitna Convention and Visitors Bureau and others to better bring out and promote this character. The community should distill and promote the "Palmer brand" in signage, downtown attractions, the community website, and all marketing material. Palmer can increase the benefits of its historic character by further marketing and improving the City's designated National Historic District and the Glenn Highway National Scenic Byway. One additional, longer term possibility would be to establish Palmer as the centerpiece of a National Heritage Area, which would provide recognition and more funding for promotion.

PARKS, RECREATION & CULTURE (Chapter 8)

The plan identifies the need to maintain and improve public parks and open spaces throughout the community. As the amount and intensity of development increases, this strategy will help keep Palmer a desirable place to live and work. Specific goals include:

Establish, improve, and maintain city-wide parks and recreation facilities and programs - Palmer already has an excellent system of park and recreation facilities. Two identified unmet needs are a skateboard park and additional fields for sports like soccer. Palmer will also need to increase park maintenance as the park system expands and promote programs to increase volunteer maintenance of parks. The City also supports creation of a youth council and eventually a youth center.

Obtain funding for and complete the urban revitalization project in downtown - Establish, improve, and maintain a range of downtown open spaces, sidewalks and parks.

Enhance area-wide recreational trail systems - Improve sidewalk and trail connections between residential areas, downtown, schools, institutional areas, recreational areas.

Continue to improve local arts and cultural opportunities - In the same way that the southern Borough increasingly supports new scales of commercial uses, the area can begin to support a new level of quality of cultural facilities. Palmer should work to be the region's cultural center, including working towards development of a multipurpose arts center.

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CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

Overview

Palmer is located in the magnificent Matanuska Valley of Southcentral, Alaska, surrounded on three sides by mountain ranges and two glaciers. It has a history and heritage unique in Alaska. The pioneer families and 203 Colony families who came to Palmer from 1935 onward brought with them small town values, institutional structures, and the beginnings of straightforward architecture that characterize the rural upper Midwest.



Many of the communal qualities of present day Palmer are directly traceable to its origins as a planned community. These qualities today find a variety of institutional expressions from Palmer's public and private schools, a centrally located library, city government and police force, established churches, active Chamber of Commerce, and extensive water and sewer infrastructure. Also within the city limits of Palmer are the Alaska State Fair, a historical society and Historic District, an airport, the finest golf course in the state, ice arena, parks and ballfields. Palmer is the seat of the Matanuska-Susitna Borough government and is home to Matanuska Electric Association, Matanuska Telephone Association, Matanuska Valley Federal Credit Union, the Alaska Job Corps Center, State Superior and District Court, amateur college baseball Mat-Su Miners, and is close to the Matanuska Valley campus of the University of Alaska.

Palmer is in the midst of a significant transformation – “evolving into a new kind of community” in the words of several different participants in the planning process. While features from Palmer’s history – its agricultural character, small town quality, and communal sensibilities - continue to define Palmer and its identity, the town now faces a very different future. Palmer along with the southern Mat-Su Borough has experienced two decades of sustained growth. In less than 20 years this region has evolved from rural, to bedroom community, to its own increasingly self-sufficient commercial and employment center. Agricultural lands are rapidly becoming subdivisions. Residents within Palmer’s boundaries and adjoining areas are looking to the City for new types and levels of community services. Much of downtown has been purchased by new owners, and appears to be on the cusp of significant construction and redevelopment.

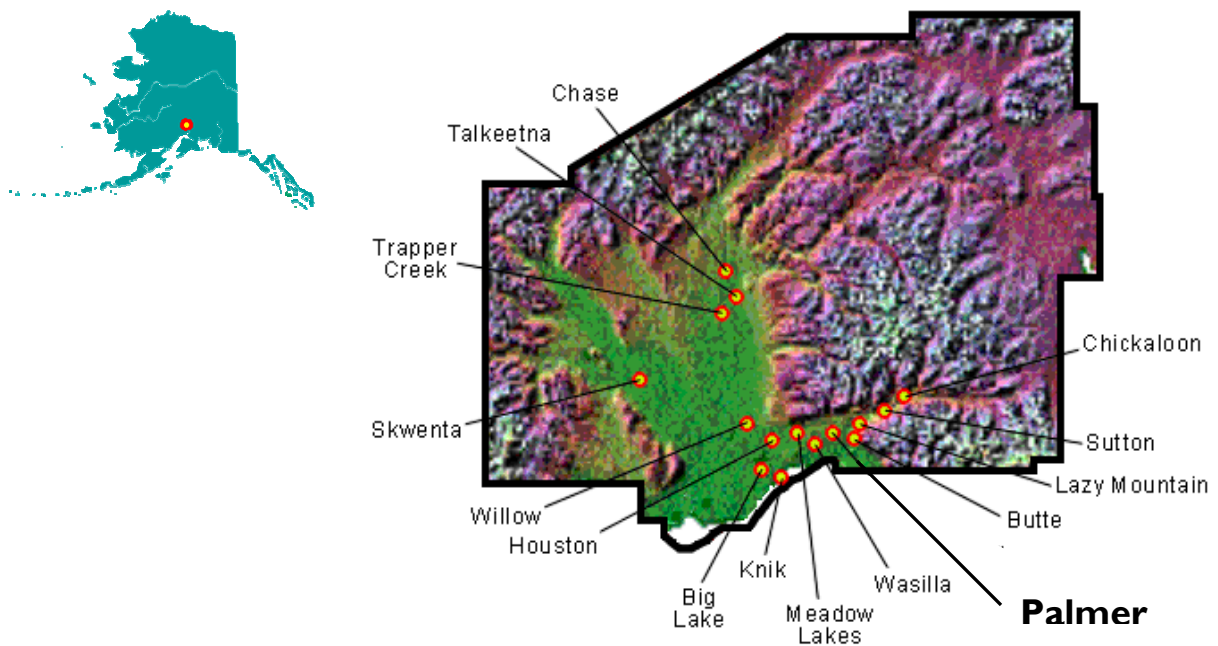
These changes present both challenges to the historic character of Palmer and opportunities to emerge as a new kind of community – one that holds onto what is best of its historic character and embraces the need to grow and change. The purpose of this plan is to set a framework for just such a strategy.

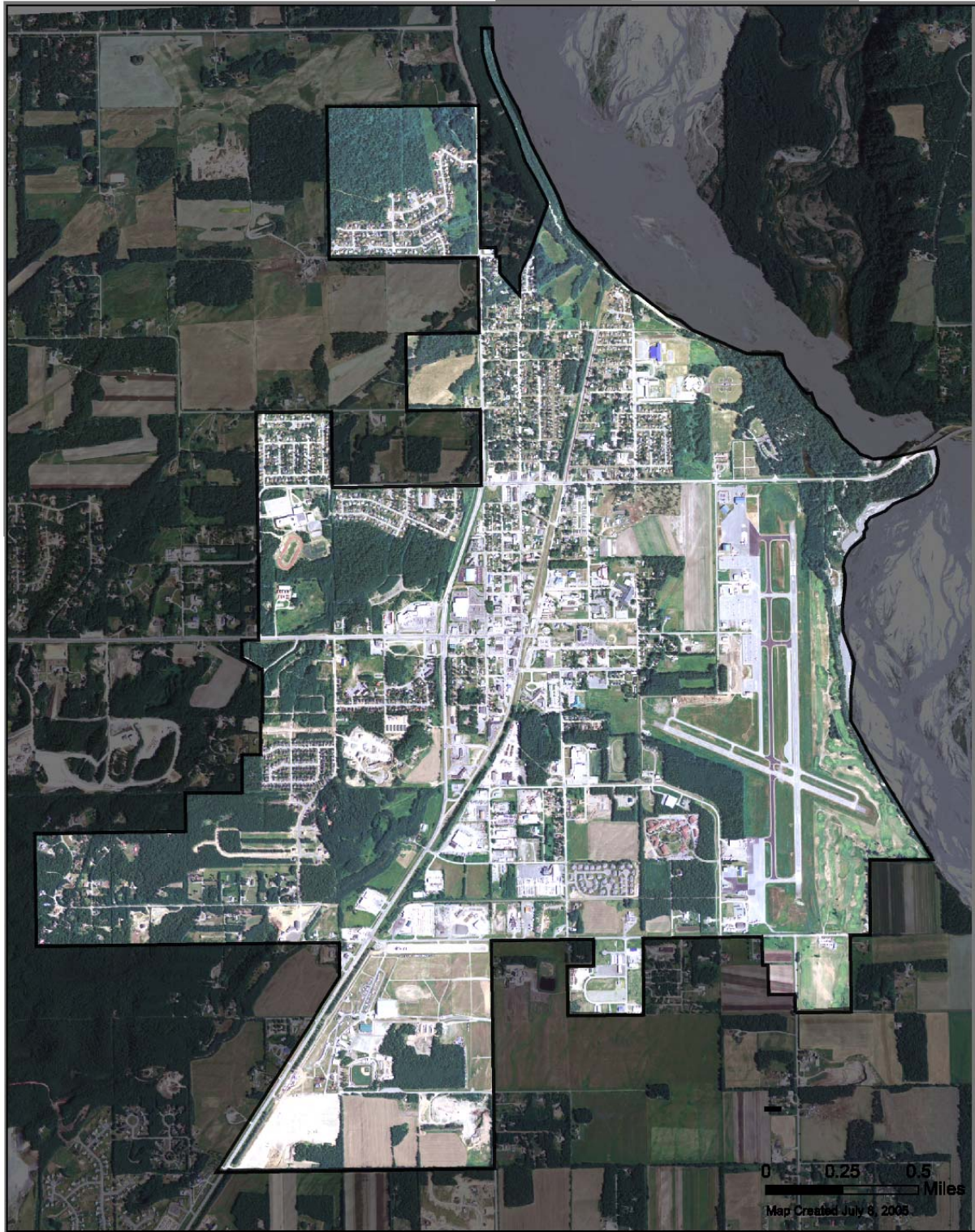
Overview of Community Boundaries and Setting

Palmer is located in the Matanuska Valley of Southcentral Alaska. The town lies just west of the Matanuska River, north of its junction with the Knik River. The community is built in the fertile valley between the peaks of the Talkeetna and Chugach mountains, in the southern Matanuska-Susitna Borough. The community is 42 miles northeast of Anchorage on the Glenn Highway.

Palmer lies at approximately 61.5° north latitude and 149.1° west longitude. The area encompasses 5.2 sq. miles of land (see “Project Area” map on following page). The temperatures in January range from -36 to 51; in July, 37 to 85. Annual precipitation is 15.37 inches, with 57.9 inches of snowfall.

Palmer is the hub of the eastern part of the Mat-Su Borough’s core area, while Wasilla is the hub of the western part. Palmer provides a substantial portion of the goods and services consumed not only by Palmer residents, but also by Borough residents from the Butte and Lazy Mountain areas, northeast up the Glenn Highway including Sutton and Chickaloon, the Fishhook and Hatcher Pass areas, the Springer system, and east of Four Corners. While Palmer’s population is just under 6,000, the number of people Palmer serves probably exceeds 20,000 and is increasing rapidly.





City of Palmer
Comprehensive Plan

City of Palmer - Project Area Map

Purpose of the Plan

The purpose of comprehensive planning is to promote the type of environment that a community desires. Very few cities are planned before they are built; however, Palmer is an exception. Palmer was a planned community from the very beginning, and has had a comprehensive plan in effect since 1959.

In Alaska, comprehensive plans are mandated of all organized municipalities by Title 29 of the Alaska State Statutes. The key elements of the statute (Sec. 29.40.030) are summarized below:

The comprehensive plan is a compilation of policy statements, goals, standards, and maps for guiding the physical, social, and economic development, both private and public, of the municipality, and may include, but is not limited to, the following:

- Statements of policies, goals, and standards;
- Land use plan;
- Community facilities plan;
- Transportation plan; and,
- Recommendations for implementing a comprehensive plan.

A comprehensive plan provides a method to analyze past development, current issues and community views, and use this information to establish policies guiding future development. Key components of this plan include a broad, long term vision for Palmer's future; policies to guide land use, growth, and development; priorities to improve community facilities and services; and policies to promote economic development, retain community character and protect the natural environment.

Funding agencies have become increasingly interested in community planning. Many now require a community plan as a condition for funding infrastructure and economic development projects. For example, the United States Department of Commerce Economic Development Administration (EDA) requires a planning process called a Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy to qualify for assistance under its economic adjustment, planning, and public works programs.

In addition, beginning with the Federal Fiscal Year 2005 funding cycle, the Denali Commission, which partners with other state and federal agencies and nonprofit agencies, will require a community to have a comprehensive plan that identifies priority projects prior to funding considerations. This plan is intended to meet the criteria of both the Denali Commission and the EDA.

Plan Time Frame – Visionary and Practical

The goal of this plan is to provide a framework for guiding future growth and change in Palmer. To be of greatest value, the plan needs to set clear goals and strategies for the long term, but also allow flexibility to respond to unexpected challenges and opportunities. With these competing objectives in mind, the plan looks at issues and is intended to guide growth over the next 10 to 20 years. For example, it identifies the expected need for substantial expansion to the City's sewer treatment facility in approximately 10 years. At the same time, it is clear that in a fast growing area like Palmer, the City Council and community will need to revisit and update the plan in 5 years. In addition, the City Council may amend the plan on an ongoing basis through a formal revision process.

Planning Process & Public Involvement

This revised City of Palmer Comprehensive Plan (Plan) built from the 1999 City of Palmer Comprehensive Plan. Other contributions included work with members of the Palmer community, the Palmer Planning Team and City staff and City department heads. Also incorporated was a recently completed project by the University of Washington, and research done by Agnew::Beck Consulting.



The following table summarizes the process to date to prepare this comprehensive plan.

Date	Activity
March 3, 2005	Initial meeting between consultants and city liaison
April 20, 2005	First Planning Team meeting to discuss process and draft Plan outline
May – June	Interviews with City of Palmer Department Heads
June 1, 2005	Planning Team Open House – to gain public input on comprehensive plan
June – Sept	Series of Planning Team meetings to review draft plan chapters, including Land Use, Circulation, Public Services and Facilities, Parks and Recreation, plus introductory chapters
Sept	Completion of Internal Review Draft
Mid Oct	Release of Draft Plan for Public Comments
Oct 29, 2005	Community Workshop to review the Draft Plan
Nov & Dec	Plan revised to reflect public comments
Dec 2005 – Feb 2006	Review and Approval by City Planning and Zoning Commission
March - May 2006	Review and Approval by City Council
July 2006	Review and Approval by Matanuska Susitna Borough Planning Commission
September 19, 2006	Final Approval by Matanuska Susitna Borough Assembly

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