



# Chugach State Park

## Access Inventory

Analysis & Recommendations  
October 2002

Alaska Department of Natural Resources  
Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation

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### **FORWARD**

The Chugach State Park Access Inventory is a planning document designed to assist planning efforts at the state and municipal levels. In order to meet the needs of existing park users and ensure that future generations of Alaskans enjoy convenient secure public access to Chugach State Park, it is important to understand where existing use is occurring and where additional public access may be needed in the future.

### **DISCLAIMER**

Many of the access points discussed in this inventory are NOT reserved public access easements to Chugach State Park. When planning a trip to Chugach State Park consult a Park Ranger or the Department of Natural Resources Public Information Center if you have questions regarding access to Chugach State Park. Please use existing marked trails and trailheads and respect the rights of private property owners.

Portions of the park share a boundary with military lands of Ft. Richardson. During times of heightened security or military maneuvers, these areas may be closed to public access and should not be entered.

The park boundary has not been surveyed. Discrepancies between the Municipality of Anchorage and Division of Park's Chugach State Park Boundary are shown, pointing out the need for further title research. The Park Boundary and access points as depicted in this inventory should not be construed as being legally definitive boundaries and access points. In many instances further title and legal research will be necessary to determine the viability of the access points discussed.



**Chugach State Park Access Inventory**  
October 2002

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### *Goal*

The goal of the Chugach State Park Access Inventory is to ensure that future generations of Alaskans have convenient secure public access to Chugach State Park, a state resource owned by all Alaskans. In order to accomplish this goal the following objectives have been identified.

### *Objectives*

- Bring access issues to the attention of the public and the Municipality of Anchorage.
- Increase communication and coordination between the Municipality of Anchorage and Division of Parks on land use issues associated with the Municipality/Park interface.
- Ensure that municipal staff analysis of future zoning and platting requests address connectivity to Chugach State Park.
- Ensure that future municipal planning addresses the need for reserved public access to Chugach State Park.
- Secure additional public access to Chugach State Park.
- Disperse Park use throughout the Municipality/Park interface.
- Document the attributes, benefits, and potential of known access points.
- Identify areas of concern for future road access and Neighborhood Access in undeveloped areas near the Park.
- Identify and secure traditional access to Chugach State Park.

### *The Effort*

Chugach State Park staff reviewed existing planning documents, zoning maps, and park files in an effort to identify potential and existing reserved public access points and traditionally used access points. Information was solicited from the public in order to identify additional points of access unknown to park staff, identify neighborhood concerns, and solicit other suggestions regarding access. Results of this analysis are summarized in Appendices A, B, C, and D. Access points and corridors are shown on maps that illustrate the relationship of identified access to the Municipality of Anchorage infrastructure and features of Chugach State Park.

### *Recommendations*

#### **THE DIVISION OF PARKS SHOULD:**

- Actively pursue secure access points in the Central Region of the Park particularly Eagle River and Arctic Valley.
- Actively pursue secure access points in the Southern Region of the Park particularly in the Stuckagain Heights and Rabbit Creek to Potter Valley areas.



- Work with non-profits such as Chugach State Park Access Coalition, The Conservation Fund, The Nature Conservancy, and The Great Land Trust to explore acquisition options that may provide benefits to both landowners and the park.
- Implement an Adopt-A-Trailhead program in order to provide citizen monitoring, participation and ownership in trailhead maintenance and security.
- Conduct additional research on proactive trailhead management strategies in an effort to develop effective means of further controlling litter, trespass, and other nuisance crimes, thereby reducing the impact on adjacent landowners.
- Complete title research for Chugach State Park.
- Revisit the Chugach State Park Access Inventory and associated recommendations on an annual basis, revising recommendations based on changes in site status, land use patterns, recreational use, and land ownership.

**THE MUNICIPALITY OF ANCHORAGE IS REQUESTED TO:**

- Coordinate with Division of Parks staff on all land use and transportation planning that affects the Municipality/Park interface including, but not limited to, the Hillside District Plan and the Anchorage Areawide Trails Plan.
- Provide notice of all zoning and platting requests received by the Municipality to the Division of Parks for all areas adjacent to the Park as well as those areas designated “Parcels of Concern” on the attached maps in Appendices A, B, and C.
- Provide, in consultation with Division of Parks, municipal road standard right of way access through new subdivisions to the park boundary where appropriate.
- Provide, through the platting process, secure 15 to 30 foot wide pedestrian Neighborhood Access easements to Chugach State Park at approximately 1,000 foot intervals in subdivisions platted adjacent to the Park.

**THE MUNICIPALITY AND DIVISION OF PARKS NEED TO:**

- Work proactively with developers and landowners to create public access to the park that enhances future developments.
- Work with the Municipality of Anchorage through the platting process to secure public access easements to preserve traditional access to Chugach State Park.
- Work to amend the Anchorage Areawide Trails Plan to recognize traditional trail access to Chugach State Park.
- Increase connectivity of greenbelts and public open spaces to Chugach State Park, thereby creating connectivity for trails, recreation, and wildlife.

## INTRODUCTION

Chugach State Park was a vision of citizens of Anchorage determined to preserve access to the wilderness behind the city. Even in the early 1960's access to the Chugach Range was being closed off as homesteads were sold and traditional access via old homestead roads was blocked. The Mountaineering Club of Alaska, a local horseman's association, and the Eagle River Game Preservation Association had talked for many years about the creation of a park. These efforts came together through a citizens' initiative, spurred by a proposed timber sale at Indian Valley, that worked through the legislative process and took advantage of the Alaska Statehood land selection process. Through the efforts of many citizens and legislators, Chugach State Park was established by the Alaska Legislature in 1970.

Chugach State Park is one of the largest state parks in the United States. The Park contains approximately 495,000 acres and is located in Southcentral Alaska, primarily within the Municipality of Anchorage. The Park's western boundary lies at the western foothills of the Chugach Mountains, just seven miles east of downtown Anchorage. The communities of Palmer, Eagle River, Chugiak, Indian, Bird Creek, and Girdwood, the village of Eklutna, Elmendorf Air Force Base and Fort Richardson are all located within minutes of Chugach State Park. Because of its proximity to the State's major population center, Chugach State Park experiences a high level of use by residents of these communities, close to half of the State's population. Anchorage and the surrounding communities have grown rapidly since the Park was created, straining Park facilities located near these communities and increasing the demand for Park access.

Figure 1: Vicinity Map, Chugach State Park Boundary



Use of the Park by residents has grown dramatically since 1970. Use of the Park has grown many times faster than the population of the surrounding communities due in part to improved road access, increased parking, additional facilities, and changes in

recreational use patterns, perceptions, and preferences. In addition, Alaskans pursue outdoor recreation at a rate twice the national average.<sup>1</sup>

New Park users seek out the more obvious trailheads first, taking advantage of well-marked trails, facilities, and educational interpretive signage. As they become more familiar with the Park and the environment they venture further from the more obvious trailheads and seek out lesser known trailheads and backcountry areas of the Park. Visitors and tourists have also discovered Chugach State Park. Their use of the Park is generally focused on more highly developed facilities requiring less individual effort that provides panoramic views, wildlife viewing opportunities, short hikes or walks, and quick access via car or bus.

Chugach State Park staff estimate the following trends in visitor use during the period 1997 through 2002.

Table 1: Chugach State Park Estimated Visitor Counts 1998, 2000, and 2002

Trailhead	1998	2000	2002
Crow Pass	16,800	18,700	19,940
Ship Creek	740	1400	1380
South Fork Eagle River	7,940	23,200	24,840
Campbell Creek	53,000	67,000	70,900
Glen Alps	118,700	165,000	188,500
Rabbit Creek	1,550	4,000	6,680
Upper Potter	3,700	3,350	4,040

Those trailheads or access points closest to the more densely populated areas of Anchorage and surrounding communities are experiencing a significant increase in use. It is not uncommon to find the parking lot at Glen Alps full or overflowing on a sunny weekend day or a sunny summer evening. Several of the most heavily used access points to Chugach State Park are at or nearing capacity and threatening the Park’s ability to safely, efficiently, and effectively accommodate the number of users desiring access.

## PURPOSE AND SCOPE

Completion of the Chugach State Park Access Inventory is an important step in ensuring that the citizens of Anchorage and the State of Alaska continue to have convenient, reserved public access to their park. **Reserved Public Access** is access that is legally secure; acquired through fee simple acquisition, conservation easement or other tools or agreements that provide for long term continued access by the public. Not all access discussed in this document is secure or reserved public access. Some access discussed crosses unsecured public lands or private lands. However, it is important to understand

<sup>1</sup> Our Wild Backyard, Alaska’s Chugach State Park. KAKM, Anchorage, AK. 1995.



where access to the Park is occurring in order to make management decisions that reflect and accommodate current and future needs.

The Chugach State Park Access Inventory complements the Chugach State Park Master Plan and the Chugach State Park Trail Plan, both of which were adopted in the 1980s. The Master Plan envisions continuous review and updating in order to respond appropriately to continuing population growth of Anchorage and the surrounding communities, development of private lands adjacent to the Park, and changing trends in outdoor recreation and tourism. As development in the Anchorage Bowl has crept ever closer to Chugach State Park, pressure has been brought to bear on commonly used access points that have been traditionally and informally available to local residents.

For many years, residents living close to Chugach State Park have enjoyed relatively unrestricted access to this state resource. Residents of downtown Anchorage have used many informal or traditional points for access to the Park as well. Many of these access points involve crossing private undeveloped land. As Anchorage and the surrounding communities have continued to grow, more and more of these larger tracts of land are being subdivided and sold to individuals and developers who may be unaware of traditional access routes to state land and/or unwilling to allow continued access. In addition, many newer landowners may have concerns about liability, loss of privacy, noise, and discourteous visitors.

In the past several years, several opportunities for access to Chugach State Park have disappeared. This problem has become particularly acute in Eagle River, Stuckagain Heights, and along the Anchorage Hillside. Two case studies presented in Appendix E further illustrate this problem and explain in more detail the limitations encountered by the Division of Parks in trying to address concerns of landowners and respond to relatively short windows of opportunity.

At the same time that opportunities for access are being closed, Park use continues to increase. The number of users at Glen Alps Trailhead has increased dramatically from approximately 118,700 in 1998 to 188,500 in 2002. Chugach State Park is unable to meet the growing needs of its users without the addition of strategically placed trailhead access points designed to disperse use. At the same time, preservation of traditional access points will also reduce pressure on more developed trailhead access points and allow users to enjoy all of the Park's values and resources.

In order for the Division of Parks to successfully meet the needs of existing and future Park users, it is important to develop a current picture of existing access and access needs. The Chugach State Park Access Inventory relies upon information contained in existing planning documents and updates and supplements that information, reflecting changes in recreational use, adjacent land use, and land status in order to provide a more complete picture of Park access needs and opportunities.

Chugach State Park staff reviewed existing planning documents, zoning maps, Park files, and Municipality of Anchorage planning documents and data, conducted site inspections,

and reviewed public input in order to identify existing and potential Chugach State Park access points. All known access points were reviewed, whether that access is through secured public access easements, unsecured public lands, or private property.

This inventory includes all known existing access points as well as Parcels of Concern where needs for new road and neighborhood access should be considered in future planning, zoning, and platting actions. Many of the access points identified in this document were previously identified in publicly reviewed and released documents. The results of this inventory are included in Appendices A, B, and C, which include maps and brief descriptions of identified access points. Parcels of Concern are identified on the included maps and represent areas where communication and coordination between the Municipality and the Division of Parks is required in order to meet needs for road connectivity and neighborhood access to the Park as new subdivisions are platted. Appendix D includes a summary of public comments received.

The results of staff research, data review, review of public comments, and site inspections are reflected in recommendations for specific access points as well as in recommendations relative to general park access issues. When access points were previously referenced in existing planning documents those documents are noted.

The Chugach State Park Access inventory compiles existing information in one document to be used as a reference for planning purposes at both the municipal and state levels. It is hoped that the boundary between the Municipality of Anchorage and Chugach State Park becomes a common area of interest rather than a dividing line between two government entities.

## BACKGROUND

The following documents provide direction for management decisions relating to Chugach State Park:

Table 2: Existing Planning Documents

Article VIII of The Alaska Constitution	Created State Parks.
AS 41.21.121, Designation of Chugach State Park by the Alaska Legislature.	Established Chugach State Park.
Chugach State Park Master Plan, 1980.	Provides guidance for management and development.
Chugach State Park Trail Plan, 1986.	Provides guidance regarding development of trails and trailheads.
Anchorage 2020, Anchorage Bowl Comprehensive Plan, 2002.	Policy document that provides guidance regarding land use and development.
Municipality of Anchorage Areawide Trails Plan, 1997.	Guides development of trails in Anchorage as part of municipal transportation system.
Anchorage Park, Greenbelt, and Recreation Facilities Plan, 1985.	Guides establishment of parks, greenbelts and recreation facilities within the Municipality.

Article VIII of The Alaska Constitution uses the analogy of a public trust to describe the nature of the State's duties to provide for the common use of wildlife and other natural resources. Article VIII, Section 7 allows the legislature to provide for the acquisition of sites of natural beauty or historic, cultural, recreational, or scientific value reserved from the public domain and preserved for the use, enjoyment, and welfare of the people. Chugach State Park is such a legislatively designated site; it is a commonly owned site to which the constitution provides the public access.

Chugach State Park was established in 1970 by an act of the Alaska Legislature, AS 41.21.121. The Park was established to:

1. Protect and supply a satisfactory water supply for the use of the people.
2. Provide recreational opportunities for the people by providing areas for specified uses and constructing necessary facilities in those areas.
3. Protect areas of unique and exceptional scenic value.
4. Provide areas for the public display of local wildlife.
5. Protect the existing wilderness characteristics of the easterly interior area of the Park.

AS 41.21.121 states that “the eastern area of the park shall be operated as a wilderness area, the central area as a scenic area, and the periphery areas as recreational areas.” These western peripheral areas of Chugach State Park are perhaps the most heavily used and in some cases, as growth and development in the Anchorage Bowl continues, may well become some of the more difficult areas to access in the future as development moves closer to the Park.

Consistent with this direction, the Chugach State Park Master plan defines three distinct land use classifications or zones within Chugach State Park.<sup>2</sup>

1. The Recreation Development Zone is located primarily on the periphery of the Park where access can be gained by vehicle and where the physical conditions, including soils, slope and vegetation can support more intense and varied recreational use. This zone is established to meet intensive recreation needs of people by providing easy and well defined points of access to the Park with facilities as appropriate. Development within this zone may include vehicle and tent camping facilities, toilet facilities, picnic areas, interpretive centers, and higher standard trails accommodating a variety of user abilities.
2. The Natural Environment Zone is established to provide for low impact forms of recreation and to provide a buffer between the Recreation Development Zone and the Wilderness zone. These areas remain relatively undisturbed, have high scenic values and are generally accessible by trail or road, providing visitors with a natural outdoor experience. Developments within this zone provide a minimum of

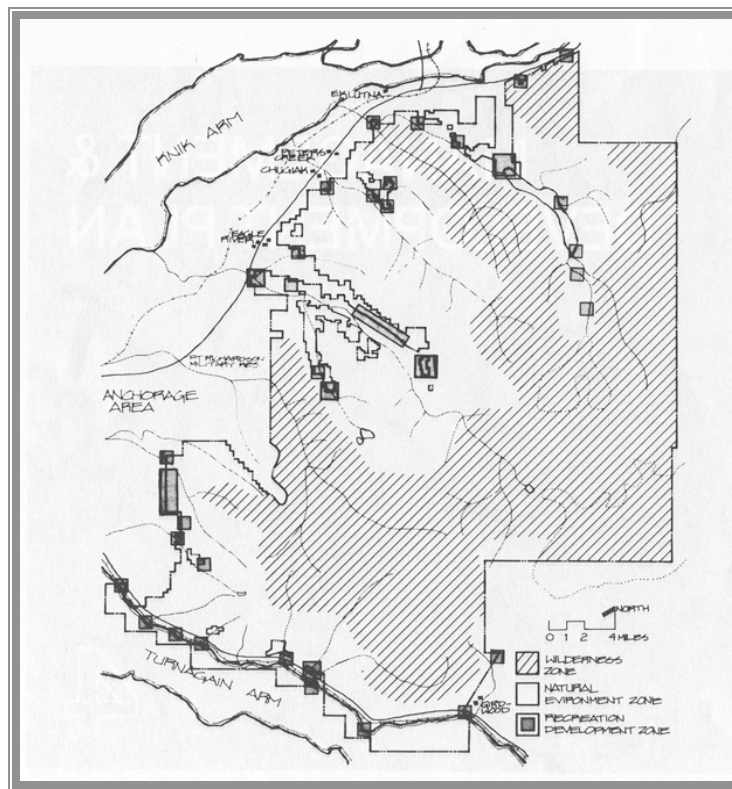
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<sup>2</sup> Chugach State Park Master Plan, Alaska Department of Natural Resources 1980. p.27-28.

convenience and safety. One may find backcountry bridges or shelters that support activities such as backpacking, hiking, cross country skiing, berry picking and rock climbing.

3. The Wilderness Zone is designed to promote, perpetuate and where necessary, restore the wilderness character of the land and the associated values of solitude, physical and mental challenge, inspiration, and primitive recreational opportunities. These zones are generally at least 5,000 contiguous acres and defined by hydrographic boundaries. Natural ecological succession is allowed to operate freely. These areas are available for public use so long as that use is consistent with the maintenance of wilderness conditions. Access to these zones is by foot or other non-motorized means. Development within this area is undertaken only for the purpose of public safety or to minimize impacts to natural resources. In situations of overuse or misuse, the Director may restrict entry and use of the area through permits, time and space allocations or use rotation schemes.

Figure 2, Chugach State Park, Land Use Zones

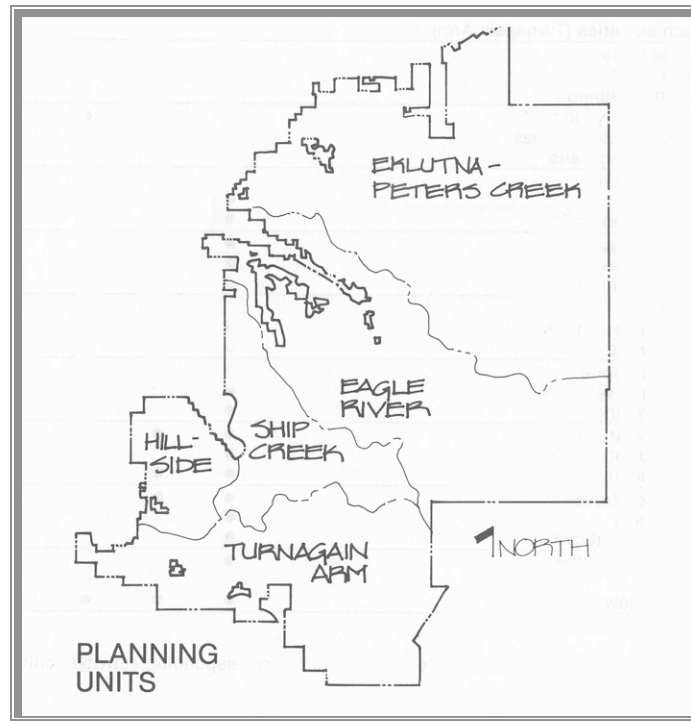


It is clear that the areas that form the interface between the Municipality and Chugach State Park are areas that the Chugach State Park Master Plan envisioned for future recreational development and access. The Master Plan recognized the need to proactively manage and direct use within this interface and provide recreational services and opportunities for the communities adjacent to the Park.

The Chugach State Park Master Plan further subdivides the Park into a series of geographical planning units in order to facilitate planning and management by geographic subareas.

These planning units are defined by major drainages with unique environmental characteristics. Recommendations for management of these subareas address the special qualities and considerations of each area. Within each planning unit, development activities, trailheads and access points are identified. Many of the proposed access points identified in the Chugach State Park Access Inventory were clearly identified as early as February 1980. For the purposes of this access inventory we have categorized the Eklutna-Peters Creek Area as the Northern Region, grouped the Eagle River and Ship Creek Planning Units into a Central Region, and grouped the Hillside and Turnagain Arm Units into a Southern Region.

Figure 3: Chugach State Park Planning Units



Other documents, which have implications for management actions in Chugach State Park, include the Chugach State Park Trail Plan adopted in 1986, the Management Plan for the Eagle River Greenbelt, and the North Anchorage Land Agreement (NALA).

In both the Master Plan and Trail Plan, Goals and Objectives are enumerated for each planning unit. Consistently, throughout both documents, issues surrounding access to Chugach State Park surface as both a concern and an objective to be addressed. For example, in the Chugach State Park Master Plan the following objectives are identified:

- Designation of access points and construction of facilities, including a visitor center/ranger station, campgrounds, picnic areas, parking areas, toilet facilities and information and regulatory signs.
- Establishment of trailheads with adequate provisions for parking and the brushing and signing of trails.
- Improvement of vehicular parking.
- Construction and upgrading of facilities on the west edge of the unit to provide increased parking and recreational opportunity and to permit better management of the unit.

The Chugach State Park Trail Plan also provides guidelines for the future use and development of trails and access points in Chugach State Park. This plan was based on an analysis of existing access points and trails, the environment, and current and anticipated trends in Park use at the time of publication, 1986. This document further states:

“Land acquisitions will also be recommended in several instances to facilitate access into and within the park. In a number of cases, the Municipality of Anchorage will be asked to provide platted access to the park through properties that are undergoing subdivision along the park’s boundaries. This will require close coordination of municipal and state interests.”<sup>3</sup>

As early as 1986, it was clear that access to the Park had become and would continue to be an issue requiring the attention of both the Municipality and the State. The Trail Plan clearly recognized the threat to access and proposed the purchase or trade of state land in order to mitigate these types of threats.

Trailheads serve as the principal access points to Chugach State Park. Trails are one of the primary reasons that people use and enjoy the Park and its resources. Over 60 points of entry, ranging from 2-3 car pullouts, to large parking lots such as the Glen Alps Trailhead, were identified in the 1986 Trail Plan. Not all trailheads require the same level of development and support. Use of trailheads fluctuates tremendously due to variable weather and Park conditions, thereby presenting significant planning and design challenges.

The Chugach State Park Trail Plan classifies trailheads as small, medium, or large based primarily on the number of vehicles accommodated and the degree of impact expected on the immediate surrounding area. The Chugach State Park Access Inventory recognizes two additional categories of access: Neighborhood Access and Traditional Access. Both categories reflect a lower intensity of use expected to accommodate pedestrian, horse, or bicycle traffic consistent with the planned uses for the trails or portions of the Park accessed at a particular neighborhood location. For purposes of this inventory, access is described as:

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<sup>3</sup> Chugach State Park Trail Plan, Alaska Department of Natural Resources, 1986. p. 2.

- **Improved Access:** Trailheads are generally improved or developed access points categorized as small, medium, or large based upon the number of vehicles that can be accommodated and the intensity of use expected. For purposes of this inventory, Trailhead Access is Improved Access and implies that the access point has facilities such as parking, toilets, signage, and interpretive displays.
- **Unimproved Access:** Access which is undeveloped, such as a road running adjacent to the Park boundary, a platted road ending at the Park boundary or an entry point with no signage or other formal designation.
- **Neighborhood Access:** Neighborhood access refers to new access needed in new subdivisions to provide convenient, low intensity access (pedestrian, bicycle, equestrian) through 15' to 30' wide easements for neighborhood residents designed to disperse use throughout the Park boundary and reduce vehicular traffic at major trailheads. Neighborhood Access is needed in Parcels of Concern.
- **Parcels of Concern:** Parcels of Concern are large tracts of undeveloped land located near the Park and through which road access and Neighborhood Access to Chugach State Park is desirable as future development occurs.
- **Traditional Access:** Access that has been established by Park users over a period of time that is unsecured through a public access easement or fee ownership.
- **Potential Access:** Sites within the Park which because of their natural features, location, and recreational potential are considered for future development as Neighborhood Access or Improved Access as funding allows.
- **Problematic:** A notation of problematic indicates that issues associated with a particular site need further research, review, or attention. Problems may include nuisances, legal descriptions, or unsecured access.

Since much of Chugach State Park, particularly those portions within the Anchorage Bowl, is located adjacent to existing or future residential areas, determining the appropriate type of access is critical. Neighbors may be reluctant to support the development of a large trailhead within their neighborhood. Trailhead access within residential areas, as stated in the 1986 Chugach State Park Trail Plan, should “generally be small and medium trailheads to reduce the traffic through any one neighborhood.” The plan goes on to state that future trailhead access through neighborhoods should be of small and medium size to disperse use and limit traffic impacts on any one neighborhood. It may also be necessary to strategically space these trailheads closer together than more developed trailheads in order to meet demands for parking and provide greater diversity and a broader selection of winter snow and road conditions.<sup>4</sup> The Chugach State Park Access Inventory is consistent with this philosophy and in addition recommends that subdivisions adjoining the Park have dedicated Neighborhood Access easements as defined above running from public roads to the Park at intervals of approximately 1,000 feet in order to provide connectivity to Chugach State Park, reduce traffic and parking concerns, and disperse use.

Larger trailheads serve very popular trails and access points for both residents and visitors, and in many instances these access corridors can and should be planned prior to

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<sup>4</sup> Chugach State Park Trail Plan, Alaska Department of Natural Resources, 1986. p. 17.

residential development so that all parties are aware of the proposed trailhead. In some instances trailheads can be strategically placed along access corridors that have or anticipate little residential development along them.

At the local level, recent planning exercises have concluded that Chugach State Park contributes to a distinctive sense of place for the Municipality of Anchorage, on both neighborhood and citywide scales. “This sense of place is imprinted on community lifestyles and attitudes, and is embodied in existing land use and activity patterns.”<sup>5</sup>

To further emphasize the importance of Chugach State Park as a resource for Anchorage and its residents, Anchorage 2020, recently adopted by the Municipality, includes Design and Environment Policy #65 that speaks to access and connectivity to greenbelts and open spaces including specifically, Chugach State Park.

**Design and Environment Policy #65**

“Promote and encourage the identification and conservation of open spaces, including access to greenbelts, Chugach State Park, Anchorage Coastal Wildlife Refuge, and Far North Bicentennial Park”<sup>6</sup>

The Anchorage Areawide Trails Plan acknowledges that trails are an important component of Alaska’s history and a basic part of the Municipality’s infrastructure. Trails are viewed as recreational facilities from which a variety of leisure activities are derived. The Areawide Trails Plan goes on to state “The residents of the Municipality of Anchorage have expressed their desire for trails shown in every public survey taken since the 1960s and was reconfirmed in the public survey...done as part of this Plan development.”<sup>7</sup> The plan expresses this support in a variety of policy statements.

**Policy Statement No. 6:**

The municipal park and greenbelt system should facilitate development of an integrated trail system where it is appropriate to provide trail linkages between neighborhoods, school and park sites and major areas of public activity. Chugach State Park is clearly an area of major public activity.<sup>8</sup>

The Municipality of Anchorage Areawide Trails Plan also discusses the need for connectivity to Chugach State Park. Existing and future trails leading into the Park have been identified, such as the trail leading up Rabbit Creek. Some municipal parks already provide access into Chugach State Park.

The survey conducted as part of the public participation process in the development of the Anchorage Areawide Trails Plan indicated that residents feel fortunate to have a well-developed trail system in the Anchorage Bowl. Seventy-eight percent of the households that responded indicated that at least one family member had used trails in the year

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<sup>5</sup> Anchorage 2020, Municipality of Anchorage, 2002, p vii.

<sup>6</sup> Anchorage 2020, Municipality of Anchorage, 2002, p. 85.

<sup>7</sup> Anchorage Areawide Trails Plan, Municipality of Anchorage, 1997. p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Anchorage Areawide Trails Plan, Municipality of Anchorage, 1997. p. 10.



surveyed. Most trail usage was for recreation and fitness. Walking for pleasure, cross-country skiing, and jogging were the most frequently expressed uses. Residents in South Anchorage and Chugiak-Eagle River expressed a need for better and more convenient access.<sup>9</sup> Connectivity with additional reserved public access to Chugach State Park can help meet this expressed need.

## **ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

There are many issues associated with access to Chugach State Park. These issues run the gamut from funding for acquisitions and maintenance to the concerns of some neighborhoods regarding additional traffic, litter and crime. Issues relative to Chugach State Park as a whole are briefly discussed in this section with recommendations developed by Park staff based upon a review of existing plans, current literature, and public comment. Each particular access point will have its own set of unique issues surrounding its existing, proposed or potential use. These issues will need to be addressed on a site-specific and time-specific basis.

### ***Funding Constraints***

Unfortunately, State funding for the acquisition of land, access rights, or recreational development rights has not been available for many years. The Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation implemented user fees in the late 1990's; however, this revenue stream is designed to support maintenance and ongoing operations and is not structured to address access issues. As a result, the Division of Parks must work closely with the Municipality to secure road and trail easements, preserve public lands held within the Heritage Land Bank that may provide access, and forge partnerships with non-profit organizations such as The Great Land Trust, The Conservation Fund and others, to secure reserved public access to Chugach State Park for the residents of Alaska.

Availability of federal funds such as Land and Water Conservation Funds has increased modestly in recent years. While half of Land and Water Conservation Funds are allocated for State projects (half for local projects), these funds require a 50% state match, which has been difficult to obtain.

Non-profit organizations such as The Great Land Trust, The Conservation Fund, The Nature Conservancy, and the Trust for Public Lands can play essential roles in the creation and protection of Park access. These groups are uniquely qualified to work creatively with private landowners on the sale of strategic lands, the donation of conservation easements, or the creation of access easements. There are often significant tax benefits available to private landowners willing to work with a land trust. These organizations have access to a wide variety of funding sources and can move quickly to take advantage of time-sensitive opportunities. In many instances, as evidenced by the case studies in Appendix E, timeliness, technical expertise, creativity, and access to funds

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<sup>9</sup> Areawide Trails Plan, Municipality of Anchorage, 1997, p. 7.

are extremely important in meeting a landowner's needs. Most government organizations do not have this resident pool of expertise or capability.

A useful reference is the document prepared by The Nature Conservancy during the initial development of the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill Trustee Council Habitat Protection Process, "Options for Identifying and Protecting Strategic Fish and Wildlife Habitats and Recreation Sites, A General Handbook"<sup>10</sup>

**Recommendations:** Chugach State Park should forge working relationships with local land trusts and work proactively to explore acquisition options such as conservation easements that may provide benefits to both the landowner and the Park.

### ***Land Status***

Land ownership within and bordering Chugach State Park is a complex issue. It is also an issue that is continually evolving. There are a number of private inholdings within the legislatively designated boundaries of the Park. Several of these inholdings block reasonable access to portions of the Park. In particular, lands in Rabbit Creek Valley, Peters Creek, Eagle River, and the South Fork of Eagle River present challenges to effective management and reasonable access. In addition, lands surrounding Eklutna Lake are owned by Eklutna Native Corporation but are currently managed by Division of Parks. These lands, and their longer-term status, are dependent on the terms and conditions of the ongoing North Anchorage Land Agreement (NALA).

Substantial portions of Chugach State Park share a boundary with Fort Richardson. Depending upon the military mission, these lands have been and in the future, may be closed to civilian use. Long-term access to Chugach State Park through Fort Richardson lands is not assured.

**Recommendations:** Chugach State Park should work with Fort Richardson to address current public access needs particularly at Arctic Valley and participate in ongoing NALA coordination meetings to ensure that Division of Parks is aware of ongoing management concerns of Eklutna Inc. and Fort Richardson as well as changes in the status of military lands.

### ***Neighborhood Access***

While some neighborhoods would prefer to have the best of both worlds, private access to a huge wilderness park in their back yard and little intrusion from others, the reasons that Chugach State Park was founded cannot be ignored. Chugach State Park sits at the edge of Alaska's largest city and several smaller communities. By planning for the future, identifying potential trailheads in advance of subdivision development, and designing trailheads to suit the existing physical, environmental, and neighborhood conditions, impacts to adjacent residential areas can be minimized.

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<sup>10</sup> The Nature Conservancy. Options for Identifying and Protecting Strategic Fish and Wildlife Habitats and Recreation Sites, A General Handbook. Anchorage, AK, 1991.

While it is certainly a landowner's right to utilize their land as they see fit, the formalization of trails and access to Chugach State Park, if managed proactively in advance of development, may reduce conflicts, provide developers with tax advantages and a strong marketing tool, and provide the public with reasonably distributed access to the Park's recreational opportunities.

Neighborhood access can be a valuable marketing tool for a developer. In one particular Eagle River development the developer has donated an easement to the Chugach State Park boundary, provided a 10-car parking lot, and contributed financially to the development of a trail leading from the development through Chugach State Park. This amenity is a strong selling point for this particular development and is a model of developer/Park cooperation. By including neighborhood access in the development plan of this particular subdivision, recreational opportunities are enhanced for residents, fewer vehicular trips are required by residents to access trails and other recreational opportunities, and the developer has created a unique, successful marketing tool for the subdivision.

Neighborhood Access can also contribute to an alternate transportation network connecting neighborhoods to the park, to each other, and to the greater Municipality. Neighborhood Access can be dictated by landforms, features and destinations of the Park, the development, and the Municipality. This access can follow long established routes such as those described in the section on Traditional Access or it can follow a route between two different land uses, or through greenbelt corridors. Through careful planning an alternate transportation grid utilizing Neighborhood Access points can provide safe, off road access to Chugach State Park and its trail system providing links to Girdwood and Eagle River to the Anchorage Hillside and other parts of town.

***Recommendations:*** The Municipality and Division of Parks need to work proactively with developers and landowners to create public access to the Park that enhances future developments and connectivity to and within the Park and Municipality. This can be accomplished through the platting process and through work with land trusts to create conservation easements designed to provide Neighborhood Access in new subdivisions adjacent to the park,

### ***Traditional Access***

Traditional Access is access that has been established by Park users over a period of time. Traditional access is generally not secure and may be through unreserved public lands or private property. In many instances, private landowners are not on site and the public has been able to enjoy convenient access to Chugach State Park for years. This access has not necessarily been illegal. AS 11.46.350(3)(b) allows access across unimproved and apparently unused land which is not fenced or otherwise enclosed, or posted at all access points. However, these access points are not secure. They are not reserved public access easements.

These access points are not publicized. They are known to local residents and their location and availability is spread by word of mouth. In many instances the levels of use

are minimal and those individuals utilizing these access points take care to cause minimal impact to the landowner and adjacent neighbors. As land ownership changes and large subdivisions are developed in large tracts of land adjacent to Chugach State Park, these access points are gradually being closed off to public use. In some cases, use has increased to levels unacceptable to the landowner and access has been blocked.

Chugach State Park has recently been closed to access in two popular areas that have been traditionally used by local residents for years (see Appendix E, Lost Access - Two Case Studies). Public comments received as a result of the outreach process associated with this inventory strongly requested that access be reestablished in these two particular areas. Other access points were mentioned as well (see Appendix D). In instances such as these, the public is likely to create alternate access points that may cause as much or more impact to private landowners.

In many cases, traditional access to Chugach State Park crosses Heritage Land Bank (HLB) lands. Access through HLB lands is not secure, reserved public access. Heritage Land Bank lands may be sold, leased or developed. Access through HLB lands should not be considered secure until such lands are designated as parks (PLI-P).

***Recommendations:*** By acknowledging traditional access, taking steps to manage that access, and planning ahead of development, user conflicts can be avoided. Traditional access may fulfill the need for Neighborhood Access. Every effort should be made to secure and protect these Traditional Access points through acquisition of reserved public easements. It is also important that the Heritage Land Bank and Division of Parks work together to address access needs for Chugach State Park, particularly as HLB lands are leased, disposed of, or developed.

### ***Transportation Planning and Maintenance***

Transportation planning within the Municipality of Anchorage has not adequately considered the high volumes of traffic generated as Park users access more highly developed Park trailheads. For those roads that provide access to Park trailheads serviced by Local Road Service areas, area residents pay for road wear and tear resulting from use far in excess of that generated by the residents. Each year, pursuant to AS 29.60.110, the legislature, may provide municipal assistance for roads utilized by statewide vehicles. For example, the Glen Alps road receives significant Park use and the legislature has provided some funding to assist with road maintenance. However, this program has been under funded for several years.

***Recommendations:*** In developing new trailheads, road access and maintenance are issues that need to be considered. As residential subdivisions adjoining the Park are platted, consideration should be given to ensuring that easements are provided for road and trail access to Chugach State Park and longer-term maintenance issues are addressed. Local neighborhood access helps to reduce the number of vehicles traveling to larger trailheads thereby dispersing use and reducing traffic and the demand for parking.

Future planning at the Municipality that may address several of these issues includes an update to the Anchorage Areawide Trails Plan and development of sub-area circulation plans focused on Bear Valley, the foothills of the McHugh Complex and Potter Valley. Division of Parks should work with the Municipality on transportation planning in areas identified as Parcels of Concern.

### ***Economic Impact***

Some residents of the Municipality have expressed concerns about the potential negative economic impact of access to Chugach State Park to their neighborhood. Recent national surveys point out that access to trails and recreational amenities is a positive attribute for buyers, sellers, and developers. The National Association of Realtors in its survey report *Consumers' Survey on Smart Choices for Home Buyers*, April 2002, indicated that thirty-six percent of the recent home buyers surveyed designated walking, jogging, or biking trails as either an “important or very important” amenity. Trail availability outranked 16 other choices.<sup>11</sup> The Director of Research for the National Home Builders Association stated, “People want walking and jogging trails. When we do surveys, trails rank up pretty high – in the top five – all the time... [the National Association of Realtors survey] was consistent across all regions and demographics.”<sup>12</sup> Creation of neighborhood access and protection of traditional access points can address and preserve this high priority amenity for local residents.

Amenities such as Park access typically increase property values thereby increasing property tax revenue. Users of the Park contribute to a variety of businesses as they purchase gear used for hiking, camping, skiing, climbing, snowmobiling, and mountain biking, helping to maintain a healthy local economy. Tourists visiting Alaska enjoy the spectacular views from Glen Alps, the McHugh Trailhead, and the pullouts along Turnagain Arm. Tourists contribute both to the local and the state economy. Secure access for visitors can help the Anchorage tourism industry attract additional visitors and provide incentives for extending the length of a client’s visit.

In addition, Chugach State Park contributes to the quality of life that Anchorage residents enjoy. Quality of life is an important consideration for businesses seeking a home base for a startup or businesses seeking locations for future expansion or relocation. Natural and recreational amenities are providing a competitive advantage for communities seeking nontraditional sources of income.<sup>13</sup>

### ***Crime, Litter, Neighborhood Impact***

Some residents have expressed concerns regarding the impact of nuisance crimes associated with access on adjacent neighbors. Surveys conducted by the Rails-To-Trails Conservancy indicate that major crime on urban trails is low compared to the national average. Minor crimes such as littering, graffiti, sign damage, and motorized use were minimal based upon letters from law enforcement personnel. Some officers felt that

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<sup>11</sup> Home Buyers Sold on Trails, Rails-To-Trails, Fall 2002, Washington, D.C. p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> Home Buyers Sold on Trails. Rails-To-Trails. Fall 2002, Washington, D.C. p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> Colt, Steve. The Economic Importance of Healthy Alaska Ecosystems. p. A-3.

minor crimes occurred less on improved or maintained trails than on, in this case, an abandoned rail. In addition, the Rails-To-Trails Conservancy found that the majority of property crimes had a minor effect on the trail and usually, although not always, did not harm nearby private property.<sup>14</sup>

**Recommendations:** In the case of Chugach State Park access points, a neighborhood or community Adopt-A-Trailhead program paired with aggressive signage, conditioning the use of the trailhead on appropriate behavior of users, may have a positive effect on user behavior. Littering and other nuisance problems are solvable.

### ***Liability of Adjacent Landowners***

Some adjacent landowners have voiced concerns regarding liability should a trail user be injured on or near their property. The Rails-to-Trails Conservancy and the National Park Service have developed a series of recommendations and solutions to address these concerns. First and foremost, “the owner of land adjoining a trail may reduce their liability by making it clear that trail users are not invited onto the adjoining land.”<sup>15</sup>

Recreational use statutes, (AS 09.65.200) provide protection to landowners whose unimproved land contains a trail that the public crosses for recreational purposes. These types of statutes are in effect in all 50 states and were conceived in the 1960s in order to encourage landowners to make their land available for public recreation purposes by limiting their liability providing they don’t charge an access fee. In general these statutes limit the duty of care a landowner owes, limit the duty to warn the public of dangerous conditions, and limit landowner liability for injury.<sup>16</sup>

AS 34.17.055 provides tort protection to landowners whose land is subject to a conservation easement granted to and accepted by the state or a Municipality, which provides public access for recreational purposes. A conservation easement granted to the state defines and secures public access, limits a landowner’s liability, and provides the landowner with potential tax advantages. These easements can be beneficial to both the landowner and the state.

### ***Safety***

User conflicts due to high concentrations of Park users, illegal parking, and the risks associated with some Park uses point to the need for dispersed use. Logically located trailheads dispersed throughout the Park boundary reduce conflicts at heavily used trailheads and alleviate safety impacts of illegal parking on local residents by reducing vehicular trips. In addition, strategically located access points will facilitate emergency search and rescue efforts by allowing rescuers to enter the Park at locations closer to

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<sup>14</sup> Tracy & Morris, *Rails-Trails and Safe Communities*, Rails-to-Trails Conservancy and National Park Service, January 1998, pp 5-7.

<sup>15</sup> Morris, Hugh. *Rail-Trails and Liability, A Primer on Trail-Related Liability Issues and Risk Management Techniques*, Rails-to-Trails Conservancy and The National Park Service, September 2000, p.5.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* p. 6-8.

victims, response vehicles and facilities, and providing better access to the existing road grid for emergency transportation. It is hoped that response times will be improved. Strategically located trailheads may also provide additional staging areas for fire fighting efforts in the event of a wildfire on the Anchorage Hillside.

**Recommendations:** Division of Parks should work with the Municipality to address access and connectivity to the Park through the platting, municipal planning and transportation planning processes.

## CONCLUSION

Access to Chugach State Park is an important issue for the citizens of Anchorage, the Municipality of Anchorage, and the Division of Parks. Park users want secure or reserved public access easements to the Park in a variety of locations. Park users do not necessarily want large trailheads with many facilities but rather a variety of access points dispersed throughout the Municipality/Park interface. Users want less congested and more convenient access to the Park and feel that steps should be taken to preserve Traditional Access that has provided convenient, low intensity access for years.

This analysis leaves little doubt that Chugach State Park needs additional access. Park facilities are nearing capacity at several popular improved access points. However at this time only a few additional larger developed access points seem necessary. These access points are appropriate in areas where several large tracts of land may be platted near areas of the Park that have high recreational values. Working with the Municipality to identify these areas in advance of development will minimize impacts to adjacent neighborhoods and ensure connectivity to the Park.

Based on the results of this inventory, the Division of Parks must work to acquire reserved public access in Hunter Creek, Eagle River, the South Fork of Eagle River, Upper Eagle River Valley, Stuckagain Heights, the Anchorage Hillside from Rabbit Creek to Potter, and in Girdwood at California Creek. Some of these areas have experienced closures of traditional access in recent years and the public has requested that efforts be made to reopen these areas. Better communication and close coordination with the Municipality of Anchorage in municipal planning processes, staff analysis of platting and zoning requests, and Park access decisions will help secure Park access.

As the population of the Municipality of Anchorage continues to grow and development pressures increase, Division of Parks must work with the Municipality, non-profit organizations, landowners, and Park users to meet the needs of present and future Park users. By leveraging the benefits of Chugach State Park with the Anchorage Trail System, the citizens of Anchorage and surrounding communities can enjoy a broader diversity of trails, access points, and user experiences designed to accommodate a variety of activities and abilities and expose Park users to a wider variety of the Park's values and resources.





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