

CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Chapter 5 presents a set of land use recommendations and options for the NW¼ Section 25. The recommendations are based on community facility needs, community aspirations, environmental characteristics, compatibility with surrounding land uses, access and infrastructure, recommendations of the *Chugiak-Eagle River Comprehensive Plan* and relevant satellite plans, and HLB responsibilities. The outcome (1) balances the multiple community facility needs, (2) incorporates trail corridors into areas given to uses other than natural open space, and (3) provides a set of options in the easterly plain of the NW¼ Section 25, pending resolution of outstanding issues. By accommodating clear and legitimate public facility needs for community sports fields and an elementary school, the recommendations resemble *Land Use Alternative 2* from Chapter 4. *Alternative 1*, although favored by community participants, failed to address community needs other than natural open space and trails.

The land use recommendations seek to accommodate and balance the multiple legitimate community facility needs that are appropriate for the Study Area. First, it is recommended to add the majority of the NW¼ Section 25 to Beach Lake Regional Park, primarily for trails and natural open space. Within the regional park there is also specific provision for community sports field facilities in the southwestern Study Area. A park access and collector street is required to provide site access and north-south connectivity in Birchwood. The ridge slope in the southeast is reserved for open space, nordic ski trails, and a sledding hill. A walking trail up the slope links the park to an elementary school that is favored for location on the crest of the ridge. The land use recommendations also accommodate a need for limited gravel extraction. A final recommendation for the easterly plain of the Study Area is contingent on the resolution of several outstanding issues beyond the scope of the *Land Use Study*. For this reason, there are three (3) land use options for the easterly plain area of the NW¼ Section 25.

Integral to the land use recommendation is the preparation and formal adoption of an updated *Beach Lake Park Master Plan* to guide and coordinate the development of community sports fields, trails, and other park facilities in the NW¼ Section 25. The plan should site recreational uses other than natural open space and trails in the Study Area to accommodate strategic trail corridors. The *Park Master Plan* is also for the entire regional park, an overall strategy to coordinate long-term development of the NW¼ Section 25 and Beach Lake Regional Park as a whole. The plan should review the present and future needs of recreational user groups for the park, and coordinate, balance and preserve recreational uses through policy statements and location and design of facilities.

Land Use Recommendations

The *NW¼ Section 25 Land Use Study* makes the following seven (7) Land Use Recommendations for the Study Area, *except for the easterly plain area*:

1. **Add the Study Area northwest of the Alaska Railroad including the Fire Creek floodplain to Beach Lake Park, as a natural habitat and potential regional trail corridor.** The wetland and coastal floodplain are protected resources, and are relatively inaccessible because of steep topography and the railroad alignment.
2. **Add the Hill Loop Trail and the very northeastern corner (5 acres) of the Study Area to Beach Lake Regional Park for the multi-use and nordic ski trail system.** The Hill Loop Trail is an established, popular trail in the Beach Lake Park trail system, and designated for protection by the Municipality. The undulating natural terrain makes the Hill Loop and adjoining northeastern corner of the Study Area a natural extension of the adjacent Beach Lake Park trails. The 330-foot buffer (one HLB parcel) south of the existing park preserves an existing, 40-foot high, east-west hill as a buffer from potential gravel extraction. Integral to the existing park, these northern areas merit protection from gravel extraction.
3. **Add the ridge slope in the southeast Study Area to Beach Lake Regional Park for a nordic ski climb, a sledding hill, and a scenic viewpoint.** Because the ridge slope is highly valued for the terrain it could offer the ski trail system, trail corridors between existing trails and the ridge must be reserved on the central plain. A pocket of black spruce along the toe of the slope has poor sunlight and drainage, making it less useful or desirable for development than for trail access to the ridge. A 100-foot buffer on the crest of the ridge should be added to Beach Lake Park as part of the ridge slope acquisition. The buffer is needed to protect stabilizing vegetation along the ridge slope, and to secure access for trails and a potential sledding hill. The buffer will also preserve an attractive birch wood and a public access trail with scenic viewpoints to the Knik Arm, Alaska Range and Talkeetna Mountains.
4. **Add the southwesterly plain of the Study Area to Beach Lake Park, primarily for use as community sports fields.** There is a need for a minimum 35 acres of sports field facilities central to Birchwood. The community sports fields area will be a part of Beach Lake Park. However, it will address a recreational need that is distinct from natural open space and trails. A *Beach Lake Park Master Plan* should determine the exact location and site plan of community sports fields within the southwesterly plain of the Study Area. The *Park Master Plan* should ensure that the location of the community sports fields will preserve two strategic natural open space and trail corridors in the NW¼ Section 25. First, corridors should remain intact

between the Hill Loop Trail and the Fire Creek beaver dams to the south of the site. Second, trail corridors should be provided from the Hill Loop to the ridge in the southeast corner of the Study Area. To the extent practical, the mature birch wood on the southwesterly plain below the toe of the ridge should be considered a priority for preservation.

5. **Reserve an 80-foot corridor for a 2-lane neighborhood collector and park access street.** The street should traverse the Study Area southwest-northeast to Hillcrest Drive. It will provide north-south connectivity in Birchwood, and access to park facilities on the site. It should provide a paved separated trail, grade-separated ski trail crossings, with a road design that is complementary to the park setting. An example of a context-sensitive street is the road design for Kincaid Park.
6. **Accommodate the need for 30 acres of gravel extraction in the southwestern Study Area.** Extraction should be limited in geographic extent, depth, and time period to minimize neighborhood impacts and to facilitate subsequent development of community sports fields. The southwestern corner of the Study Area is the most appropriate location because gravel extraction here has fewer impacts on the regional park and existing residential, and is compatible with relatively timely development of sports fields. Also, possible gravel haul routes are to the southwest. Extraction further northeast, or a northeast haul route, would impact the existing neighborhood and regional park. Gravel extraction is not compatible with a chalet on the southeasterly plain. An extraction pit should also be located at least 150 feet away from the ridge slope, to preserve a natural open space corridor. To the extent practical, the mature birch wood on the southwest plain along the toe of the ridge should be considered a priority for preservation.
7. **Reserve for school purposes the southeast ridge top, an area of 9 acres, as an elementary school site.** With additional acres to the south, the southeast ridge could accomplish the 15-acre elementary school site standard. It is an appropriate site to address school needs because it shares the ridge with the future neighborhood to the south, and is accessible to the existing neighborhood to the east via Almdale Avenue. It offers valuable scenic views of the region. A school is compatible with trail and sledding hill connections down the hill into the recommended community park facilities. If a selection process finds a critical failure in this site even if expanded south, the site is appropriate for a land exchange for a school site elsewhere, and is recommended for residential development at an R-7 density. The developable area available for residential may be somewhat less than what is available for a school site, because school grounds incorporate the AWWU Eklutna Transmission Main (water pipeline) on the southeast ridge top.

Outstanding Issues for Resolution

A final recommendation for the easterly plain of the Study Area is contingent on the resolution of the following outstanding issues:

Gravel Extraction Agreement

A land use recommendation regarding the easterly plain of the Study Area depends on the extent of gravel extraction in the NW¼ Section 25. The Municipality and the State should negotiate an agreement that sets limits to extraction, in order to minimize impacts on parks and neighborhoods, and to accommodate other legitimate community facility needs in the Study Area. The agreement should address:

- Limits to the geographic extent, depth, and time period of the gravel extraction in specific areas.
- Location and development of haul routes for gravel trucks.
- Site reclamation, including recontouring and revegetation, that provides for long-term park facilities in the Study Area.

A gravel agreement would clarify whether the easterly plain of the NW¼ Section 25 can be the focus of near-term investment in a chalet with an access street, trailhead, parking and trail maintenance facilities. The easterly plain provides ample space for permanent chalet facilities adjacent to the existing trails system. However, a gravel extraction agreement that preserves a 5-acre portion of the easterly plain is prerequisite to selecting the NW¼ Section 25 as a chalet site. In the meantime, the nordic ski club has identified a suitable chalet site to the north of Section 25, in the existing Beach Lake Regional Park.

Beach Lake Regional Park Master Plan

A land use recommendation regarding the easterly plain of the Study Area also should rely on the preparation and adoption of an updated *Beach Lake Park Master Plan*. The stated facility need for maximum regional park expansion into the NW¼ Section 25, including trails and a potential chalet, results not from a lack of gross regional park acreage in Beach Lake Park. It is a consequence of the piecemeal division of use of the regional parkland. This has affected the ability of the park to be a multi-use recreational resource. The situation has led to proposed investments in chalet and trail facilities on the easterly plain of the NW¼ Section 25, rather than in a more central location in Beach Lake Park. The *Chugiak-Eagle River Comprehensive Plan* also recommends an update of the park master plan.

As Chugiak-Eagle River grows, and the Birchwood community reaches build-out, community pressure for multi-use recreation access for the main park is likely to

increase. Physical accessibility will also improve because of the coming grade-separated railroad track crossing in Beach Lake Park. A park master plan will review the present and future needs of recreational user groups in the park, and coordinate, balance and preserve recreational uses through policy statements and location and design of facilities. The plan should take into account changing conditions in Chugiak-Eagle River when evaluating future public facility needs.

A plan will clarify whether the easterly plain of the NW¼ Section 25 should be the focus of trail investments. If a master planning process were to result in acreage becoming available north of the railroad, then the easterly plain of the NW¼ Section 25 may become less critical for trails expansion. In such a case, a chalet could be well-located north of Section 25, on the north end of the existing ski trail system, off Beach Lake Road, central to the trail systems. A master planning process that takes into account the community growth and other changing conditions to the year 2020 is prerequisite to a clear determination regarding the public facility need for the easterly plain.

Options for the Easterly Plain Area

Three options were developed to address the unresolved status of the easterly plain area. Options A and B incorporate the seven basic land use recommendations, but do not address a gravel extraction agreement or park planning issues in the easterly plain. Option C also incorporates the seven land use recommendations, but is based on resolution of the outstanding issues affecting the easterly plain.

While Options A and B are legitimate choices, Option C is recommended. A final decision for the easterly plain is contingent on gravel extraction and a *Beach Lake Park Master Plan*. These outstanding issues are beyond the scope of the *Land Use Study*. If, however, it is the will of the decision-making bodies to take immediate action on the easterly plain, Options A and B represent legitimate alternatives.

Option A –

Concentration of Beach Lake Park Facilities in the NW¼ Section 25

If the northern 1,450 acres of Beach Lake Park remain unavailable to multi-use recreational trails, then there is an arguable public facility need for the easterly plain of the Study Area to be used for trails and potentially a chalet and trailhead. A chalet could be located to the north of Section 25. However, the easterly plain provides ample space for chalet facilities adjacent to the existing trails system. Co-location with community sports fields is also advantageous. The easterly plain is deemed undesirable for gravel extraction, in part because of conflicts with the timely development of a chalet, and because of impacts on existing residential.

Community support runs strong for addition of this area to Beach Lake Park. The easterly plain could address community aspirations for developing multiple trails to the southeast ridge, and for expanding the park's open spaces for future generations. Even if it is the will of decision making bodies to recommend the easterly plain of the NW¼ Section 25 as park, a gravel extraction agreement remains prerequisite to selection of the easterly plain for a chalet site.

Option B –

Master Planned, Shared Recreation Use of Beach Lake Park

The easterly plain is deemed surplus to public need because a portion of the northern 1,450 acres of Beach Lake Park may eventually become more accessible to multi-use trails. With acreage available in the central park, the easterly plain of the NW¼ Section 25 becomes less critical for trails expansion over the next 20 years. A chalet is recommended to be located north of Section 25, instead of adjacent to gravel extraction or residential. The easterly plain of the NW¼ Section 25 is considered less than optimal for a chalet and multi-use recreational gateway to Beach Lake Park. The easterly plain has limited scenic views, in comparison to chalet sites in Kincaid or Russian Jack Springs Park, or to scenic sites that may exist within Beach Lake Park. The easterly plain is also deemed undesirable for gravel extraction, due to impacts on park and residential.

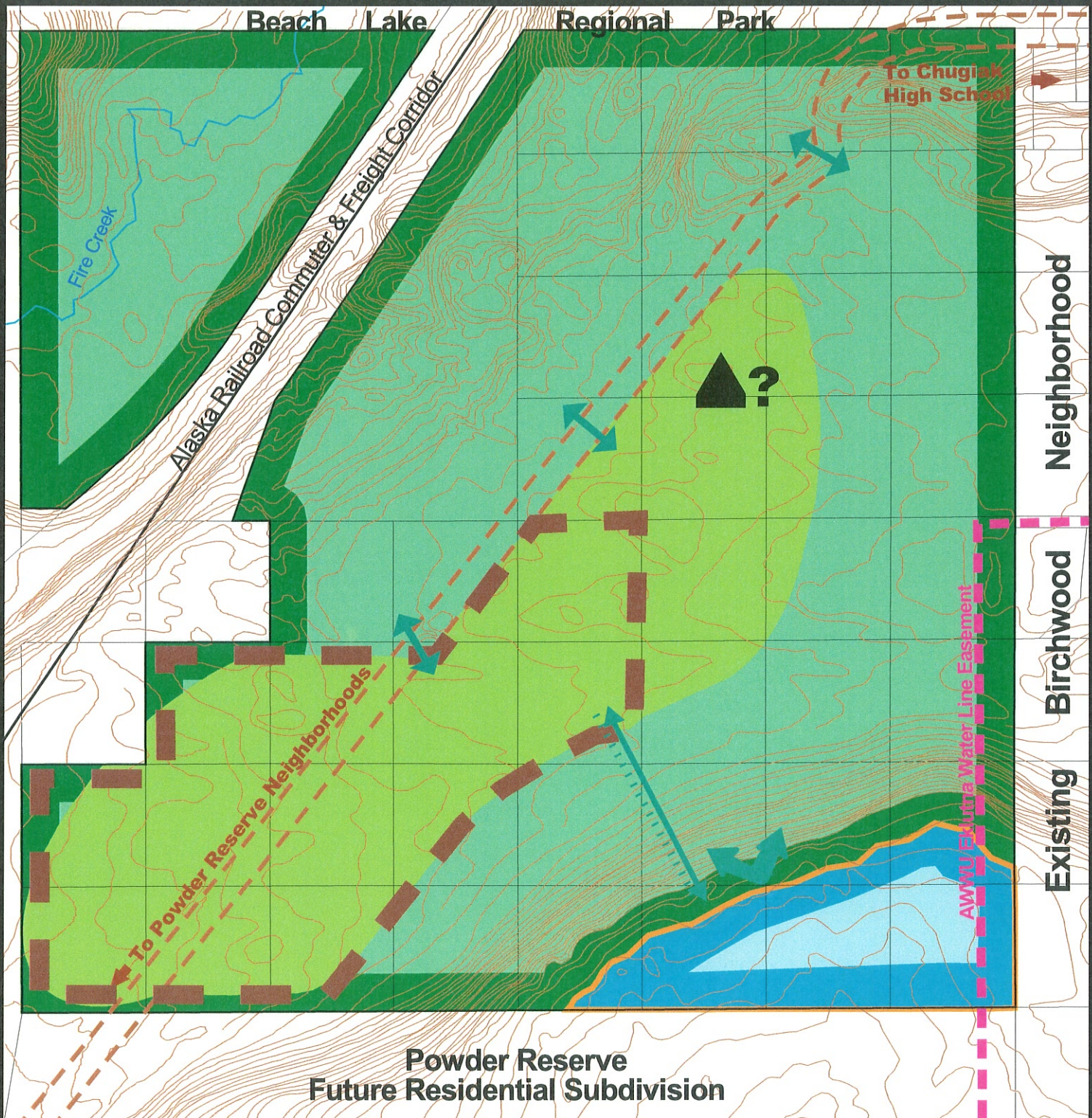
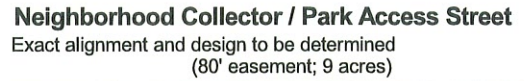
As a result, 20 acres of the easterly plain is deemed surplus to municipal needs, rezoned to R-6 (large lot) residential, and disposed of for private development. The 80-foot wide road corridor must be accommodated on the disposed lands. Also, a pedestrian access easement from Pioneer Drive extended provides neighborhood access into the regional park. The western extent of the residential disposal is limited by a buffer of 330 feet from the limited gravel extraction in the southwest corner of the Study Area. The 35 acres of community sports fields also limit the amount of land to dispose of for residential.

Option C (Preferred Option for the Easterly Plain) –

Limited Action Pending a Gravel Extraction Agreement and Park Plan

Prior to making a decision regarding the easterly plain of the Study Area, the community should prepare and adopt an updated *Beach Lake Park Master Plan*, and the Municipality and the State should reach an agreement regarding gravel extraction. A portion of the "No Action Area" should be used to complete the 35 acres of sports fields. The extent of gravel extraction here remains unclear, pending an agreement. A chalet facility in the easterly plain is either delayed, pending a gravel extraction agreement, or located elsewhere.

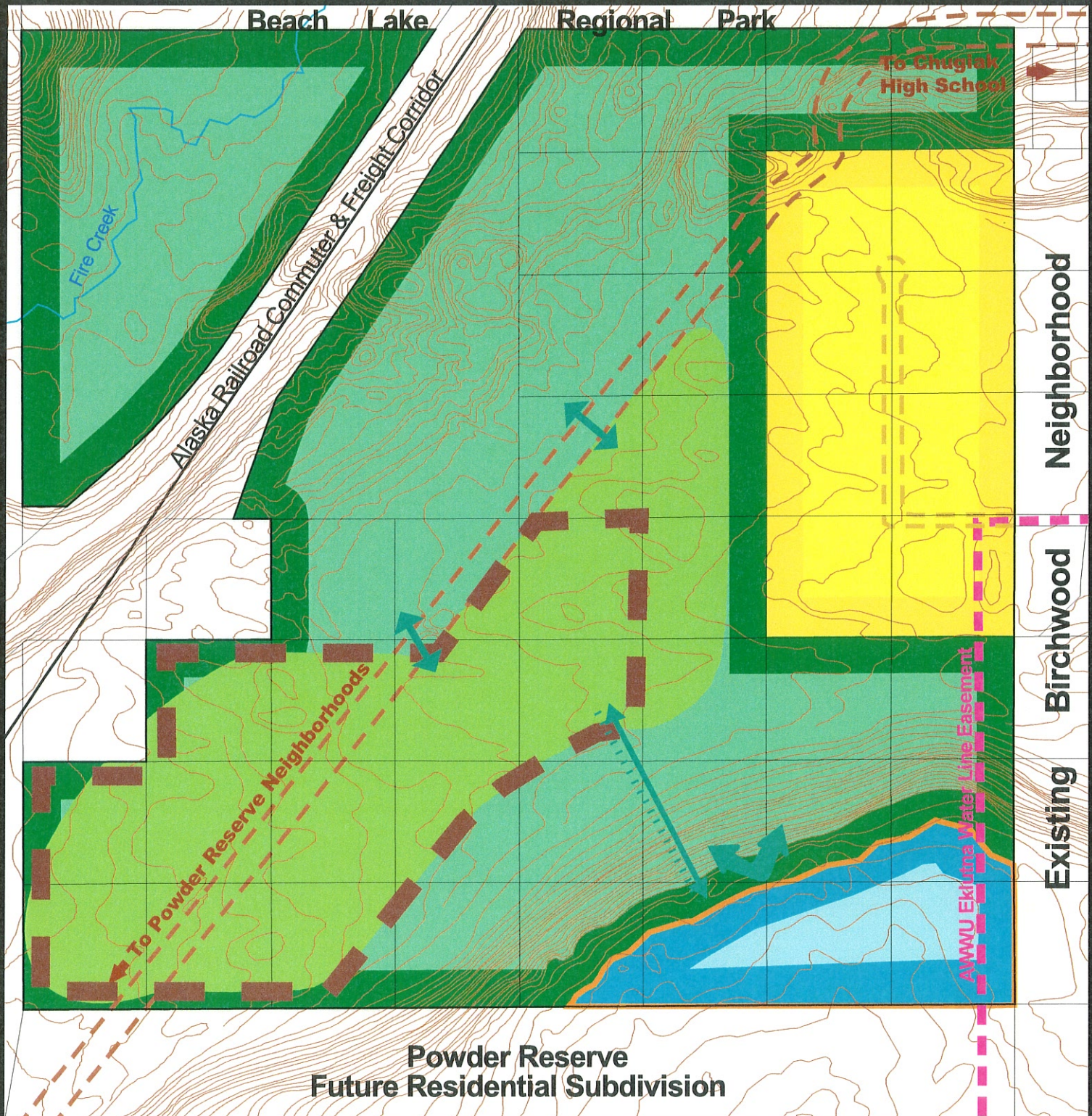
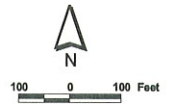
Potential Chalet / Recreation Facility
Location to be determined (5 acres)



Land Use Recommendations, with Option B

- Regional Park**
Natural Open Space and Trails (72 acres)
- Community Sports Fields**
Exact location to be determined (35 acres)
- School Reserve Land**
Elementary School Site or R-7 Residential (9 acres)
- R-6 Suburban Residential (large lot)**
Max. density 1 house per acre (20 acres)

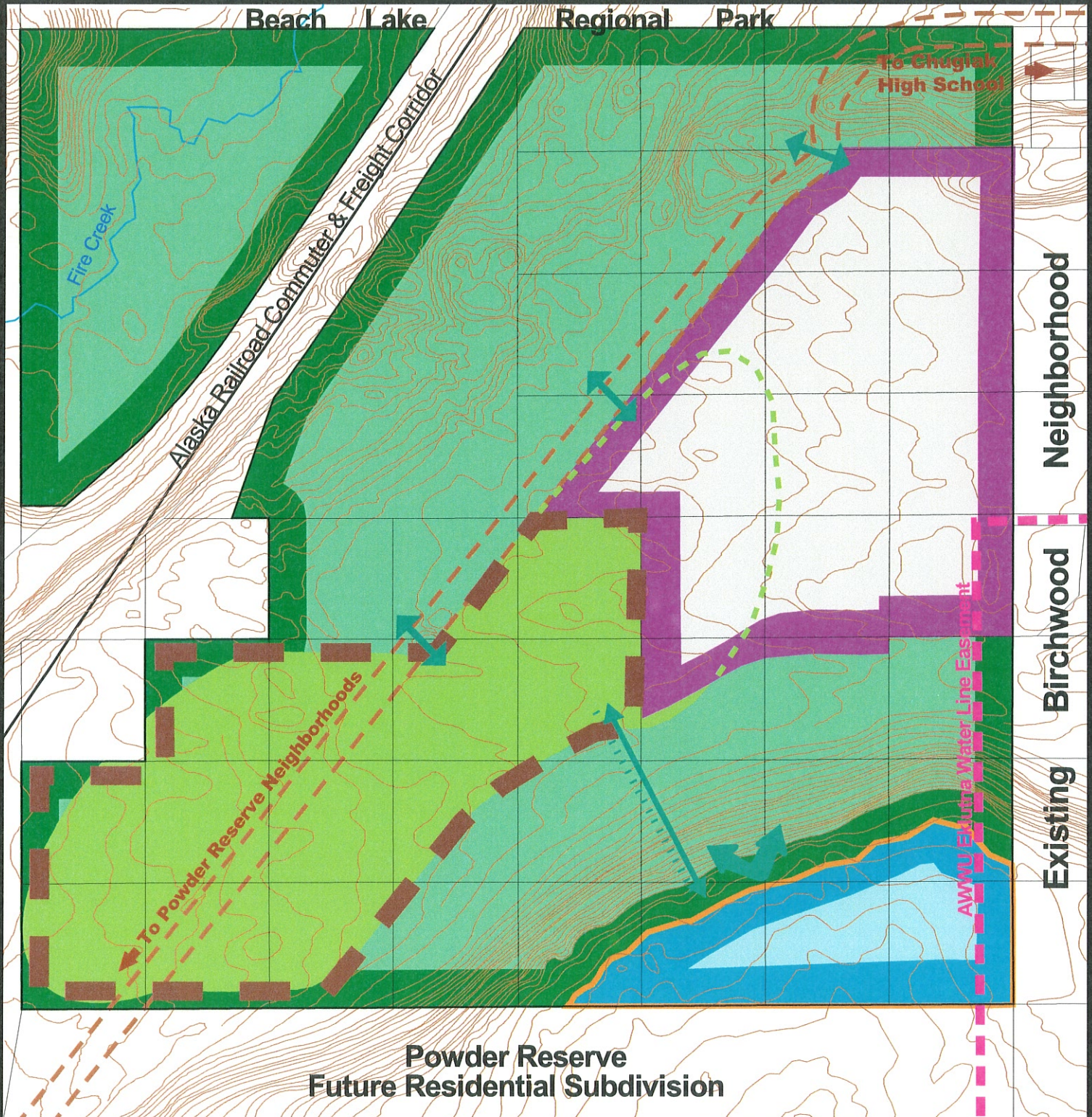
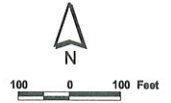
- Gravel Extraction Area**
Depth of 12 - 20 ft (30 acres)
- Grade Separated Trail Connections**
- Trail and Sledding Hill**
- Scenic View Points**
- Neighborhood Collector / Park Access Street**
Exact alignment and design to be determined (80' easement; 9 acres)



Land Use Recommendations, with Option C

- Regional Park**
Natural Open Space and Trails (68 acres)
- Community Sports Fields**
Exact location to be determined (35 acres)
- School Reserve Land**
Elementary School Site or R-7 Residential (9 acres)
- No Action Area**
Pending gravel extraction agreement and park plan (30 acres)

- Gravel Extraction Area**
Depth of 12 - 20 ft (30 acres)
- Grade Separated Trail Connections**
- Trail and Sledding Hill**
- Scenic View Points**
- Neighborhood Collector / Park Access Street**
Exact alignment and design to be determined (80' easement; 9 acres)



Implementation

Land use designations approved by the Assembly are considered amendments to the *Chugiak-Eagle River Comprehensive Plan*. The land use designations are replacements for the “Residential / Park” land use category that has been applied to NW¼ Section 25. Following is a summary of recommended implementation measures for the NW¼ Section 25.

Upon adoption of Option C, a land use designation of “Park” will replace the “Residential / Park” category for most of the Study Area, excepting the 30-acre “No Action Area” and the 9-acre Elementary School Reservation. The PLI – Public Lands and Institutions land use zoning district remains for all areas. Approval conditions for a new Powder Reserve master plan should include the accommodation of a potential school site acquisition south of and adjacent to the Elementary School Reservation on the southeast ridge of the Study Area.

The Municipality will reserve an 80-foot wide transportation corridor for a collector street and separated paved trail, and designate Hillcrest Drive and the future transportation corridor as a collector street in the next update of the *Official Streets and Highway Plan*.

Development of new park facilities southeast of the railroad is contingent on an agreement between the Municipality and State regarding the extent, depth, and period of time of gravel extraction. The agreement must set limits to extraction, as per the recommendations of this study, and include plans for re-contouring and re-vegetating the depleted gravel pit for sports fields, trails, and other park facilities.

Until the extent of gravel extraction is agreed upon, designation of any specific boundaries for addition into Beach Lake Park is deferred. Physical development of sports field, trail, sledding hill, and other facilities should rely on an updated *Beach Lake Park Master Plan*. First, the *Master Plan* will do site planning and design to maximize the efficient use of land and facilities on the NW¼ Section 25. For example, the location and design of the sports fields should accommodate open space and trail corridors as recommended in this chapter. Also, trail and sledding hill design should be sensitive to the potential instability of the ridge slope in the southeasterly corner. Second, the *Master Plan* should result in an evaluation of future recreational facility needs in Beach Lake Park as Chugiak–Eagle River grows and Birchwood reaches build-out.

Following the resolution of the gravel extraction agreement, and the adoption of a *Beach Lake Park Master Plan*, the Municipality should revise the *Land Use Study* with a specific recommendation for the easterly plain. Until that time the easterly plain remains as municipal reserve land under HLB management.

Revision Process

The *NW¼ Section 25 Land Use Study* is based on current, available information. Because the Land Use Recommendations include specific, long-range uses, it is possible that some factors affecting land management and future uses that were considered in this study may change in the future. Additional study and analysis may be required in the future, if, for example, the Municipality and State come to an agreement regarding gravel extraction, or a new *Beach Lake Park Master Plan* is adopted. Depending on the circumstances, it may be appropriate to revise an approved land use designation in response to new developments or conditions that may occur. In such a case, it may be appropriate to amend a land use designation through the formal public review process. Any re-evaluation of an approved land use designation should apply the same general criteria used in this study. Any future land uses amendments to this plan approved by the Assembly will constitute an amendment to the *Chugiak–Eagle River Comprehensive Plan*.