

Organization History¹

The Eagle River Nature Center log building originally operated as the Paradise Haven Lodge, a privately owned business. In 1980, Alaska State Parks purchased the property and opened the Eagle River Visitor Center in 1981. The center prospered year-round and flourished in the oil-revenue heyday of the early 1980s. Operating with a paid park staff of five and a budget of \$180,000, it welcomed thousands of visitors year-round. By 1995, however, budget cuts reduced its operating budget to \$16,000. Faced with closing the center, the Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation held public meetings to determine the facility's fate. The public asked to keep the facility open and the state responded by deciding to lease the visitor center to a private operator.

The Friends of Eagle River Nature Center, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, won the bid to operate the center. The division retained full ownership of the building and grounds, stipulated certain maintenance duties for the permitted area, placed limits on staff salaries, and created compatibility guidelines for use of the permitted area. Operation and programming responsibility went to the new nature center board of directors.

Renaming it the "Eagle River Nature Center," the organization held a grand opening in May 1996 and expanded its program offerings in 1997. In addition to the popular interpretive programs, guided hikes, and daily nature walks, the organization added in-depth workshops for adults, like "Wildflowers of Eagle River Valley" and "Eating Wild Mushrooms." Working with the Anchorage School District, the center also refined its popular science education program. Additions to the center's grounds included a 260-foot boardwalk and creek-side viewing deck. The trail to the Eagle River also received a layer of gravel and native plants were added to the surrounding gardens. Visitors could enjoy most of the services and amenities for free, with fees only charged for parking, longer hikes, in-depth workshops, and school programs. In November 1997, nature center managers received an Alaska Land Forum first place award for the "Most Improved or Innovative Business" in the tourism industry.

However, the center also experienced growing pains. During busy summer weekends in 1997, the center's parking lot was full. In an attempt to alleviate the overcrowded parking, volunteers cleared brush to provide a stopgap solution for about 20 cars on the old racetrack area. However, some drivers ignored the parking fee or parked on nearby residential roads to avoid paying, annoying nearby residents. Although the nature center earned more than \$23,000 in parking fees for the year, the manager estimated that about 20% of potential parking revenue went unpaid.

Since 1997, the situation has increasingly become worse. Strain on the parking area is now coupled with strains on the center's building capacity and aging infrastructure. These growing pains, along with the fact that the site was originally developed assuming fully subsidized facilities, indicates a need to develop a site plan to increase the center's ability to generate revenue. The center's ability to generate revenue will enable the Friends of Eagle River Nature Center to operate the facility without state assistance.

1. Information from internal Eagle River Nature Center document: "Eagle River Nature Center—Need for Parking Improvements and Site Plan"