



Comprehensive Plan

June 1999

City of Palmer
231 W. Evergreen Avenue
Palmer, Alaska 99645
907-745-3271
www.cityofpalmer.org

CODE ORDINANCE

By: M. Scott
Introduced: 4/6/99
Public Hearing: 4/20/99
Public Hearing: 6/1/99
Adopted: 6/1/99

**MATANUSKA-SUSITNA BOROUGH
ORDINANCE SERIAL NO. 99-071**

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

BE IT ENACTED:

Section 1. Classification. Section 1,3, and 4 of this ordinance are non-code. Section 2 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 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.


Section 3. Replacement of comprehensive plan. The City of Palmer Comprehensive Plan is replaced by City of Palmer Comprehensive Plan, June 1999.

Section 4. Effective date. Ordinance Serial No. 99-071 shall take effect upon adoption by the Matanuska-Susitna Borough Assembly.

ADOPTED by the Matanuska-Susitna Borough this 1st day of June,
1999.


DARCIE K. SALMON, Borough Mayor

ATTEST:


SANDRA A. DILLON, Borough Clerk

(SEAL)

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Mayor:

Henry Guinotte

Palmer City Council:

Edna DeVries

Keith Armstrong

Steve Carrington

Marilyn Sellick

Stephanie Dennis-Brown

Joe Lawton

Planning and Zoning Advisory Commission:

James Rogers, Chairperson

Jerry Baker

Brad Hanson

Michael Kircher

Cindi Payne

Kevin Sorensen

Detlef Wanke

City of Palmer:

Tom Smith, City Manager

Cathy P. Check, Assistant to Manager

David Meneses, Zoning Officer

Consultants:

Matanuska-Susitna Borough Planning

John Duffy

Marcy Martin

Beth McKibben

David Post

Gillian Smythe & Associates

Gillian Smythe

Kevin Waring

Legal Writes

Pamela J. Whitehead, CPS

PALMER COMPREHENSIVE PLAN
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PREFACE AND THE PLANNING PROCESS

The purpose of 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.

This comprehensive plan is a compilation of policy statements, goals, objectives, and maps for guiding the physical, social, and economic development of our community. It provides the community with a method of analyzing past development of our community. It provides our community with a method of analyzing past development as we enter into the process of influencing future development.

The effectiveness of a plan will be determined by the extent to which it is used. Public agencies should use this plan as a guide when siting schools, parks, streets, and other capital improvements.

This new City of Palmer Comprehensive Plan (Plan) began when the City of Palmer (City) requested the Matanuska-Susitna Borough (MSB) to fund an update of the existing plan. The MSB funded the land use, annexation, population projections, and public participation elements which were contracted to Gillian Smythe and Associates. The remainder was conducted with the MSB acting as the City's "consultants."

Initially a community survey was conducted by the MSB and the results summarized for the City's planning commission. Following the presentation of information by Gillian Smythe and Associates, the MSB Planning Department submitted a draft plan to the City's planning commission for comments. The planning commission modified the draft to more accurately reflect the needs, desires, and priorities of the City. From this point the plan went to public hearings, the council, and the MSB for further modifications and approvals. The result of this effort is the Plan that is before you.

INTRODUCTION

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 202 Colony homesteaders 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 excellent public and private schools, its efficient and centrally located library, solid city government and police force, well-established churches, active Chamber of Commerce, highly regarded regional hospital and in-place water and sewer infrastructure. Also within the city limits of Palmer are the Alaska State Fair, a historical society and Historic District, an excellent small airport with capacity for expansion, and the finest golf course in the state of Alaska. Palmer is the seat of the Matanuska-Susitna Borough government; is home to Matanuska Electric Association, Matanuska Telephone association, Mat-Su Valley Federal Credit Union, the Alaska Job Corps Center, the national champion amateur college baseball Mat-Su Miners, and is virtually adjacent to the Matanuska Valley campus of the University of Alaska.

All of these features — the agricultural character, the small town quality, and the communal sensibilities — have been and continue to be definitive of Palmer and its self-identity. These features are being threatened, however, by the rapid population growth of the Anchorage area and its expansion into the Matanuska Valley. This growth presents both a challenge to the historic character of Palmer and an opportunity for Palmer to adopt a strategy for its own future that will at once preserve, maintain, and extend its historic character and allow for both economic and population growth. This plan represents just such a strategy and is in response to the challenges and opportunities currently facing Palmer.

BACKGROUND

HISTORY

Athapaskan natives, specifically the Ahtna and Dena'ina have lived in the Matanuska Valley for centuries. According to archaeological evidence the Athapaskan people moved into the area displacing Eskimo populations, sometime around 1000 AD (de Laguna 1975). Historical accounts and oral traditions refer to at least two villages at the head of the Knik Arm, near the mouth of the Knik and Matanuska Rivers. Another village was once located near the Matanuska Bridge on the Palmer side (Kari & Fall 1987:272-273) During the time of Russian fur trading the Ahtna traveled along the Matanuska River, transporting furs from the Dena'ina to Copper Fort near Chitina.

George Palmer, a trader, worked for the Alaska Commercial Company (ACC) between 1875 and 1882. His store is reported to have been located at the confluence of the Knik and Matanuska Rivers. While working for the ACC George Palmer operated his own store on the Matanuska River, just north of current Matanuska Bridge. The store was unattended and trade with the Copper River Ahtna was based on the honor system. In 1882 George Palmer bought out the ACC and closed his store on the Matanuska.

In 1912 Alaska was made a territory of the United States. At that time U.S. Navy ships ran on coal from the east coast, which was shipped, at great expense, by railroad. The Navy was interested in establishing a northern Pacific supply of coal. In 1912 President Taft appointed a study team to examine the possibility of a railroad to open up the interior of Alaska to access the reported mineral wealth. The study team recommended that a railroad be built from Seward to the Tanana River with a spur to the Matanuska coal fields. On March 12, 1914 Woodrow Wilson, acting on those recommendations, signed a bill authorizing a government built railroad. The intention was to open Alaska to settlement in the same way railroads had opened the American west.

Congress allowed the leasing of coal reserves in 1914 and one year later construction on the railroad began. The Evan Jones mine opened in 1920 and operated until 1968. During its peak, coal mining supported a large work force that had notable impact on the development of Palmer.

Railroad construction brought an influx of workers and homesteaders who settled in the area near Matanuska Junction and Palmer. In 1916 a siding was constructed at the present site of Palmer. The White brothers began operating a new post office under the name "Palmer" in 1917. At that time Palmer consisted of a section house, a small depot and a homestead cabin which was used as the post office. That same year the U.S. Department of Agriculture built an experimental station near Matanuska to encourage agriculture. Many of the homesteaders provided agricultural products for the railroad supply center in Anchorage. Between the end of World War I and the beginning of the Great Depression the population of the area declined. In 1929 the Alaska Railroad attempted a colonization effort to encourage settlement along its service area. M.D. Snodgrass of the

experimental station headed the settlement program which brought 55 families to the area by 1934. In 1931 J. Ward and J. Felton bought out the White brothers, assumed operation of the post office and changed the name to a combination of their last names - Warton.

Under President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal program in 1935 more than 200 families were relocated from the Great Lakes states to the Matanuska Valley. The rail spur at "Warton" was returned to the name Palmer and the settlement became the governmental center for the valley. The town included schools, churches and businesses. The Anchorage-Palmer highway opened in September 1936 providing better access to markets for valley grown produce.

The Matanuska Maid complex was constructed in 1935. The 80,000 square foot structure originally functioned as cannery, creamery and warehouse. It was operated by the Alaska Rural Rehabilitation Corporation, a federal agency.

World War II brought thousands of troops and civilian workers to Alaska. Major transportation projects included airports, harbors and roads. Construction of the Glenn Highway began in 1941 linking Palmer to the port in Valdez. The following year the construction of the Alcan Highway was underway, joining Alaska to the lower 48. Plans were made to lengthen the Glenn to connect with the Alcan.

In 1944, 300 area residents requested action be taken to develop a safe landing field. Construction of the Palmer Airport began in 1946. Construction was directed by the Territorial Board of Road Commissioners. The work was completed using equipment borrowed from the road commission, and labor donated by Boy Scout Troop No. 54. In 1950 the airport was upgraded and additional land was acquired.

After the war, defense building provided jobs and markets for the farm produce of the valley. Various homesteading programs enabled ex-military and railroad workers to acquire land. Palmer was incorporated as a city under the territorial government in 1951. Dairy farming boomed and in 1952 there were 42 grade A dairies. The 1950s and the early 60s were the peak of the agricultural production of the area.

Coal mining has had a significant impact on the history of Palmer. The mining areas at Wishbone Hill, Eska, Chickaloon, Sutton and Jonesville produced large quantities of high grade coal during the early part of the century. At one time two train loads of coal per day passed through Palmer on the way to the military bases in Anchorage. The mines were largely underground operations and much of the wishbone Hill area is underlain by tunnels and mining works. There is potential for future development.

The city received title to the airport from the state in 1963 and the FAA established a manned flight service station in 1966. The airport has been continually upgraded over the years and today it is one of the most complete airport facilities in Alaska.

The Matanuska-Susitna Borough incorporated in 1964, with Palmer as the government seat. Palmer evolved into the center for federal, state and borough government.

Oil and gas development, which began in the late 1950s in upper Cook Inlet, brought with it new people, industry and business. The valley gradually evolved from an agricultural center to a mixture of farming and residential subdivisions. This trend continues today. The late 1970's and early 1980's brought an unprecedented period of growth to south-central Alaska. The building of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline, the development of the North Slope oil fields and rising prices for petroleum products pumped billions of dollars into the state economy. The population of many cities and communities increased dramatically. The Valley experienced rapid economic and population growth. The city constructed an industrial park in the early 1970's.

Alaska and the Mat-Su Valley experienced a deep depression during the late 1980's. Bank failures and foreclosures were common from 1986 to 1989. Although Palmer suffered from the recession, from 1990 forward, the community has worked to enhance private sector activity (i.e., residential and commercial valuations have increased). PEDAA (Palmer Economic Development Authority) has been and is active in promoting Palmer. The City has initiated downtown beautification and storefront improvements through grants and appropriations. A street repair and improvement plan has been in place since May of 1996. Repair and expansion of the City's sewer plant and system are in its second year. The City of Palmer has experienced a large growth pattern since 1991. The growth is shown by the total capital improvements of \$65,340,636 since 1991. It is anticipated that the growth rate will only increase due to the growing popularity of Palmer.

NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Topography

Palmer is located on the upper Cook Inlet near the confluence of the Matanuska and Knik Rivers in the Matanuska-Susitna Borough. Anchorage is about 45 miles south. The Matanuska Valley is formed by the Matanuska River and two mountain ranges, the Talkeetna range to the north and the Chugach to the east and south. The geology of the area is very complex as the Talkeetna and Chugach mountains have different geologic backgrounds. The Knik River joins the uppermost reach of Cook Inlet just south of Palmer. The river valley and Knik Glacier form a low pass connecting to Prince William Sound.

The Glenn Highway is constructed along the edge of a glacial end moraine which covers the area west of the highway. This terrain is comprised of low rolling hills which vary in height about 200 feet. The area east of the highway and south of the city limits is a nearly level moraine. The Palmer airport is listed as 232 feet above sea level. The Matanuska River emerges from its gorge just up stream of the old Palmer Highway bridge and meanders through this flat floodplain area to the confluence with the upper reaches of Cook Inlet.

The City of Palmer is located on a nearly level to rolling terrace of glacial deposits and bedrock. These deposits vary in depth and can be very deep as evidenced by the bluff along the Matanuska River just east of the airport. Urban intensive land uses in the City are adequately separated from cut banks of the braided Matanuska River channel, with the exception of a small area abutting the river bank along the City's northern boundary.

Geology and Soils

The soils of the Palmer area have played an important role in the city's development. It was this natural resource that first enabled people to homestead and farm the area. The principle soil series in the area is the Bodenber series. These soils have formed in deep, wind laid silts and very fine sands over gravelly coarse sand. The Bodenber soils naturally support a forest consisting mostly of birch and white spruce. Most of the level areas in the Palmer locality have been cleared for use as crop land. The mantle of wind laid material ranges from 30 inches to 10 feet in depth, but is generally less than 40 inches deep. The level nature and great depth of these soils were an exciting discovery to the early farmers of the area. The ease of tillage, excellent drainage and the lack of major erosion control problems enabled farmers to use the short Alaskan growing season to its maximum. Produce and vegetables grown in the area are still marketed and are famous world wide.

These soils also have very few limitations for building. The deep deposits of gravel underlying the area provide ample storage area for ground water.

NATURAL HAZARDS

Earthquakes

Palmer is located in seismic zone 4 for earthquakes.

Flood Hazard

Ninety-nine percent of the City of Palmer lies outside of the flood plain areas. For more information consult the Flood Insurance Rate maps (FIRM). Flood damage prevention regulations require developers and owners of land located within federally designated flood hazard areas to obtain a Flood Development Permit pursuant to MSB Code 17.29. The permit requires use of specific design criteria intended to minimize flood damage.

Climate

The presence of nearby Cook Inlet moderates both summer and winter temperatures. Summers in Palmer are characterized by long beautiful days with daily high temperatures averaging in the upper 60's during the months of July and August. Winters are long with freeze-up usually complete by the end of October and break-up beginning in mid April. Winter temperatures are not as severe as areas with a more interior-like climate. The average winter high temperature in December and

January is about 22 degrees. The city enjoys about 19 hours of day light during the summer. The winter minimum on December 21 is 5 hours. Rain fall averages about 16.5 inches and the average total snow fall is 57 inches. The amount of precipitation in Palmer is moderated by the surrounding mountains. Snow cover is usually minimal due to winds which can blow strongly for long periods. The winter winds are generally either from the Susitna Valley (northwest) or the Matanuska Valley (northeast). In the spring the strongest winds are usually from the Knik Glacier southeast of the city.

Vegetation

According to Alaska Regional Profiles, Southcentral Region, Palmer is primarily of one vegetative type. Bottomland Spruce-Poplar Forest. This vegetative type is described as a tall, relatively dense forest system which primarily contains white spruce, locally mixed with large cottonwood and balsam poplar, found on level to nearly level floodplains, low river terraces, and more deeply thawed south-facing slopes. Both black cottonwood and balsam poplar quickly invade floodplains and grow rapidly. Alaska paper birch and quaking aspen are often apparent. These species are in turn replaced by white spruce in the successional process. Shrubs that are prevalent are American green alder, Thinleaf alder, willow, rose, labrador tea, raspberry, blueberry, huckleberry, high bush cranberry, bearberry and service berry. Associated grasses, herbs, etc., are bluejoint, fireweed, horsetail, wintergreen, parsley fern, marsh fern, lady fern, lichens, mosses, liverworts, mushrooms, and other fungi. The Alaska cooperative Extension Office located in Palmer provides detailed information about the multitude of various native species that grow profusely in the area.

Fish and Wildlife

The area surrounding Palmer has abundant fish and wildlife resources, with hunting and sport fishing as important contributions to the local economy. Most of the city of Palmer has been developed for urban land uses, or cleared for agricultural activities. Open areas are used seasonally by waterfowl and other wildlife. The only wetland areas identified in the Palmer vicinity are a few isolated ponds and stretches along the Matanuska River. No unique or unusual wildlife habitat values or concerns have been identified within the city. Small game are occasionally seen in the city and in the winter moose visit city residences to browse.

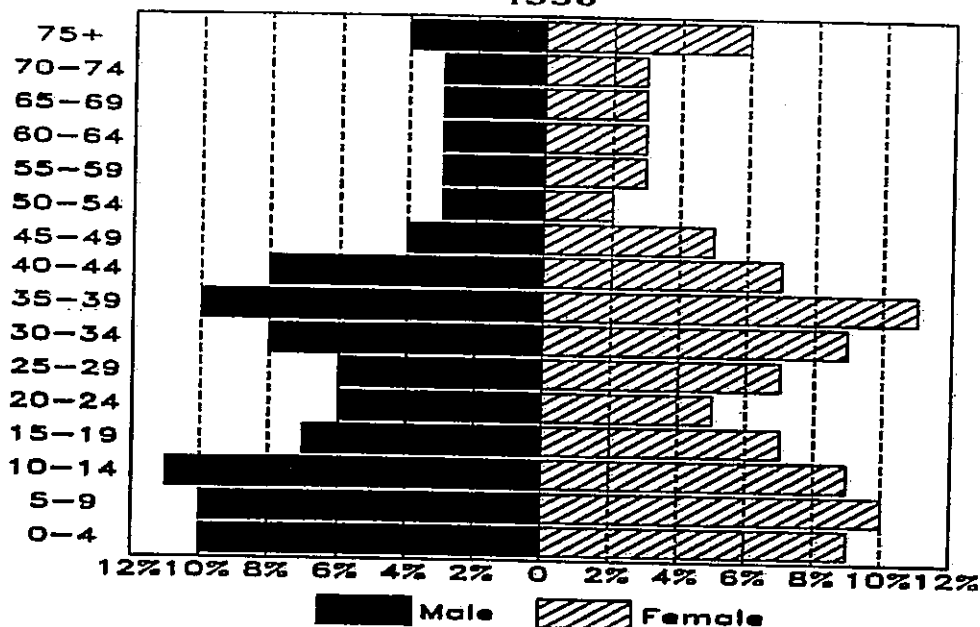
DEMOGRAPHICS

Population and Housing

The population of Palmer increased from 3,126 in 1992 to 4,282 in 1996, reflecting a 37% increase.

The 1990 U.S. Census is still the best source for demographic information. In 1990 Palmer's population was 2,866, with 1,401 (49%) males and 1,465 (51%) females. This differs somewhat from the borough (52% male, 48% female). Due to the opening of the Alaska Job corps Center, the age ratio of Palmer is assumed to have shifted some from that of 1990. The 1990 census shows a rather large number of older people, which can be attributed to the Pioneer Home. However, the Job Corps is assumed to have increased the younger population from that of 1990.

Palmer Composition of Population 1990



The total number of housing units at the time of the 1990 U.S. Census was 1,169, with 998 of those occupied. Single family housing is the most prevalent type, and average number of persons per house was 2.72. This is slightly less than the borough average of 2.92 persons per household.

Economy

Palmer is the seat of the borough government and headquarters for several state and federal functions. Palmer also serves as the governmental and administrative center of the Borough. In addition, the borough's three largest nongovernmental employers are located in Palmer — Valley Hospital, Matanuska Telephone Association, and Matanuska Electric Association.

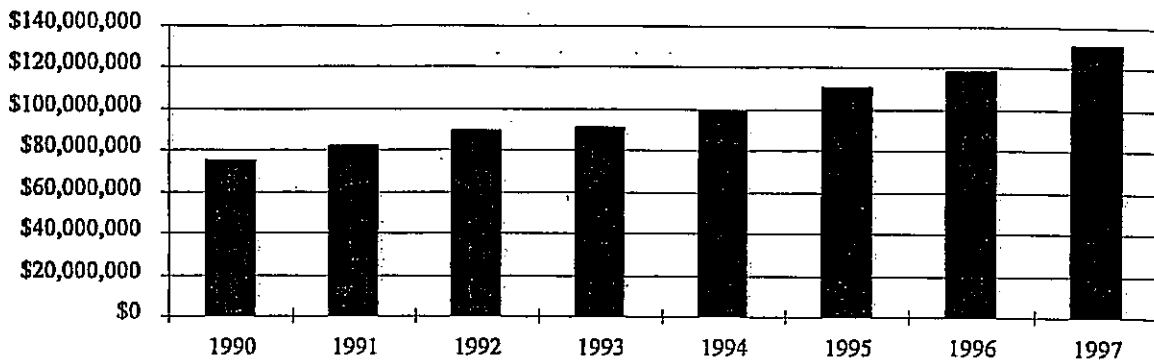
The median 1990 household income for Palmer was \$34,940. The average annual unemployment rate for the City of Palmer in 1994 was 10.9%. The city's unemployment rate in November 1995 was 9.9%. These rates are only slightly different from those of the borough. The borough's unemployment rate for December 1995 was 10.8%, and the average annual unemployment rate for 1994 was 10.9%.

Other information confirms the growth indicated by the population figures. In 1992 the City of Palmer issued 111 permits with a construction value of \$22,402,852. In 1993, 95 permits were processed and construction was valued at \$3,145,461. In 1994, 132 permits were issued, and construction was valued at \$8,323,986. In 1995 the city issued 101 permits with a construction

value of \$15,579,627. In 1996 the city issued 89 permits with a construction value of \$5,095,236, and in 1997 there were 108 permits issued with a construction value of \$9,788,037.

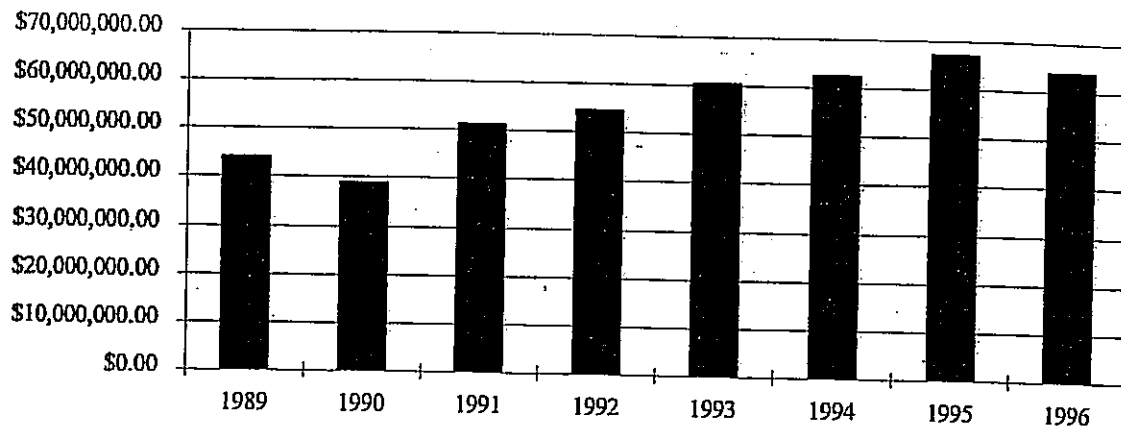
Additionally, the assessed value of lands within the City of Palmer has steadily increased since 1990. The certified assessed value in 1990 was \$74,731,300, and in 1997 it was \$131,386,000. The Multiple Listing Service of the Valley Board of Realtors indicates there were 20 residential sales, 8 land sales, and 1 commercial sale in 1992. In 1995, there were 110 residential sales, 54 land sales and 1 multifamily sale. In 1996 there were 120 residential sales, 1 commercial sale, and 76 land sales. As of August 31, 1997 there were 83 residential sales, 1 commercial sale, and 32 land sales.

Certified Assessed Value by Year



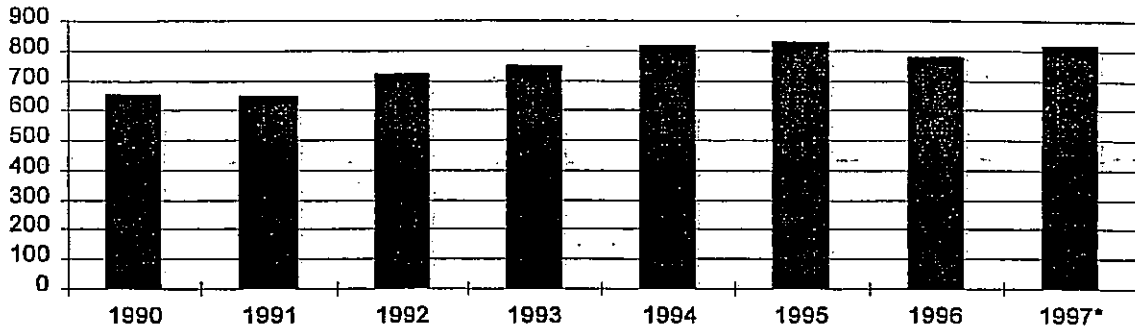
Sales tax revenue for the City of Palmer has also grown at a steady rate, indicating the economic health of the community. In 1989 sales tax received was \$880,750 and in 1996 \$1,926,359 was received. However, in 1996 the sale tax was increased from 2% to 3%. The revenue to the city increased from \$1,341,866 in 1995 to \$1,926,359 in 1996. The actual value of the taxed goods and services increased from \$67,093,311 in 1995 to \$68,027,321 in 1996, an increase of \$934,010. The value of taxed goods and services in 1997 was \$71,106,773.

Value of Taxed Goods and Services 1989-1996



Other information indicates that Palmer has been steadily growing. The number of business licenses issued by the city of Palmer has consistently increased since 1990. The number of business licenses issued for Alaska State Fair vendors in 1997 was 284.

Business Licenses Issued by the City of Palmer



Tourism is growing in Palmer. The Palmer Visitor Center and Gift Shop had a total of 39,283 visitors in 1994; 51,001 in 1995; 50,790 in 1996; and 32,506 during January through August 31, 1997.