

Parks Highway Scenic Corridor Study

A study of options for enhancing and preserving scenic resources on public lands adjacent to the George Parks Highway MP 104-132, generally from the Susitna River Bridge to the Chulitna River Bridge.



Matanuska-Susitna Borough

December 31, 2009



Visual Landscape Units

George Parks Highway MP 104-132

Generally from the Susitna River Bridge to the Chulitna Bridge



Unit
1

Susitna River

MP 104 to 105



Unit
2

Dense Forest/Denali Views

MP 105 to 113



Unit
3

Trapper Creek Settlement

MP 113 to 116



Unit
4

Denali Framed/Agriculture

MP 116 to 118



Unit
5

Tunnel of Green

MP 118 to 126



Unit
6

Talkeetna Views

MP 126 to 128



Unit
7

Ridges/Drainages

MP 128 to 131



Unit
8

Chulitna Bridge

MP 131 to 132



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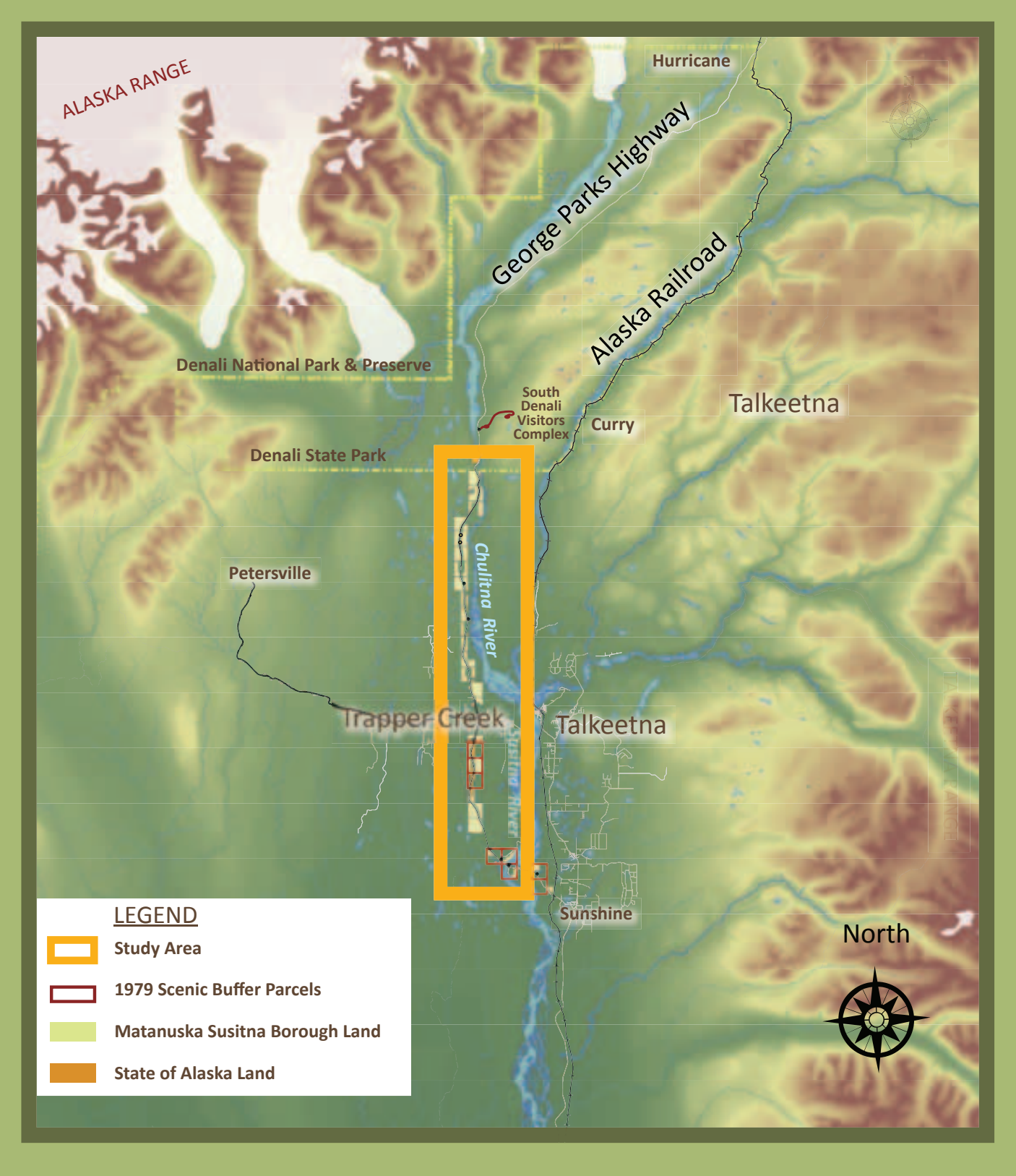
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Parks Highway Corridor Study Area
Mileposts (MP) 104 - 132



Section 1. Introduction

A. Study Area

The goal of this study is to provide analysis and recommendations for protecting scenic resources on Matanuska-Susitna Borough (MSB) and other public lands adjacent to the George Parks Highway, Mileposts (MP) 104-132.

As highlighted in the Study Area Map (left page) this stretch of the Parks Highway travels through 9,500 acres of MSB land, and some limited State of Alaska (SOA) lands. Some small portion of lands in the corridor, which are now private, have scenic buffers in place that maintain vegetation for 150 feet beyond

the highway right-of-way. This places large components of land in public ownership, simplifying land management as long as agencies are clear regarding scenic goals and objectives.

The Mat-Su Borough sponsored this study as a resource to help guide communities and agencies in making pro-active land use decisions that are sensitive to scenic corridor resources, along with other community needs, into the future. This is seen as benefitting residents who enjoy the scenic qualities of the area, and visitors especially on their northbound drive to visit Denali.

The study area begins at the Susitna River Bridge (MP 104) as the northbound Parks Highway enters an area notable for its existing scenic and natural resources, including largely contiguous foreground vegetation of mature birch forest, punctuated by black spruce forests, water features, wetlands and some community development, focused mainly in the Trapper Creek area. Periodic rises in the road's elevation frame drivers' direct northbound views from the roadway to Denali and the Alaska Range. These spectacular "wow" views in the background and attractive land cover in the foreground create anticipation and excitement for the expectant traveler driving north, and constitute a valuable scenic resource. The study area ends as drivers pass over the Chulitna River Bridge (MP 132).

Land uses and scenic conditions south and north of the study provide frame of reference for the corridor context. South of the study area, between Wasilla and up through Sunshine, cultural land uses and development are generally dominant on the landscape as viewed from the Parks Highway. Private land ownership and development patterns, including large clearing areas for businesses, frequent driveways, and turn outs create visual clutter that is less compatible with the natural scenic experience many drivers and visitors prefer.

At the far north end of the study area, beyond the Chulitna Bridge (MP 132), lands are within Denali State Park, or are inholdings and have in place scenic protections through a Special Land Use District (MSB 17.17), although this currently under revision to create better protections. Additionally, the George Parks Highway due north of the study area (MP 132-248) was recently recognized as one of America's National Byways® Designations. Extending this national byway designation southward through the study area could be used to bring recognition for scenic qualities between MP 104 and 132.



In 1979 a scenic buffer was put in place that limits development within the 150 feet adjacent to the highway right-of-way to include no vegetation removal. The photos above at MP 104.7 (left) and MP 112 (right) show how effective this buffer system has been. The left photo shows effective screening of a residential development, and at right is a well screened gravel extraction area.

As mentioned, public lands along the Parks Highway between MP 104 and 132 currently have some limited scenic protections. In 1979 a scenic buffer was created that now applies to less than 10% of the land adjoining the right-of-way. Based on a joint agreement between the Mat-Su Borough and the State of Alaska, the agreement limits development on 150 feet adjacent to the highway right-of-way to include no vegetation removal except to provide physical access to adjacent lands, access at intervals of 500 feet or greater, and no utilities except in outer 25 feet of easement. This agreement is recorded with the land title and has been somewhat effective, although it applies to a limited number of parcels, and does not distinguish between clearing opportunities to capture a scenic viewing and clearing for forms of development that are less compatible with the scenic experience.

The twenty-eight miles of road in the study area adjoins 9,500 acres of mostly contiguous Matanuska-Susitna Borough (MSB) land adjacent to the Parks Highway. These public lands are largely undeveloped and are not proposed for any action at present. In the future, however, the borough could reasonably be expected to sell land in support of private settlement and economic development, or use the land to support public purposes ranging from recreation, to forestry and gravel extraction, pipeline and utility transmission, or facility development. Construction of the South Denali Visitor Center Complex (MP 134.5) in the near future may increase development pressures in this area including by bringing in new utilities and strengthening the demand for residential development and tourism-related services. Additionally, Gas Pipeline Corridor development routes are uncertain and the Parks Highway and this corridor may be expected to accommodate that important economic infrastructure.

B. Scope & Purpose

This study is primarily written for agencies, land managers, and communities to use in guiding future action and developing management and policy responses. This initial section focuses on describing the study area, scope, methodology, and background information. Section Two provides an analysis of the corridor's existing scenic resources and describes visual concerns and opportunities specific to the corridor in terms of visual "Landscape Units." The final section recommends sensitive design principles and landscape unit specific considerations. Altogether, the study seeks to describe where

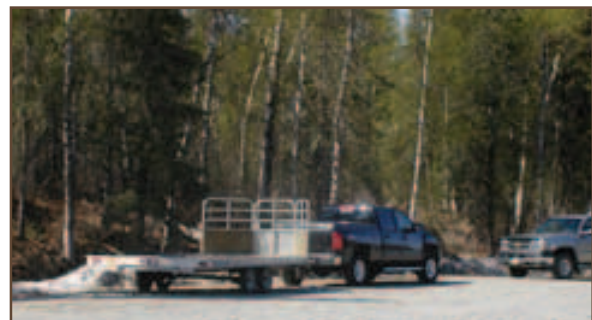
protection would be valuable, and what forms of protection may be beneficial specific to this area. It is provided so that decision makers and landowners have guidance on the development and disposal of land in public ownership.

Numerous research documents including a recent MSB “Tourism Infrastructure Needs Study” can provide supportive information outlining the economic and other benefits of protecting and enhancing scenic resources in this area. In general, the beneficiaries of scenic corridor protections include:

- The general citizenry who drive or recreate along this corridor
- Tourists and visitors who contribute to the region’s economic vitality
- Adjacent landowners who are more effectively buffered from the adverse affects of roadway traffic while enjoying desirable ties to scenic landscapes and natural landscapes.

Finally, this study acknowledges, but cannot fully address some of the needs that at times are incompatible with scenic corridor protection, or that can make it more challenging. These include:

- Functional needs for right-of-way infrastructure, utilities, roadside services, and the maintenance and management practices associated with highway travel.
- The need for formal and informal roadside recreational trails, pull-offs, scenic view areas, visitor services/ restrooms, and trailhead parking. Clear visibility to the road from these facilities serves two purposes. First, it visually alerts potential users that the facilities exist and gives drivers’ time to safely exit the roadway. Secondly, visibility to these sites, which typically do not have an on-site management presence, can help deter vandalism, dumping, and other problem and illegal activities that vegetation can obscure from the main roadway.
- Landowner’s need to manage roadside vegetation based on functional and safety issues:
 - Vegetation clearing along driveways to visually extend sight triangles for vehicles entering the highway to improve safety.
 - Vegetation clearing along the traveled road prism adjacent to the right-of-way to give drivers a better view of potential wildlife, such as moose, that may enter the roadway and create safety hazards.
 - Vegetation clearing surrounding roadside businesses to give highway travelers a good view to the business, and thereby make them aware of available services, access, and parking with ample time to safely exit the road.



Some roadway elements can “impact” the scenic experience of the roadway, yet are of high public value and are to be expected within the roadway prism. These can include utility placement (photo left), recreational parking and facilities (right), and vegetation clearing measures that promote safety or open up scenic views.

- A desire to maintain or clear vegetation for other reasons that may include: to provide views to or from the property, to accommodate infrastructure or a specific land use, to address firewise concerns, to provide fencing or structural buffers, or simply because values and activities important to a landowner are not complementary to preserving the scenic buffer.

C. Input

The findings of the study were developed with input from several participating agencies, including the Matanuska Susitna Borough, the State of Alaska Department of Natural Resources, Parks and Mining Lands and Water, the Alaska Department of Transportation, and the National Parks Service.

This study solicited public input at one community meeting held in Trapper Creek in May 2009. The event was publicized with both the Susitna Community Council and the Trapper Creek Community Council, and focused primarily on gathering information and input specific to MSB owned lands and visual and cultural resources in the corridor.



A May 2009 public meeting in Trapper Creek gathered information and input from residents.

Finally, on December 7, 2009 a presentation was made of draft study findings to the MSB Real Property Asset Management Board. Copies of the plan were put online and mailed to area community councils and the Trapper Creek Library. A number of comments were received over a three week public review period, which were used in revising aspects of the draft study. Appendix A includes the full text of all public comments over the study effort.

D. Methodology

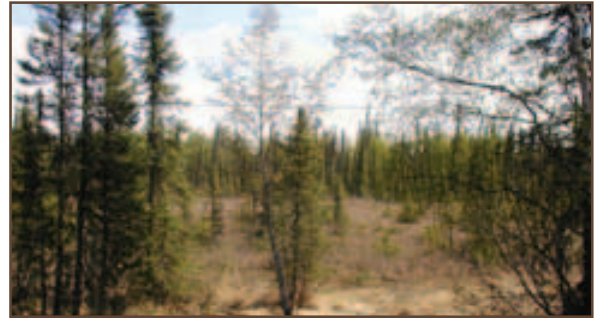
The methodologies used for analysis of scenic resources are from a combination of both the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service document *Landscape Aesthetics, A Handbook for Scenery Management* (USFS, 1995), and The Federal Highway Administration's *Visual Impact Assessment for Highway Project* (FHWA, 1981). Following is a discussion of major terms from these methodologies that are helpful for describing and identifying scenic quality, and that were used in the visual analysis as a basis for recommendations.

Scenic Attractiveness. A primary indicator of the intrinsic scenic beauty of a landscape and of the positive responses it evokes in people. It is based on commonly held perceptions of the beauty of landform, vegetation pattern, composition, surface water characteristics, and land use patterns and cultural features.

Scenic Integrity. An indication of the degree of intactness and wholeness of the landscape character.

Visual Quality. The qualitative appraisal of the relative excellence of a view based on these three criteria:

- "**Vividness**" consists of the distinctness of a key view, including its being clearly perceptible
- "**Intactness**" refers to an untouched or unaltered landscape; and
- "**Unity**" is defined as a landscape with a quality or state of being made whole or a condition of harmony.



Visual Absorption Capacity is defined as a landscape's vegetative screening potential and the visual magnitude of development that might occur. For example, the photo left shows dense forest along the roadside and an area with a high "Visual Absorption Capacity" where development set back 150 feet is virtually invisible, even in the winter when deciduous trees have lost their leaves. The photo right is in an area with low "Visual Absorption Capacity" where even with buffers, any development will be highly visible.

Landscape Visibility. An indication of the area that may be seen as a function of the context of the viewers, the duration of view, the degree of discernible detail, the seasonal variations, and the number of viewers.

Distance Zones. A measure of the distance of potential viewers from areas of project components, usually measured as foreground (0 to .5 miles), middleground (.5 to 4 miles), background (4 miles to horizon), or seldom-seen.

Landscape Units. These are visual resource areas representing distinct visual characteristics. Landscape units are sometimes considered as all encompassing "outdoor rooms" perceived by a viewer as a cohesive visual experience. These units are the basis for analyzing existing visual quality. They are specific geographical areas that can be identified based on common characteristics of landform, vegetation, hydrology, and social attributes where present.

Landscape Character. A description of key attributes found consistent throughout a mapped landscape analysis unit that conveys an image of the landscape based on landform patterns, water characteristics, vegetation patterns, and cultural elements.

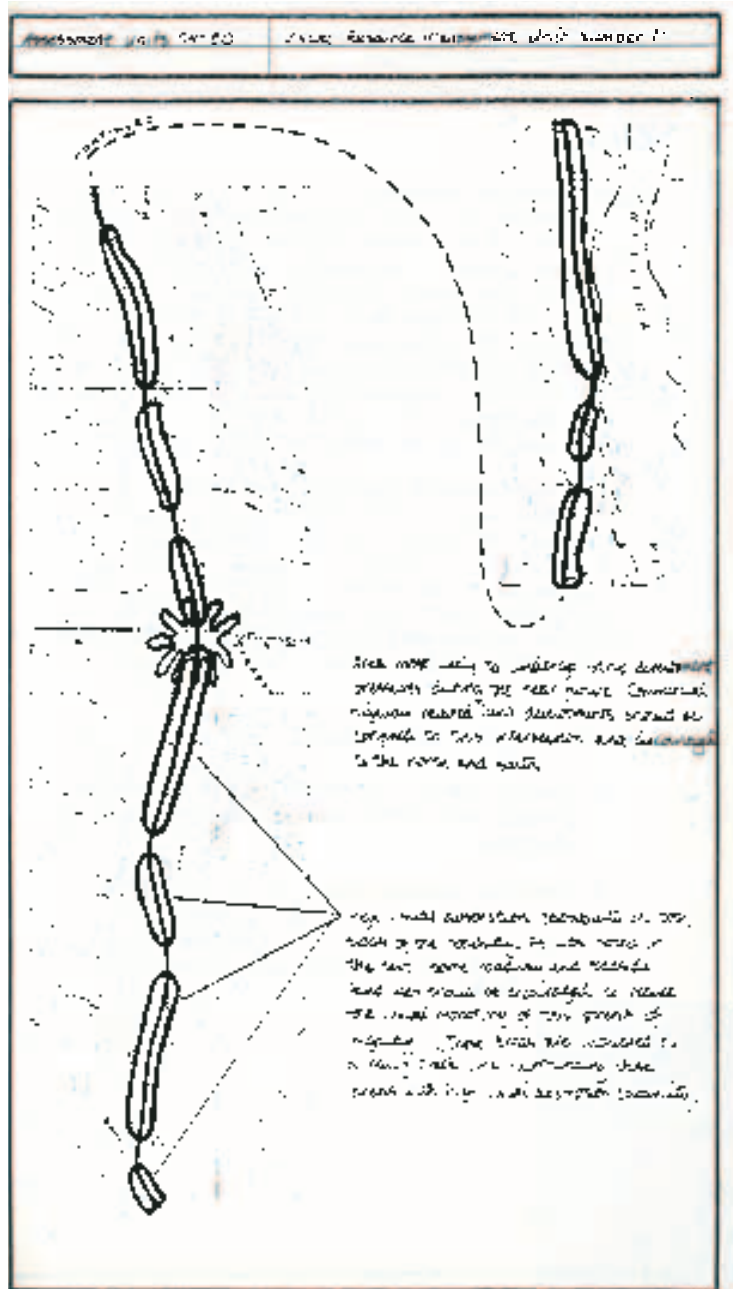
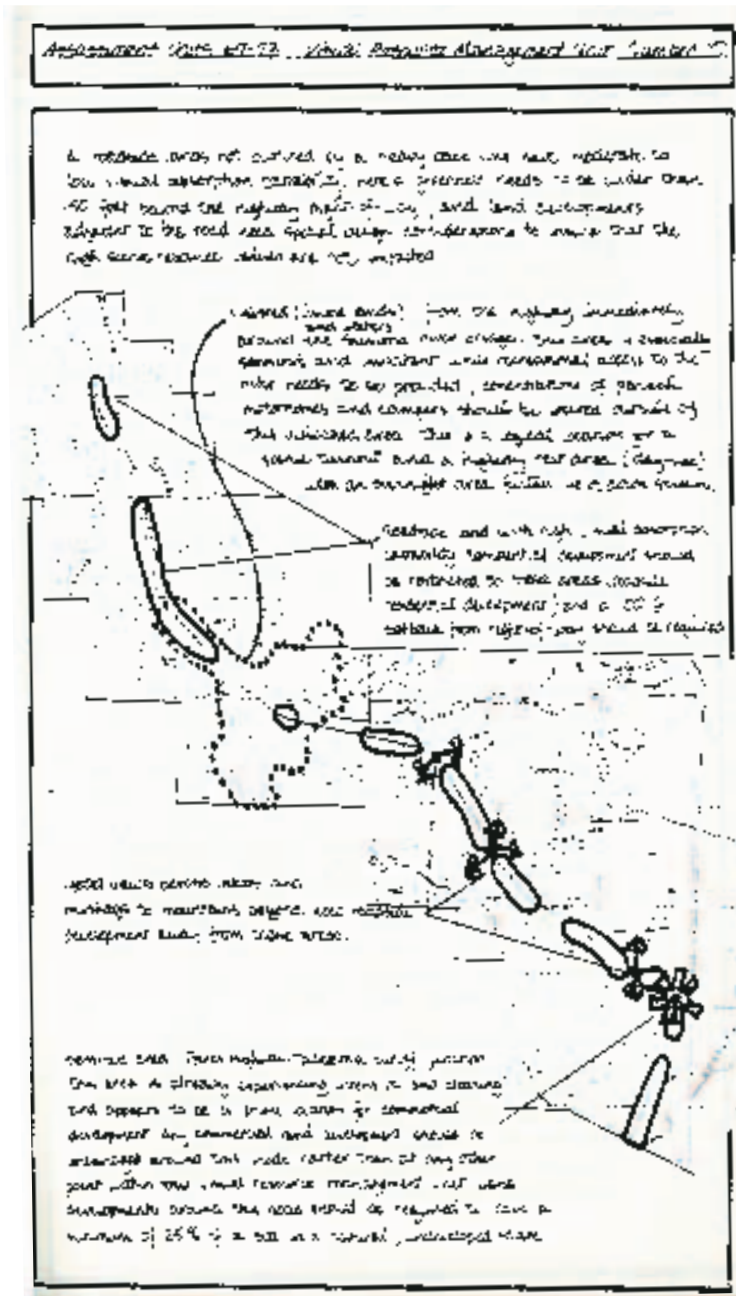
Visual Absorption Capacity. This is an indicator of the landscape's ability to absorb visual modification such as roads, housing development, and timber harvests. It is derived from vegetative screening potential and visual magnitude information. Capacity ratings are as follows:

- **High:** Vegetative screening potential and visual magnitude together indicate that most landscape modifications can readily be screened if properly sited and designed.
- **Medium:** Vegetative screening potential and visual magnitude are such that most landscape modifications remain visible from the highway. The actual visual impact of modifications will depend on its type, design, considerations and siting, but can generally remain subordinate to the overall landscape character.
- **Low:** Vegetative screening potential and visual magnitude values indicate that landscape modifications are highly visible and generally cannot be screened.

E. Background Studies

A number of background studies and plans were reviewed for this effort, and are summarized below:

Scenic Resources along the Parks Highway (1981, DNR) - This document provides an inventory of scenic resources along the George Parks Highway from Anchorage to Fairbanks. The document is dated and covers such a large a scale that is has limited management value at present. As such, it is used in this study for historical and general reference purposes only.



Scenic Resources along the Parks Highway (1981, DNR) is presented in this document for historical reference and comparison purposes only. The entire study area (MP 104-132) is covered in two of the 1981 study unit maps (10 and 11, inset above).

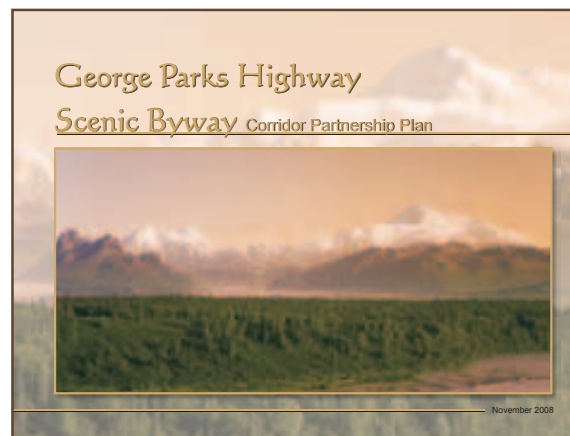
Memorandum of Understanding (1979 and 1999, Matanuska Susitna Borough and State of Alaska) - This agreement applies along the Parks Highway near the Petersville Road with provisions for scenic buffers, driveway spacing, utilities, vegetation clearing, and development of complimentary uses such as paths and trails on public land.

Susitna Area Plan (1985 & 1993, 2009 revision underway by DNR) – Among other things, this land use plan for state-owned lands describes settlement patterns, access needs, and protection of scenic features including along the Parks Highway. Currently, the Department of Natural Resources is starting to revise two related plans dealing with state land in the Susitna Valley, the Susitna Area Plan and the Susitna Forestry Guidelines. The Southeast Susitna Area Plan will cover the area of study and is expected to be released in March/April 2010 for public review.

South Denali Implementation Plan (2005, NPS/Denali National Park and Preserve) – This plan analyzes options for enhancing recreation and access throughout the South Denali region and identifies improvements along the Parks Highway MP 134.5 as the preferred alternative.

George Parks Highway Scenic Byway Corridor Partnership Plan (2009, DNR) – This plan is applicable north of the study area (MP 132-248) and provides recommendations for maintaining and accentuating visual assets along the Parks Highway public right-of-way as it passes through Denali State Park, and Denali National Park and Reserve north up to Healy.

Trapper Creek Comprehensive Plan (draft underway) – In 2006 a draft plan was prepared and circulated for review that did not find consensus in the community and was not adopted. The Community Council and the Matanuska-Susitna Borough staff anticipate that this draft, which does have recommendations specific to development in the road corridor, will be revised and adopted sometime in the future. A key theme in the draft plan, based on public input, is the desire to “concentrate commercial development in distinct nodes” in order to maintain the visual quality of the highway and ensure that existing commercial nodes remain a focus of regional economic activity.



In October 2009 it was announced that the George Parks Highway due north of the study area (MP 132-248) was recognized as one of America's National Byways® Designations.

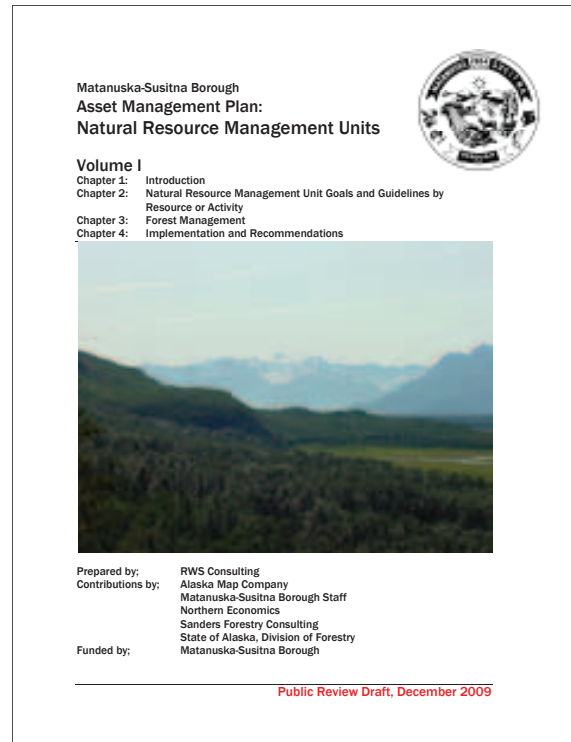
The Petersville Road Scenic Resource Study (1995, LDN) – This study provided an analysis of landscape aesthetics for the 19 mile road length, along with suggestions for land management and mitigation to enhance and protect visual resources.

Matanuska-Susitna Borough Tourism Infrastructure Needs Study (2008, McDowell Group) – This study analyzes tourism infrastructure Borough-wide, and identifies roadway and facility improvement priorities. It also highlights regional destination opportunities at South Denali and funding options for Highway facilities through expansion of the Scenic Byways program.

TRAAK Corridor Assessment (1999, LDN) – This document provides recommendations for developing waysides, rest areas, trailheads, and scenic view opportunities for the entire National Highway System, including the Parks Highway, based on a collaborative effort of land managers along the highway system.

Matanuska-Susitna Borough Asset Management Plan, Parks Recreation and Open Space Plan (2001, LDN) – This generalized plan for use of Borough land outlines goals and opportunities for dedicating open space, trails, and protecting important visual corridors.

Draft Matanuska-Susitna Borough Natural Resource Management Units Plan (2009, RWS Consulting) – This asset management plan includes forest management, timber sale, and management plans for NRMU’s in the study area including Rabideaux Creek, Parks Highway, Susitna River Corridor, and Chulitna River. The draft plan intent for most NRMU’s in the study area is generally to protect water resources, provide for some wood product and material (rock, sand, and gravel) while not significantly reducing from the recreational and other uses in the unit. One sub-unit, Jigsaw Puzzle Lakes, specifies no timber harvest or material extraction, and has an intent to protect the important habitat and recognize recreational uses. Finally, the plan specifies for all units facing the Parks Highway and Petersville Road that they shall each have an undisturbed natural vegetative 150-foot buffer either side of their respective rights-of-way.



The MSB Draft Asset Management Plan: Natural Resource Management Units provides direction for managing multiple uses and the natural resources of some borough-owned lands in the study area.



Section 2. Scenic Resources

A. Scenic Corridor Overview

This section describes scenic resources on public lands adjacent to the George Parks Highway MP 104-132, generally from the Susitna River Bridge to the Chulitna Bridge. The section looks first at the general characteristics of the corridor along with general land status and historic scenic inventory context. Next, the study analyses eight specific “Landscape Units” with respect to scenic characteristics and potential visual sensitivities and absorption potential.

The major scenic resource visible in the corridor are the upper elevations of Mount McKinley or Denali, the highest peak in North America. With its vivid land-sky interface and the sheer magnitude of its size and landforms, Denali is the major scenic icon anticipated by roadway travelers. For northbound travelers, the study area stretch of road teases the viewer and only provides six stretches in the twenty-eight miles where great views to the mountain of any duration are possible from the roadway (weather dependent). These northbound scenic views are on roadway segments oriented toward the mountain peaks, and on straighter segments that provide a longer view to the horizon. Also, the best sites are slightly elevated or angled toward the mountain.

For southbound traffic, and northbound visitors when Denali is not in view, corridor travelers’ viewsheds are generally limited to the roadway and adjacent vegetation. The intact vegetative cover, largely unaltered and undeveloped, creates a significant visual perception of continuity and unity in the corridor. Especially for visitors traveling to Alaska to see a natural landscape, this “green,” which shifts into white with seasonal changes, has a harmony that is a welcome relief from the more cluttered and developed roadside viewsheds further south.

That said, well-seasoned Alaskans and visitors looking for a more vivid landscape and grand vistas, particularly on a southbound drive after visiting Denali, may find the long unbroken stretches of vegetation to be monotonous. Occasionally, wetlands and water, offer some variability in the landscape, as do cultural developments such as farms, and commercial development near Trapper Creek. This provides some roadway travelers welcome contrast and visual interest.

The map on the opposite page highlights MSB and State of Alaska lands, and also shows Trapper Creek and its development node in the center of the study area. It also illustrates information specific to the historical scenic inventory as background context:

1981 Inventory and Conceptual Recommendations

The map opposite also highlights findings excerpted from the *Scenic Resources along the Parks Highway* (1981, DNR), an historic inventory addressing the scenic roadway experience travelling from Anchorage to Fairbanks. This inventory provided conceptual visual recommendations, including for the stretch of roadway covered in this study area. The report was never adopted as policy, although it has been used to some degree to help inform decisions in the unit over the past three decades. It is presented in this report as conceptual background information for historical reference.

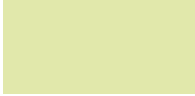
Visual Resource Management Unit 10 (1981) - The analysis for unit 10 between around MP 104 and 109 rates the scenic resources of the portion of the study area at and just north of the Susitna River bridge as “very high” quality, consisting of gently rolling glacial moraine that affords view in all directions including Denali, with generally dense stands of birch-spruce forest with relatively little visible human use. The document recommends that lands adjacent to the highway near the Susitna River Bridge be retained in public ownership and be developed into a roadside rest area, and a 150 foot wide greenbelt, or wider be created based on field surveys, and that “land developments adjacent to the road have special design considerations to insure that the high scenic resource values are not impacted.”

Visual Resource Management Unit 11 (1981) - Further north, beginning at about MP 109 and extending though MP 124, the document rates the scenic quality as “generally low” given the lack of water features, the level to gently rolling topography, and dense birch spruce stands that confine views to the foreground. The document recommends creating greater roadside visual diversity by encouraging land uses that remove some of the dense tree cover, create more topographic diversity, or introduce structures that most drivers identify with or some agriculture or grazing. It recommends confining commercial development to the Petersville Road intersection, and implementing controls so that development remains in scale and character with the surrounding development to consist of low buildings, generally of wood construction, and retention of as much of the native landcover as possible - about 25% of every acre.


Visual Resource Management Unit 12 (1981) - The northern segment between MP 124 and into Denali State Park is described as a transitional area, going from the subdued topography of the Susitna lowlands north into the more mountainous uplands of the Chulitna River. The scenic resource value is considered moderate, however the stretch of roadway is more sensitive to visual impacts from development, and “roadside land uses need to be more carefully located in order to maintain the existing visual quality.” Given the proximity to Denali State Park, it is listed as an area where roadside development should not be encouraged. Finally, the document recommends protecting the numerous views towards the Alaska range and Denali to the Northwest. This suggests that the east side of the road would be the preferred side for the location of roadside land developments.

Context Map

Land Status / Historical Information

 Matanuska-Susitna Borough Land

 State Owned Land

 MSB - SOA Scenic Buffers
150 feet adjacent to the Highway ROW:

- No vegetation removal allowed except to provide physical access to adjacent lands
- Access at intervals of 500 feet or greater
- No utilities except in outer 25 feet of easement
- Recorded with title

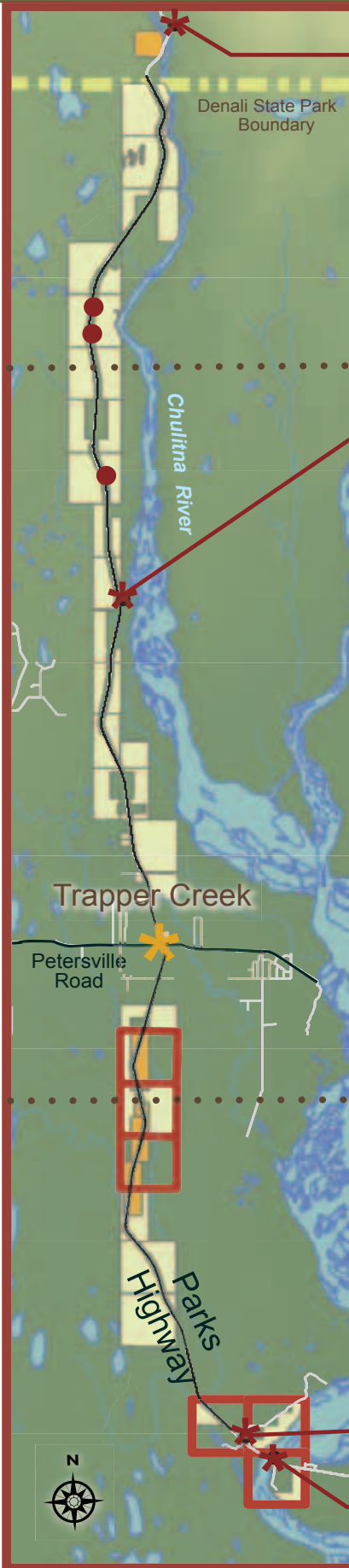
 Commercial Node

 Wayside Viewpoint

 Gravel Pull-off

Historical Susitna Basin Scenic Resource Unit

1981 Susitna Basin Scenic Resources Inventory and Management



Denali Viewpoint South

Susitna Basin Scenic Resource Unit 12

- Transition from Susitna lowlands to Chulitna River Mountain uplands
- Lower visual absorption capability needs greater care to maintain visual quality
- Roadside development is not encouraged

Chulitna Maintenance Station MP 122 Area Proposed Improvements:

- East - Wayside
- West - Parking area
- Chulitna River dock
- Road/trail Crossing Signs

Susitna Basin Scenic Resource Unit 11

- High visual absorption capacity on both sides of the roadway
- Recommendations involve creating more visual diversity and opening up lateral views as possible while preventing strip development
- Views are confined to dense forested foreground with occasional views to distant mountains. Greater diversity could be created by removing some of the tree cover (selective logging), creating more topographic diversity (gravel mining with reclamation), clustered development, and grazing or agriculture.

Susitna Basin Scenic Resource Unit 10

- Low to moderate visual absorption and high scenic resource value.
- Gently rolling moraine affords views in all directions, including to Mt. McKinley and Chugach.
- Recommended greenbelts and varying setbacks for development.

Rabideaux Creek Access

Big Susitna River State Wayside

B. Existing Conditions, Concerns & Opportunities

This section looks at the current scenic conditions from the roadway travelers' perspective, and outlines some of the conditions, concerns, and opportunities relative to future scenic value protection, enhancement, and visitor service development. The section breaks the corridor into specific "Landscape Units" which were defined and then analyzed in the field. Within the study area corridor, eight "Landscape Units" were identified, each representing distinct visual characteristics.

Landscape units are sometimes considered as all encompassing "outdoor rooms" perceived by a viewer as a cohesive visual experience, and can be identified based on common characteristics of landform, vegetation, hydrology, and social attributes where present. Understanding the units is useful for understanding both the existing conditions, and the potential concerns and opportunities for protecting scenic qualities as development occurs.

The landscape unit descriptions that follow will describe general characteristics, capacity, and outline specific issues, concerns and opportunities that can potentially be addressed by the recommendations presented in the final section of this report. Representative photos are used to help convey the "room like" or special qualities of individual units.

A key term presented for each unit is "visual absorption capacity." VAC is a measure of the ability of a landscape to be modified while still retaining the intrinsic qualities that are valued by the viewer. As an example high capacity means that development can be largely screened and be made less dominant in the landscape with good siting, using vegetation, slope, and other factors. Poor capacity means that development, even with care on siting and buffers, can easily dominate the visual landscape.

More detailed aerial maps which highlight land ownership, and wetlands, and include unit specific recommendations are found in the final section of this report under "Public Land Scenic Corridor Recommendations."



Landscape units are sometimes considered as all encompassing "outdoor rooms" because they are perceived by a viewer as a cohesive visual experience. In this study area, a driver passes through eight specific Landscape Units. The first and shortest unit (about one mile long) is characterized by the visual experience in the photo above - passing over the bridge, with water and river bank views that open up the landscape.

Visual Landscape Units

George Parks Highway MP 104-132

Generally from the Susitna River Bridge to the Chulitna Bridge



Unit
1

Susitna River
MP 104 to 105



Unit
2

Dense Forest/Denali Views
MP 105 to 113



Unit
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Trapper Creek Settlement
MP 113 to 116



Unit
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Denali Framed/Agriculture
MP 116 to 118



Unit
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Tunnel of Green
MP 118 to 126



Unit
6

Talkeetna Views
MP 126 to 128



Unit
7

Ridges/Drainages
MP 128 to 131



Unit
8

Chulitna Bridge
MP 131 to 132



Susitna River

MP 104 to 105

Intrinsic Visual Quality

The Susitna River Landscape Unit includes one mile of the Parks Highway as it crosses the Susitna River Bridge, and short segments of roadway beyond, before the road re-enters the forest. The unit has distinctive visual characteristics related to water and provides a shift in spacial perception as foreground and middleground views offer views of reflective water and streambank, and background views with a pleasing interface between treeline and open sky. To the northwest, background views include a tiny glimpse of the Alaska Range’s two tallest peaks, and in the opposite direction, background views of the Talkeetna Range as it heads southeast. Overall the unit has a strong harmony, and provides a vivid and attractive scenic experience.

Cultural Impacts

The bridge and roadway are the most prominent cultural elements in this unit. Because of the roadway’s elevation above the river, seasonal recreational parking, fishing, and other activities are at times visible on the riverbanks below as are informal gravel access and parking areas.

Challenges

The foreground is primarily bridge and water. Fixed elements in the landscape and lands are either public, or private with an existing scenic buffer (1979 agreement). This unit has a medium to low Visual Absorption Capacity as the open viewshed up and down the river could allow development or clearing in vegetation to be easily visible. Within the forest edge however, the large sweep of the landscape helps draw attention away from sensitively placed, smaller scale impacts.

Opportunities

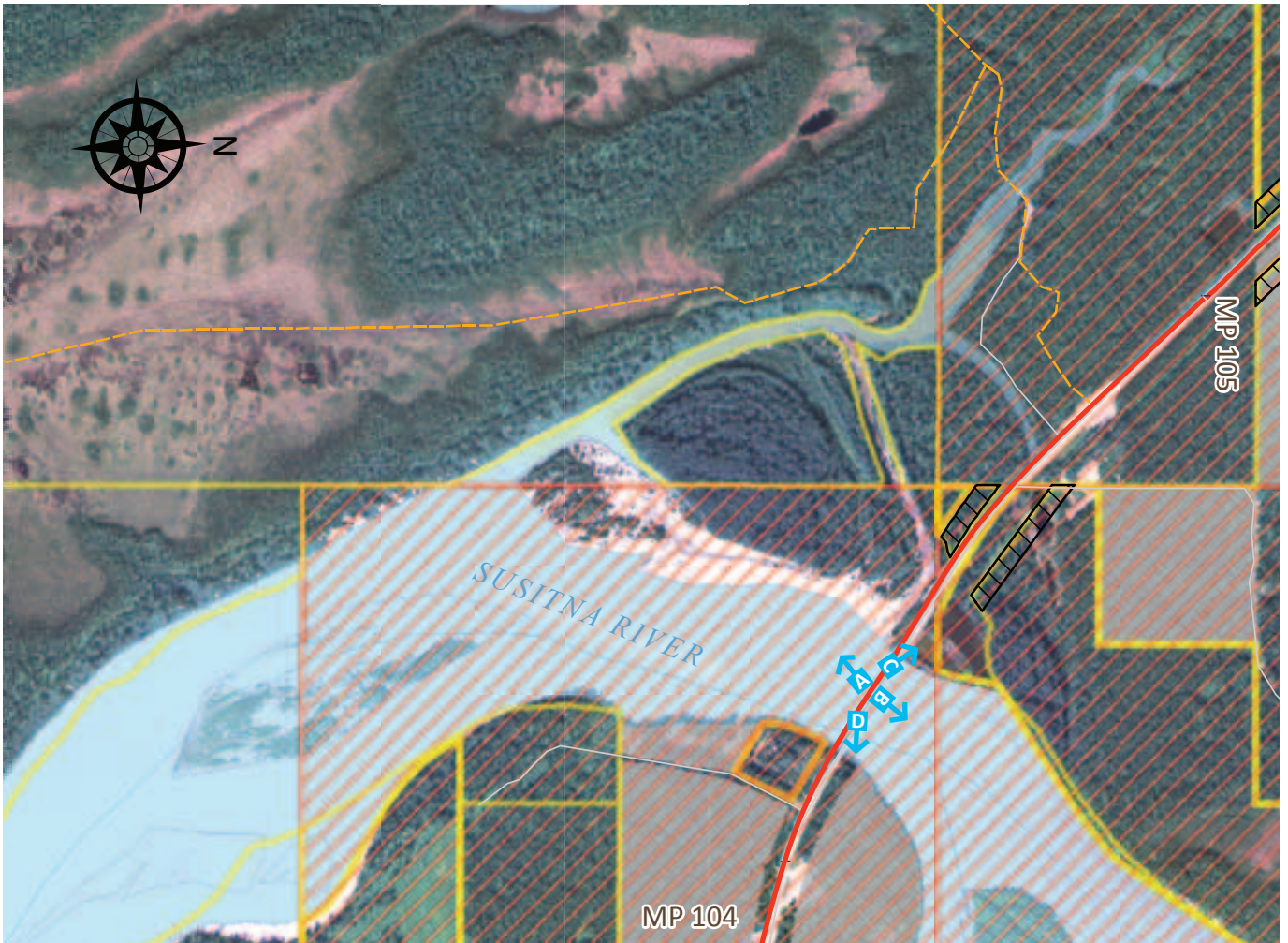
Waterforms are often visually attractive and invite travelers to stop for a better look. The Susitna River tends to invite this activity with its broad braided valley and sandy/gravelly banks on either side, however there are not well defined parking areas, overlook points, or visitor facilities. There is an opportunity to develop these elements, integrated into the landscape in a visually sensitive manner, at an appropriate scale. Opportunities also exist to take advantage of the spatial opening up of the travelers’ view, by providing a gateway or interpretive features in the unit. From the Chulitna bridge south to beyond the Susitna bridge could provide a logical point for extending the Parks Highway Scenic Byway.






1A. Expansive view of water, river bank, treeline, and sky









1B. Northeasterly view up the Susitna River Valley



LEGEND

-  PARKS HIGHWAY
-  TRAILS
-  PHOTO VIEW LOCATION / DIRECTION

LAND STATUS

- | | |
|---|---|
|  MAT-SU BOROUGH |  STATE OF ALASKA |
|  STATE OF ALASKA & MAT-SU BOROUGH SCENIC BUFFER APPLIES (1979) |  PRIVATE |
|  DOT/MAT-SU BOROUGH |  WETLANDS |



1C. Northeastern view with the tops of Denali barely visible



1D. Southeasterly view to the Talkeetna Mountains

Unit 2



Dense Forest / Denali MP 105 to 113

Intrinsic Visual Quality

The Dense Forest / Denali Landscape Unit includes eight miles of gently rolling topography within a mature, dense forest that creates a more enclosed view, framed around the road prism and skyline on the horizon. The unit has distinctive visual characteristics responding to the continuous vegetation along the sides of the road, and several stunning northbound Denali views where road elevations and orientation permit. The tree mix is dominated by mature deciduous birch and evergreen spruce, but there is some diversity in form and distribution, creating sequential diversity and a pleasing land-sky contrast.

Cultural Impacts

The roadway is the most prominent cultural element in this unit, although there are some inconspicuous driveways and turnouts to both public and private parcels. Scenic buffers established in 1979 have been effective at screening other development including residential and gravel pits in this unit, with the exceptions of some roadside clearings primarily associated with utility development.

Challenges

The unit has a High Visual Absorption Capacity, supported by the dense forest adjacent to the roadway. With this vegetation intact, the existing scenic buffers limit should be expected to maintain the harmonious natural scenic qualities of the unit. Roadway right of way impacts (vegetation clearing for maintenance, driveways, and utilities) are the greatest concern, as they can be prominent in the foreground, and in contrast to the continuous vegetation.

Opportunities

Spectacular views to Denali occur for motorists at several points along this corridor, although for fairly short durations. At the public meeting residents noted that at MP 8 (east of the road, back off through a forested area) and at old gravel extraction sites (west of the highway) there are great opportunities to get people off of the road with screened parking and provide short walks to scenic overlooks, interpretive sites or recreation-oriented facilities.



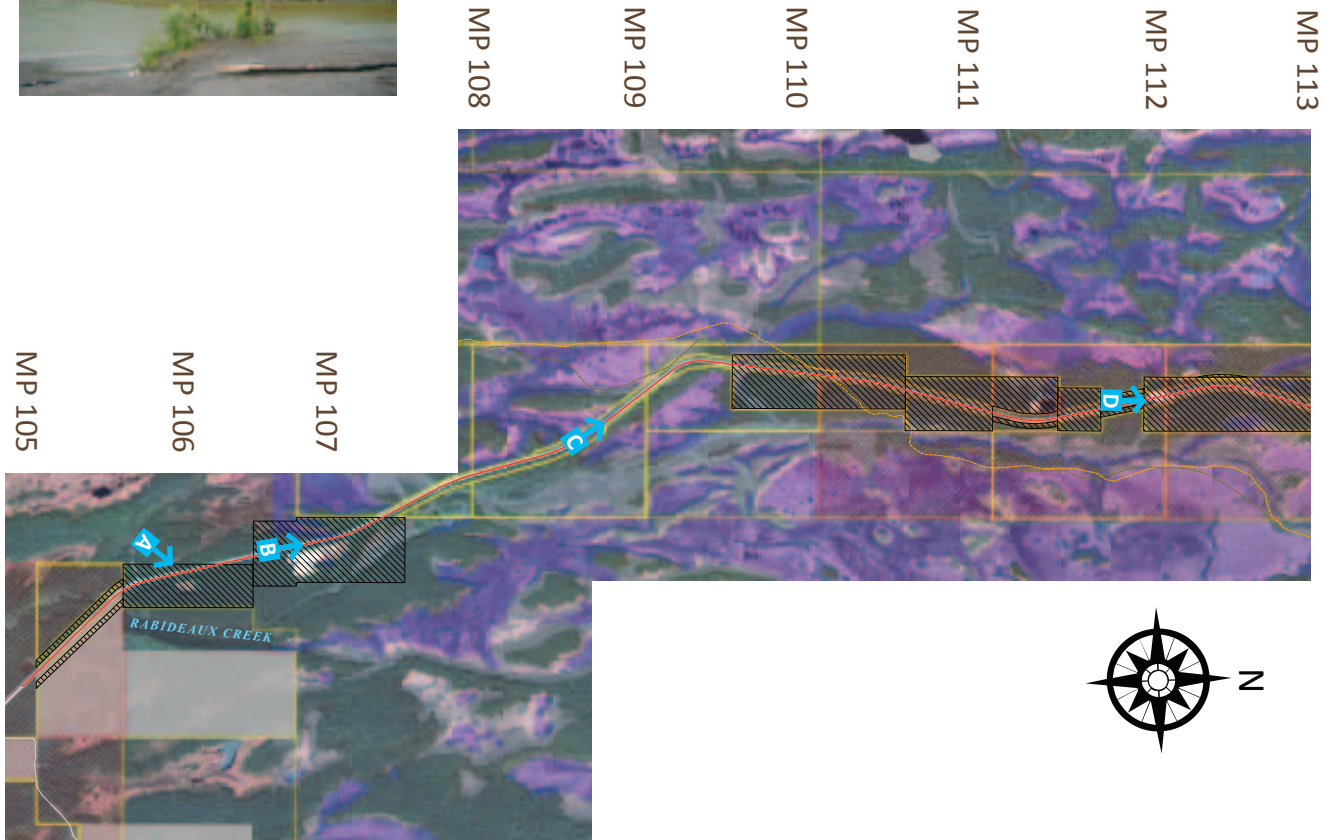
2A. Platted vegetative buffers screen existing development



2B. MP 8, east of the highway is a lovely forested area that could provide a roadside park, walk, and view opportunity.



RABIDEAUX CREEK (photo left) is in this unit on MSB land, but is not visible from the highway. The waterway has both historical and scenic qualities that local residents hope to protect into the future



LEGEND

- PARKS HIGHWAY
- TRAILS
- PHOTO VIEW LOCATION / DIRECTION

LAND STATUS

- MAT-SU BOROUGH
- STATE OF ALASKA & MAT-SU BOROUGH SCENIC BUFFER APPLIES (1979)
- DOT/MAT-SU BOROUGH
- STATE OF ALASKA
- PRIVATE
- WETLANDS



2C. The roadway prism allows some Denali views



2D. Roadside utility clearing is noticeable in the foreground

Unit 3



Trapper Creek Settlement

MP 113 to 116

Intrinsic Visual Quality

The Trapper Creek Settlement Unit includes three miles of road focused at the crossroads of the Parks Highway and Petersville Road. The unit has distinctive visual characteristics responding to Trapper Creek's history, business, and roadside service activities, as well as local cultural attributes.

Cultural Impacts

Trapper Creek's economic and development node at the crossroads is the prominent visual element in this unit. The roadway visual prism expands significantly laterally as a sizable area has been opened up to create a functional activity center and to allow traffic to exit the highway safely. Within this clearing prism, service driveways, frontage roads, buildings, signage, and cultural items in the foreground dominate the landscape.

Challenges

The unit encompasses a highway-oriented development node for the Trapper Creek Community. Ongoing development and additional clearing is likely to occur. This is highly appropriate for a road service area, but as the visual environment gets more busy, and the clearing area from the road is widened, traffic speeding and safety concerns may increase. Further, continued clearing for commercial development has negative visual impacts.

Opportunities

There is limited public land in this segment, and development should be encouraged in this node. There may be opportunities for incorporating visual safety and gateway cues for travelers. Adding cohesive visual design elements into the public road right of way could help both improve safety, and encourage visitors to stop and spend more time and money in the area.



3A. Large buildings in a wide clearing prism are highly visible



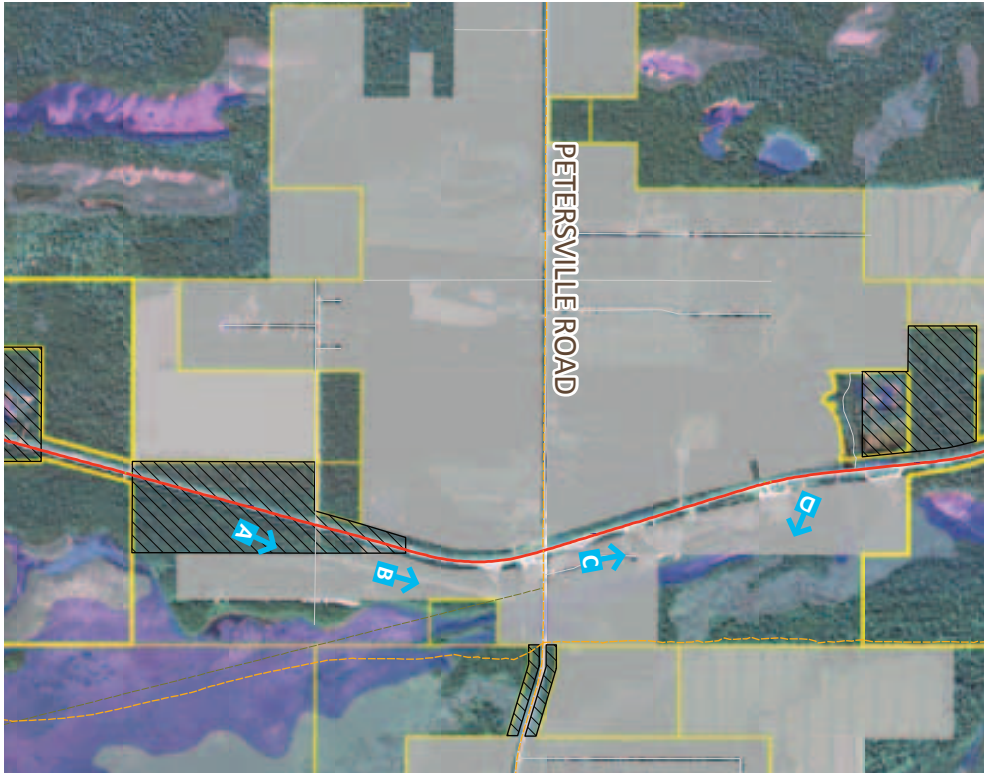
3B. Activity is focused at the crossroads with Petersville Road

MP 113




MP 114

MP 115







MP 116



LEGEND

-  PARKS HIGHWAY
-  TRAILS
-  PHOTO VIEW LOCATION / DIRECTION

LAND STATUS

-  MAT-SU BOROUGH
-  STATE OF ALASKA
-  STATE OF ALASKA & MAT-SU BOROUGH SCENIC BUFFER APPLIES (1979)
-  PRIVATE
-  DOT/MAT-SU BOROUGH
-  WETLANDS



3C. Some developments have maintained mature trees



3D. Larger driveways help fast traffic to exit more safely but may create negative visual impacts

Unit 4



Denali Framed/ Agriculture

MP 116 to 118

Intrinsic Visual Quality

The Denali Framed / Agriculture Unit includes two miles of highway on a generally straight tangent, oriented directly toward the Alaska Range. It is characterized by a sustained view of massive, jagged mountain landforms providing a strong visual contrast against the sky, and creating strong anticipation and excitement for northbound travelers. This view is framed mainly by forest, dominated by mature deciduous birch and evergreen spruce. Some wetlands open up lateral views and add visual interest where the enclosed view broadens out.

Cultural Impacts

The roadway is the most prominent cultural element in this unit, although there are still some visible signs of settlement, including a few driveways. A recreational trail crossing is also present, but not highly visible. West of the road are tracts of agricultural reserve land, which have been cultivated for a number of decades and, although not clearly visible from the highway, are part of the region's historic cultural landscape.

Challenges

The unit has a generally High Visual Absorption Capacity, supported by the dense forest adjacent to the roadway, except where wetlands open up lateral views. Private land is available in the unit which is not protected by the 1979 scenic buffer agreement. Although almost continuous vegetation is present along the road for much of the corridor, this unit's proximity to the crossroads and Trapper Creek may encourage increased development in the foreground which may not be harmonious with the scenic views in the background.

Opportunities

Agriculture can be highly compatible with scenic values when large, visually continuous fields open up background views and add cultural interest to the landscape. Although the orientation of the road and location of the existing agricultural lands may not open up better views than currently exist, this option may be worth exploring.



4A. Longer duration views of Denali emerge

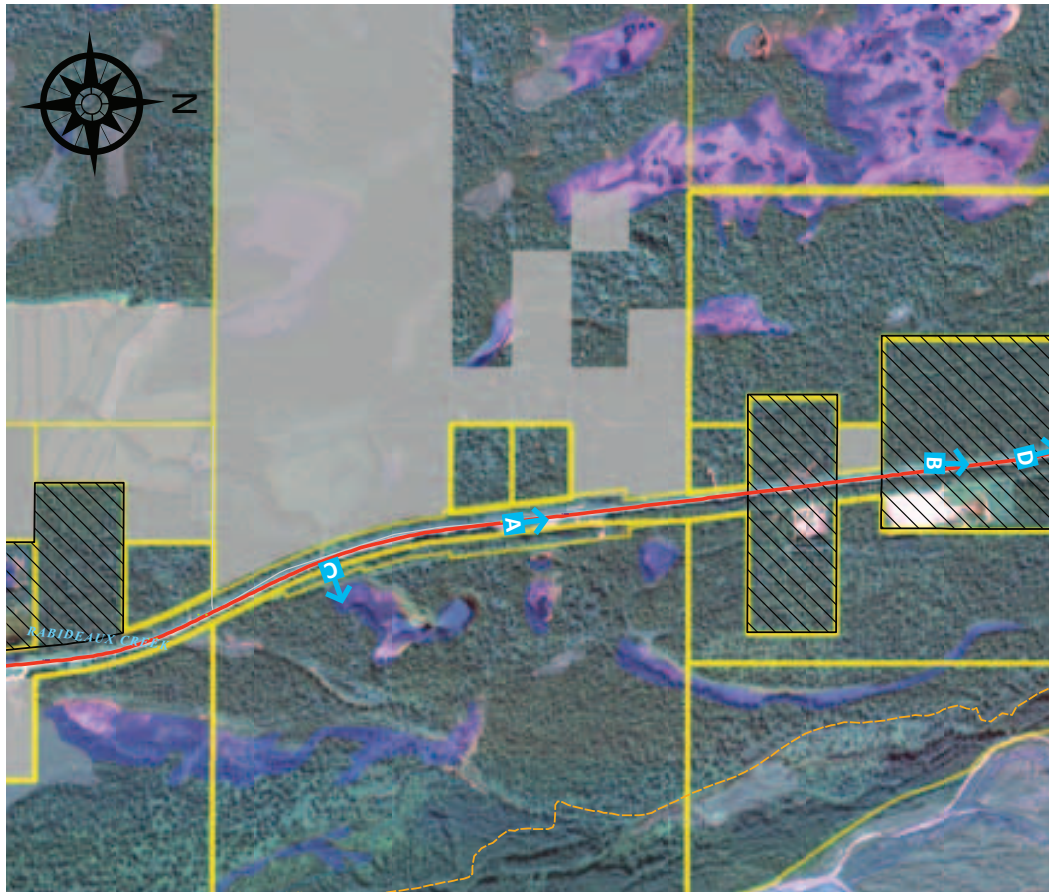


4B. A trail crossing occurs on a long straight stretch

MP 118










MP 117

MP 116



LEGEND

LAND STATUS

- | | | | | | |
|---|---------------------------------|---|---|---|-----------------|
|  | PARKS HIGHWAY |  | MAT-SU BOROUGH |  | STATE OF ALASKA |
|  | TRAILS |  | STATE OF ALASKA & MAT-SU BOROUGH SCENIC BUFFER APPLIES (1979) |  | PRIVATE |
|  | PHOTO VIEW LOCATION / DIRECTION |  | DOT/MAT-SU BOROUGH |  | WETLANDS |



4C. A few drainages and wetlands become visible



4D. There is still dense roadside forest in this unit



Tunnel of Green

MP 118 to 126

Intrinsic Visual Quality

The Tunnel of Green Unit includes eight miles of highway marked by foreground vegetation of reduced variability, and a more enclosed spatial experience. Deciduous birch and evergreen spruce are still the dominant species, but a shift in the forest pattern begins. The trees become smaller than further south with less visible understory, creating a more uniform visual experience laterally. Black spruce and forest with standing water are also present in patches. Road orientation shifts allow some background views of Denali above the “green tunnel” of forest.

Cultural Impacts

The vast majority of land in this unit is owned by MSB and is generally undeveloped. Some maintenance and utility infrastructure is visible because of the changing character of the forest despite the use of scenic buffers. Visible infrastructure beyond the roadway includes a communications tower (west) and utility easement with electrical poles and other markers (east). An ADOT&PF maintenance facility is visible in the foreground at its driveway, MP 121. East of the road is an important historic trail corridor, and this unit has a formalized parking area with restrooms developed to provide access to the trails.

Challenges

The unit has a generally Lower Visual Absorption Capacity, reflecting the smaller trees, less dense forest and increasing muskeg and wetlands. Because so much land in this unit is undeveloped and owned by MSB, scenic buffers can be put in place prior to development, but may need to take into account site conditions to work well in all places. As an example, the screened utility corridor offset east of the road works well through units 1-4, however the screening starts to become more spotty in unit 5, especially where soils and vegetation are damaged by equipment.

Opportunities

Proximate to and east of the roadway are the historical trail and river, both highly valued by area residents. Public river access near MP 121.5 in this section would allow visitors to break up this unit and look at the Chulitna river, just a few hundred feet from the road. Additionally, this unit could have opportunities for selective vegetative removal to open up views of interest, potentially in association with trail overlooks or service areas.



5A. Alaska Range is visible on several stretches



5B. Fewer road elevation changes reduce visual interest

MP 118

MP 119

MP 120

MP 121

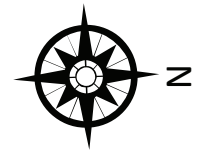
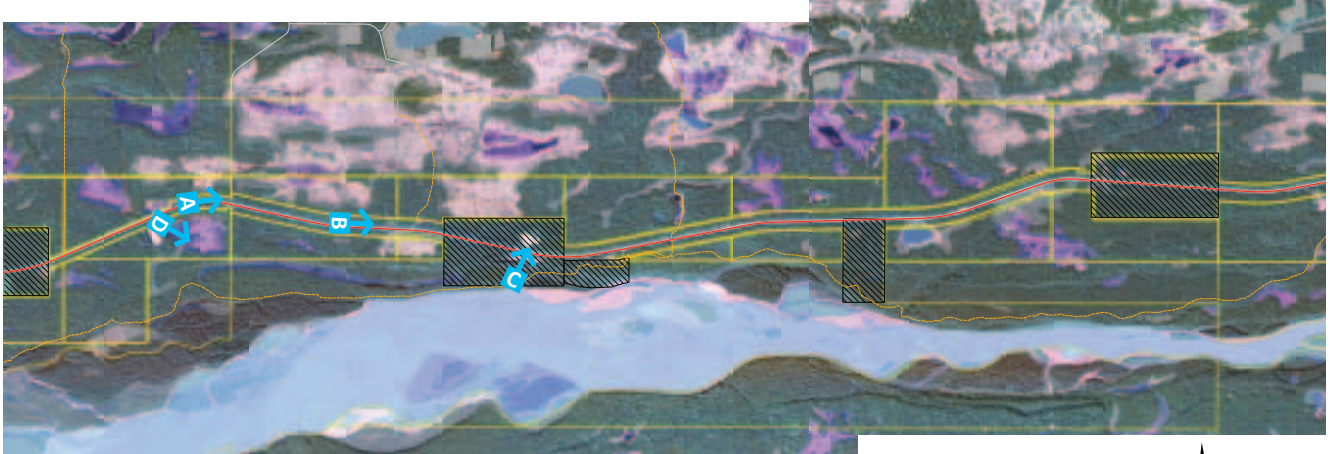
MP 122

MP 123




MP 124

MP 125







MP 126



LEGEND

-  PARKS HIGHWAY
-  TRAILS
-  PHOTO VIEW LOCATION / DIRECTION

LAND STATUS

-  MAT-SU BOROUGH
-  STATE OF ALASKA
-  STATE OF ALASKA & MAT-SU BOROUGH SCENIC BUFFER APPLIES (1979)
-  PRIVATE
-  DOT/MAT-SU BOROUGH
-  WETLANDS



5C. ADOT&PF maintenance site



5D. Wetlands adjacent to the roadway are common

Unit 6



Talkeetna Views

MP 126 to 128

Intrinsic Visual Quality

The Talkeetna Views Unit is characterized by marked transitions in the vegetation, surprise open views to Denali where wetlands extend out west of the road, and some background views to the Talkeetna Mountains. The vegetation is variable responding to natural conditions including large permafrost and wetland areas with black spruce, muskeg, and gravel uplands with stands of large well formed trees. These elements add to the growing anticipation for the northbound traveler, and this unit has a strong transitional quality within the corridor.

Cultural Impacts

Mainly this unit consists of MSB undeveloped land. The roadway and roadside parking areas are visible in the landscape as are some utilities approximately 40 feet east of the road. A mile from the road to the west there are a number of cabin sites with no road access and parking on the road and walking or use of sleds/snowmachines is typical. This area is sparsely settled, and as the development footprints are small, they are of limited visibility.

Challenges

The unit has a Low Visual Absorption Capacity, especially west of the highway, reflecting the changes in vegetation and the opening vistas. This visually sensitive area currently has an existing residential subdivision proximate to the new South Denali Visitors Complex which may be under pressure to expand including a demand for improved utilities and road access. East of the road some pockets of denser vegetation remain which could serve as buffers possible development, especially associated with gravel extraction sites.

Opportunities

Expanded development west of the road can be carefully designed to respond to the visual sensitivities of this unit. Maintaining small building footprints and carefully sited access points and/or utilities will be key issues. East of the road, the historical trail and river access provide opportunities for public facilities that provide greater access to scenic resources, including a trailhead, campground, and boat launch for float trips.



6A. Smaller vegetation increases visibility to Alaska Range

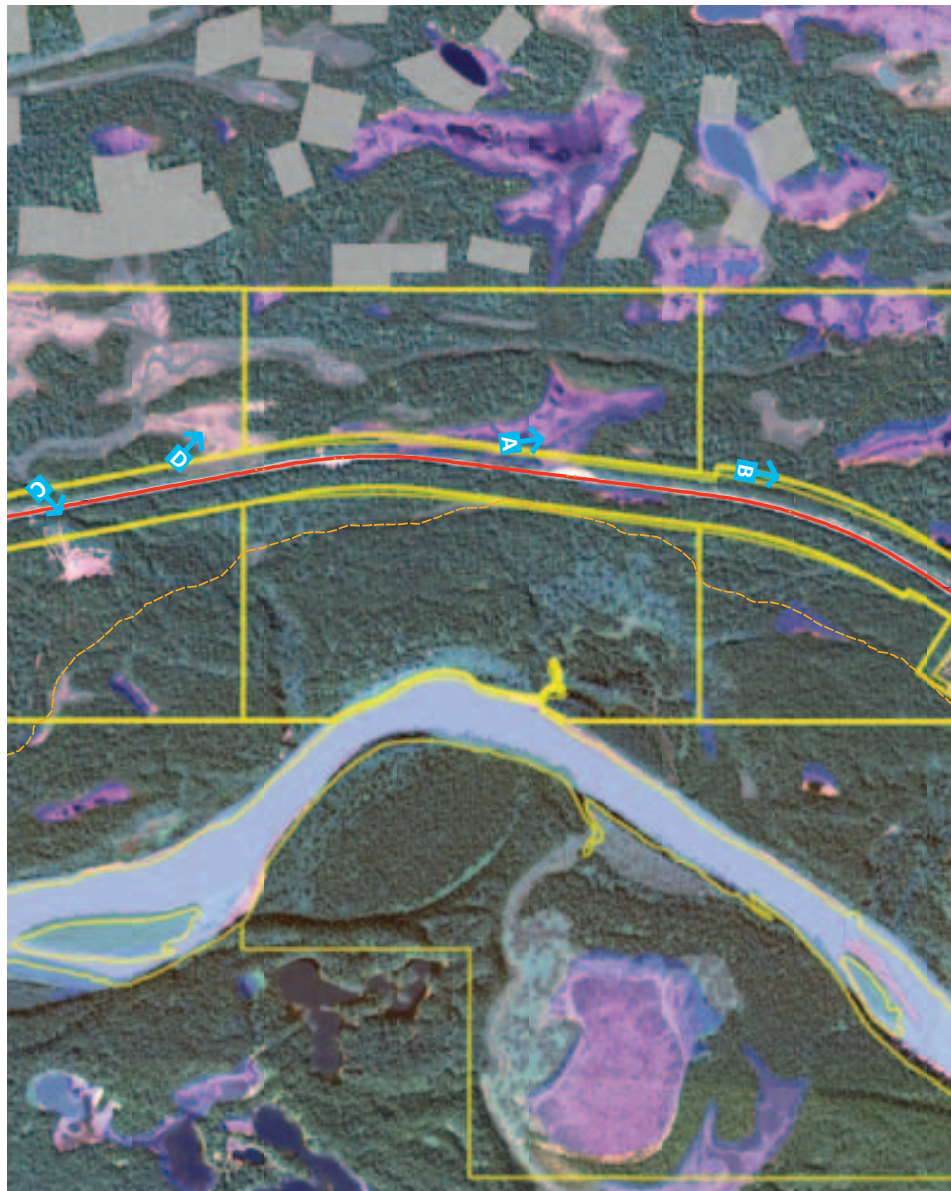


6B. The low Talkeetna Mountains are visible in this unit




MP 128

MP 127







MP 126

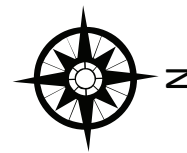


LEGEND

-  PARKS HIGHWAY
-  TRAILS
-  PHOTO VIEW LOCATION / DIRECTION

LAND STATUS

-  MAT-SU BOROUGH
-  STATE OF ALASKA & MAT-SU BOROUGH SCENIC BUFFER APPLIES (1979)
-  DOT/MAT-SU BOROUGH
-  STATE OF ALASKA
-  PRIVATE
-  WETLANDS



6C. Gravel extraction site east of the road screened by trees



6D. Larger vistas begin to open up, particularly to the west



Ridges / Drainages

MP 128 to 131

Intrinsic Visual Quality

The Ridges and Drainages Unit is characterized by ridges and topography. The forest is less dense, and near waterways, wetlands, and drainageways, vegetation may be very thin and large views open up. This is followed by portions with enclosed views as ridges run parallel to the roadway that are covered with vegetation. Ridges elevation and backslopes that face Alaska Range where the slope drops away could present view opportunities. Along this portion of road there is some monotony in the landscape because of the more enclosed view between ridges, with vegetation dominating the foreground.

Cultural Impacts

The roadway and some trail crossings are visible in the landscape. Limited numbers of driveways exit to the west of the road, via a shared driveway where a small subdivision sit fairly hidden behind a ridgeline. Although no record was located, residents in this area believe that their properties are subject to the 1979 scenic buffer agreement.

Challenges

The unit has a generally Low Visual Absorption Capacity, although with variability dependent on topography. West of the road there is a fairly hidden residential subdivision with shared road access. This area is proximate to the new South Denali Visitors Complex and may come under pressure to expand, including improved utilities and road access.

Opportunities

Expanded development west of the road can be carefully designed to respond to the visual sensitivities and located so as to be screened behind the ridges and the variable landforms in this unit. Maintaining small building footprints and carefully sited access points and/or utilities will be key issues. East of the road, greenbelt and river access opportunities could be considered.



7A. Ridges and variable landforms are along roadway



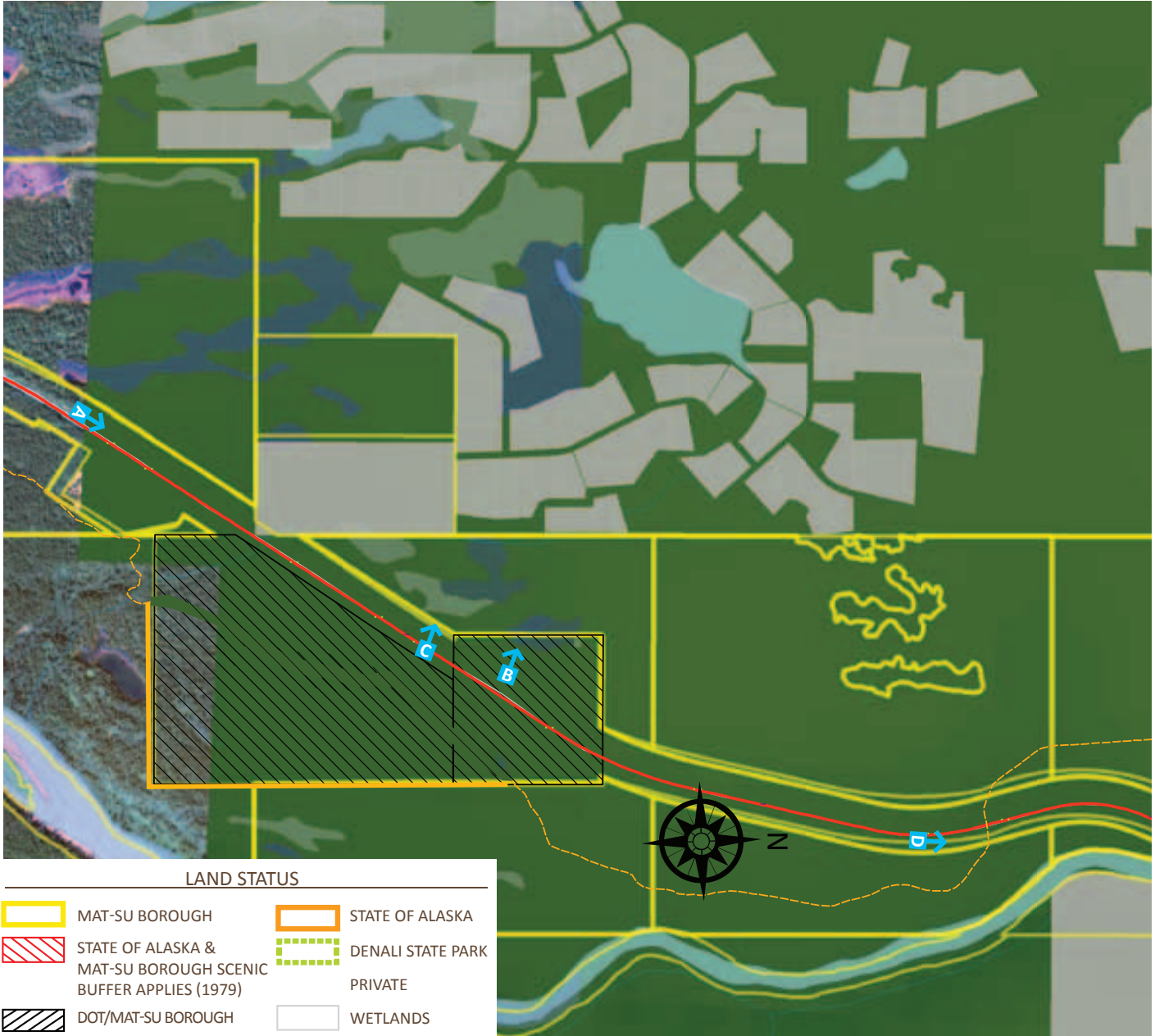
7B. Vegetation is thin near drainageways and wetlands

MP 131

MP 130

MP 129

MP 128



7C. Larger trees occur although they can be sparse



7D. Trail crossing at MP 130

Unit 8



Chulitna Bridge

MP 131 to 132

Intrinsic Visual Quality

The final unit encompasses one mile of highway, extending into the Chulitna River Valley, and across the Chulitna River bridge. The visual characteristics are shaped by the changes in elevation starting above the river with great mountain views and curving down to the bridge and beyond. Just west and north of the road is a downslope that faces Denali. Views become limited again as the road descends into the river valley, but a Denali view appears briefly once on the bridge. The adjacent terrain includes a continuation of ridges, and less dense forest.

Cultural Impacts

The roadway, bridge and some signage (mainly oriented to visitors) are visible in the landscape. Limited numbers of driveways exit to the road, but are not prominent.

Challenges

The unit has a low to variable Visual Absorption Capacity, depending on the elevation and vegetation. The site is virtually at Denali State Park's boundary and is proximate to the new South Denali Visitor Complex. There may be strong pressure to use MSB lands in this unit to serve private development interests (housing, hotel site, business).

Opportunities

This unit is essentially a gateway to Denali State Park and has world class view area destination potential. The key consideration is to ensure that the "highest and best possible use" takes full advantage of the site. A special study of the area should be done prior to development to ensure that the "right" publicly oriented use is selected that takes the greatest advantage of the areas scenic opportunities and proximity to the state park.



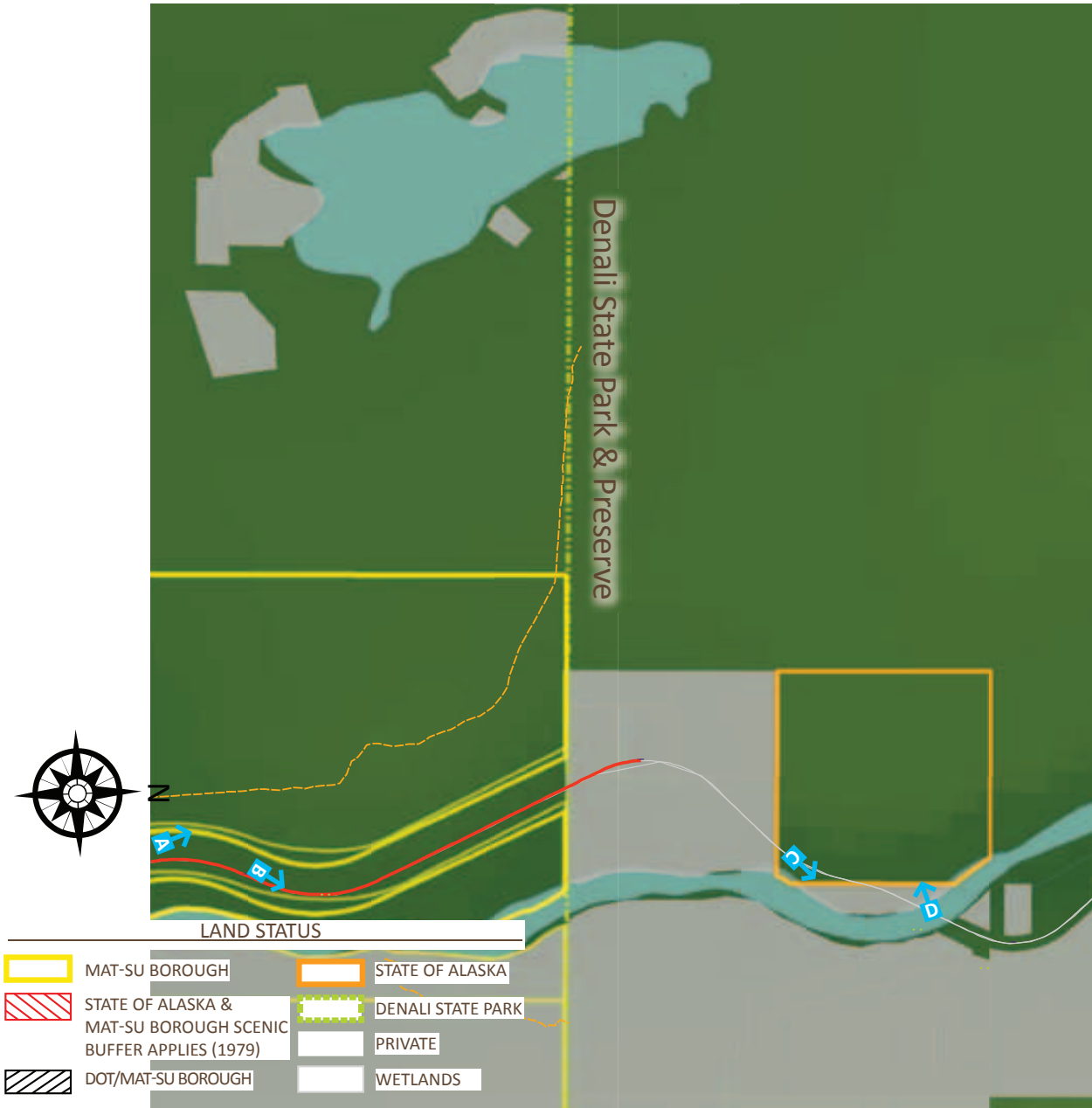
8A. MP 131 provides a large viewshed to the Alaska Range



8B. Coming down into the Chulitna River Valley

MP 131

MP 132



8C. The Chulitna Bridge and Water



8D. Exiting the Chulitna Bridge

Section 3. Recommendations

This final section of the study outlines sensitive design principles that can guide decision makers in considering how to best enhance and preserve scenic resources on public lands in the study area.

This is followed by several pages of Landscape Unit Maps with discussion of issues and approaches to resolution that were raised during the course of the study. The maps are intended only as a macro-level planning exploration based on scenic corridor considerations, and all notations will need to be verified, adapted, and refined through site specific study and/or public review processes prior to implementation.

A. Sensitive Design Principles

Sensitive design can analyze more carefully each potential site and project in the corridor and improve the quality of visual outcomes. Principles to consider in sensitive design include:

1. The design character of any development should be compatible with the scenic resources of the corridor, and respect and enhance the unique topography, vegetation, historical and scenic context of its environment.
 - Siting of new development should be focused in nodes, and selectively located in portions of the corridor where there is high visual absorption capacity, and safely located suitable shared public access.
 - Building design should consider the distinctive qualities and character of the surrounding context, and as appropriate, incorporate those qualities in its design.
 - Land uses that frame scenic views and add a cultural element, without visual clutter, should be considered for sites where this will open up broader views to the Alaska Range (e.g. grazing, agriculture, campgrounds and community facilities).
2. Development, through appropriate siting, scale and orientation of buildings should recognize and preserve established major vistas, as well as protect natural features such as:
 - Waterways, wetlands and drainages
 - Foreground native vegetation and landforms
3. Development should be sensitive to existing topography and the scenic experience of the corridor by minimizing disturbances to the natural environment, and as much as possible, restoring natural habitats and ecological processes.
 - Protect significant visual corridors experienced in the roadway corridor
 - Preserve existing vegetation, balanced with highly selective clearing for views where this achieves existing and future viewshed management objectives.
 - Minimize scarring of the natural topography, particularly in sensitive black spruce and wetland settings

- During platting, the MSB may determine a need to add requirements to specific parcels to both limit additional access points, or to record scenic buffer requirements.
4. The design, development and maintenance of public facilities, including in the right-of-way, is an opportunity to support scenic values and convey design expectations.
 - Access points should be limited to the extent possible, ideally spaced with a mile separation at section lines.
 - Frontage parallel access roads off the highway have the potential to extend the road and scale of disturbance into a greater prism. This issue should be considered in planning for transportation improvements in sensitive viewshed areas.
 - Utility Location: Where possible, utilities should be located where not visible from the roadway, either by burying or through use of vegetative buffers and screening. Note that highway right-of-way and vegetation within it should not be relied on as a buffer.
 - Specific to this plan area, all functional corridor elements: utilities, trails, retaining walls maintenance facilities, etc. to the extent possible, should be located on the eastern side of the road (not on the Alaska Range side) and incorporate vegetative buffers.
 - Clearing and maintaining vegetation in the roadway right-of-way will be necessary both to support scenic views and for the safety of the traveling public.
 5. The National Scenic Byway program may help support opportunities for improving view areas and developing interpretive opportunities that help increase the scenic and traveling experience around hydrology, wetlands and historic characteristics of the study area. The George Parks Highway due north of the study area (MP 132-248) was recently recognized as one of America's National Byways® Designations; extending this national designation southward through the study area could bring recognition of scenic qualities and funding for highway right-of-way enhancements between MP 104 and 132.