

SECTION

1

INTRODUCTION



SECTION 1, Introduction

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The Eagle River Central Business District (CBD) Revitalization Plan is a work in progress. It offers the residents of Eagle River a road map for taking control of the heart of Eagle River and shaping it into a community center where people want to live, work, and play. As this goal is achieved, Eagle River will also become a great place to visit. The key components of this plan include an Urban Design Study for the Central Business District, a Bicycle/Pedestrian Circulation Plan, and a Master Plan for Eagle River Commons Park. The three components are strongly interrelated. Good examples of small towns, almost invariably have a strong urban core, lots of parks and open space, and good trails and recreational opportunities.

Eagle River has all of the resources to become a great place to live and a memorable place to visit. The only thing missing at this point is a unified sense of community and an understanding of how to implement change. Great communities are not the product of governmental control and they don't happen by accident. They are the product of a shared effort of residents toward a common goal.

Following is an overview of the three components of the plan and brief discussion about the nature of Eagle River. This discussion includes a brief description of the planning context, community demographics, and the public involvement process.

1. Eagle River Central Business District Urban Design Study

The Eagle River CBD Urban Design Study is focused on the Old Glenn Highway as it passes through central Eagle River from the South Interchange of the New Glenn Highway to the North Interchange of the New Glenn Highway. It also encompasses the area between the Old Glenn Highway and Business Boulevard. The intent of the Urban Design Study is to provide the residents with a set of tools that can be used toward improving public safety, appearance, and establishing a sense of place. These include:

- Development of an Urban Design Plan that includes recommendations for establishing a town core.
- Design Guidelines for public right-of-way and private properties adjacent to the roadway.
- Implementation Strategies.

2. Pedestrian and Bicycle Circulation Study

One thing that livable communities seem to share is that they are walkable communities. In the course of working with Eagle River residents on this project, the comment, "nobody walks in Eagle River" was a common theme. One resident who has lived more than ten years in the community was surprised to discover that there were sidewalks on either side of the Old Glenn Highway. The potential role of paths and trails in Eagle River should not be underrated. First, existing facilities are very popular. An example is the New Glenn Highway Bike Path, which is well used during the summer months and offers an uninterrupted link all the way to Anchorage. The trail also extends north to Chugiak. Second, contrary to public perception, there

is significant pedestrian activity even where facilities are lacking. The Pedestrian and Bicycle Circulation study identifies key existing destination points and several anticipated destinations within Eagle River, and focuses on the means of connecting them either through existing trails/pathways or through proposed improvements. A dozen improvements are identified and prioritized based on the following criteria:

- Safety
- Ability to serve the greatest number of users
- Linkages that serve the overall urban design plan
- Cost

A key focus of the plan is to examine the need for additional crossing points on the Old Glenn Highway as a means of improving pedestrian safety and encouraging people to walk.

3. Commons Park Master Plan

Eagle River Commons Park is a perfect example of how a community can take control in shaping its character. The grass roots effort of local residents established the concept of the park and promoted a bond initiative, which was approved by the voters in 1998. The park will be a major feature of central Eagle River and the importance of the park will only increase as the population increases in the coming years. The park will, ultimately, provide a large open space right in the heart of town. The master plan deals with the following key issues:

- Identification and placement of park facilities within the eight-acre tract.

- Identification of a trail link to the New Glenn Highway Bike Path.
- Opportunities for additional land acquisition for incorporation into the park.
- Phasing recommendations for construction of the park.

PLANNING CONTEXT

1. Community Character

The community of Eagle River is situated approximately fifteen miles northeast of downtown Anchorage and has a relatively recent history. The area was homesteaded following World War II, when construction of the Glenn Highway provided access. In the 1970s and 1980s, the city grew rapidly as a suburb of Anchorage and that growth continues today. In 1980, the population of Chugiak-Eagle River was 12,700. In 1998 the population had grown to more than 30,000. Growth in the Eagle River-Chugiak area will likely continue to expand at a rapid pace due to lower land prices and the desirability of a semi-rural lifestyle. Expansion of the community to the south, toward Anchorage, is limited by military reservation lands and Chugach State Park. As a result, there is a wide greenbelt of undevelopable lands separating the two cities. This ensures that Eagle River will maintain a discrete identity well into the future. Eagle River is situated in a lovely setting on the flanks of the Chugach Mountains. There are excellent views across the Knik Arm of Cook Inlet toward Mount McKinley and Mount Susitna as well as back into the Chugach Mountain Range.

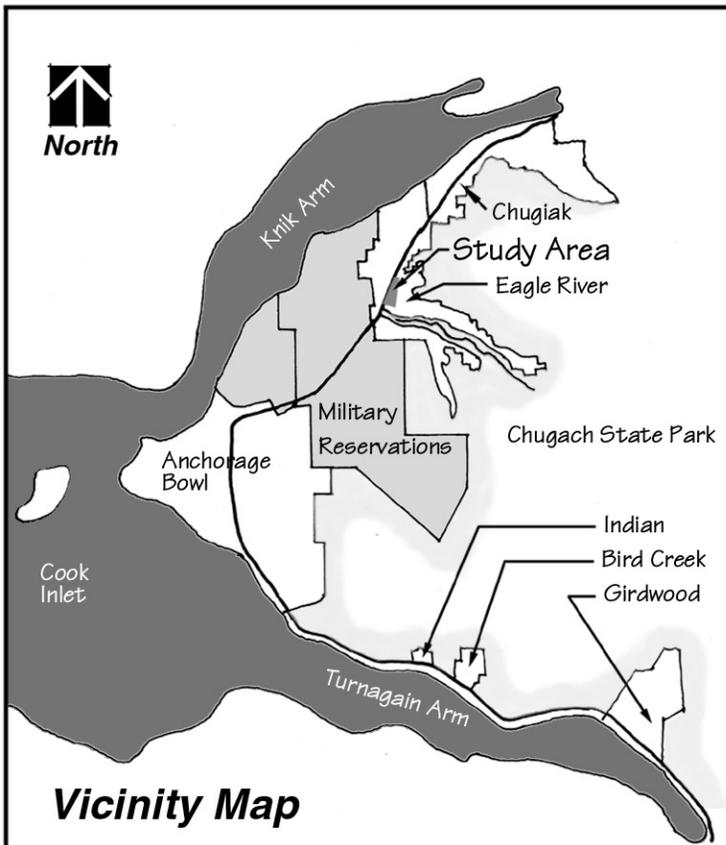


Figure 1-1 Vicinity Map

The city has developed in a linear fashion along the Old Glenn Highway typical of many suburban communities in a pattern commonly referred to as “strip development”. Retail businesses are principally auto-oriented and pedestrian amenities are limited or nonexistent in many parts of town. As often happens in fast growing communities, growth quickly overtaxed the existing rural road structure so that

traffic congestion is a major concern for many residents. There are two main roadways within the Central Business District of Eagle River: the Old Glenn Highway and Business Boulevard. The Old Glenn Highway features a number of strip malls and an assortment of small retail businesses. By comparison, Business Boulevard features a large retail grocery store, an indoor mall, office buildings, Municipal offices, restaurants, and a post office. Acres of paved parking are associated with these businesses. Eagle River lacks a town core and any sense of individual character. This is often the case with communities that develop in a strip fashion. In the words of one community resident, “Eagle River is ugly and we want to know what to do about it”. This frustration with the appearance of the town is directly related to a lack of character and a missing “sense of place”.

What is a sense of place? It is the visible link between a community, its natural setting, and the expression of its history. In short, it establishes an identity. Communities that have a sense of place feel connected to their local environment. They are towns that are fun to explore. They have special places, an authentic feel, and are unique in character. Examples of communities that have a sense of place include Seldovia and Hope on the Kenai Peninsula. Some larger towns would include LaConner, Washington and Eugene, Oregon. Towns that lack a sense of place feel like they could be anywhere. They are predictable and boring.

2. Community Growth

Like it or not, change is on the way. A 1998 issue of Mountain Sports and Living Magazine stated: *“In the last ten years, the fastest rates of growth in the United States were in small communities in the western United States - places like Bozeman, Montana; Boise and Stanley, Idaho.*

More and more people (and businesses) are deciding to leave behind big city traffic and pollution, and move to small towns with great quality of life, economic opportunity, and wilderness out the back door". What is driving this change? Communication technologies, which allow individuals and companies to transfer information easily; a footloose population, not afraid of relocating; and a dramatic growth in tourism, which is now the world's largest industry.

Growth will occur in Eagle River. The community has the option of allowing growth to continue in random fashion, which will maintain the status quo, or to shape growth in such a way that it benefits the entire community.

There are a number of specific changes that will begin to affect the character of Eagle River in the near future. These include:

- **Development of large new retail outlets.**

A Walmart discount store has recently opened at the intersection of Eagle River Road and Eagle River Loop Road. Fred Meyer has opened a store on the Old Glenn Highway near the North Interchange. These facilities are expected to improve the commercial vitality of Eagle River by allowing residents to shop at home instead of having to make the trip to Anchorage or incorporating shopping into the daily commute. The effect that these large scale retailers will have on small local retail establishments, especially along the Old Glenn Highway is uncertain. In many small communities similar to Eagle River the impact of large discount retailers has been detrimental to small locally owned businesses.

- **Development of new housing.**

As many as 600 units of housing are planned for the west side of the North Interchange. Additionally, new housing is planned along Eagle River Road. The combination of new housing and new, large retail businesses within the community will significantly impact traffic on the Old Glenn Highway, Eagle River Loop Road, Eagle River Road and the North Interchange with the New Glenn Highway.

- **Public Projects.**

In addition to private development, there are several public roadway projects either in the design or construction stage. These projects include:

Business Boulevard Safety Improvements, Municipality of Anchorage.

This project has provided a complete upgrade to Business Boulevard. The project included the placement of center medians, right-of-way acquisition for trails and walkways, landscaping, and the placement of site furnishings. The site furnishings included banner poles, some pedestrian scale lighting, and fences to separate parking areas from walkways. Construction was completed in 2002.

Old Glenn Highway Pavement Rehabilitation, Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities.

The primary goal of this project is to repave the Old Glenn Highway from the South Interchange to the North Interchange as it passes through Eagle River. In the process, it will deal with drainage problems, lane striping or widening at key intersections, and the incorporation of some pedestrian amenities and

landscaping. No right-of-way acquisition occurred with this project. Construction was completed in 2003.

Eagle River Loop Reconstruction, Old Glenn Highway to Eagle River Road, Alaska Department of Transportation & Public Facilities.

This project is in the preliminary design stage and will widen Eagle River Loop Road as well as provide pedestrian walkways/trails from the Old Glenn Highway to Eagle River Road. Right-of-way acquisition is not anticipated for this project. Construction will not likely occur until 2006 or later.

Eagle River Road Reconstruction, M.P. 5.3 to M.P. 12.6, Alaska Department of Transportation & Public Facilities.

This project is in the final design stage and calls for major improvements to Eagle River Road from milepost 5.3 to milepost 12.6. The project will include upgrading of the road with widened shoulders for pedestrian use and repaving. Construction is anticipated in 2005.

3. Tourism Potential

Out-of-state visitors to Alaska have increased almost three-fold in the last twenty years, from fewer than 500,000 in 1979 to 1,400,000 in 1999. Additionally, Alaska is now the third most visited cruise ship destination in the world. More than 350,000 of our annual visitors travel to Denali National Park, with a large majority passing directly by or through Eagle River. Despite the community's strategic location within this heavily-traveled corridor, there are few attractions developed in Eagle River to draw tourists off the highway and help the community to take advantage of this opportunity. Certainly an improved appearance, a

pedestrian-friendly environment, and unique opportunities for recreation could help Eagle River to take advantage of its strategic location.

4. Relationship to Anchorage

Eagle River is part of the Municipality of Anchorage. It does not have its own mayor or town council. Instead, the Mayor of Anchorage also represents Eagle River. The community also has two elected members of the Assembly, the eleven-member governing body for the Municipality of Anchorage. As a result, most of the decisions that ultimately affect Eagle River are not made locally and Eagle River has to compete for Municipal tax support with Anchorage and Girdwood. There are advantages and disadvantages to this situation. On the plus side, Eagle River enjoys the benefits of a much larger resource base than most communities of a similar size. On the down side, decisions that may affect only Eagle River have to be dealt with at the much broader Municipal scale. An example is the parks bond passed in 1998 for Eagle River. Although the bond would affect taxes only in Eagle River, passage of the bond required voter approval throughout the Municipality.

COMMUNITY DEMOGRAPHICS

As mentioned earlier, the growth rate in Eagle River has been significantly higher than for the Anchorage Bowl in general. The 1998 population was estimated at 31,654 for Eagle River/Chugiak. Population is projected to increase by approximately 2% annually toward a population of 38,000 for Eagle River alone in 2015. The majority of housing in Eagle River is situated in the Eagle River Valley. Although there are plans for a large new subdivision (Powder Ridge) near the North Interchange on the west side of the New

Glenn Highway, the Eagle River Valley is expected to maintain its dominant position as the “most lived in” part of Eagle River.

It is estimated that 80% of the Eagle River work force commutes to Anchorage every day. This impacts almost every aspect of life in the community. People tend to do much of their shopping in Anchorage as a routine part of their daily commute. Roadways become congested with large peak flows, as much of the community departs for Anchorage in the morning and returns in the evening. The Hiland Road Interchange and the South Eagle River Interchange become major bottlenecks during peak commuter periods. As housing increases at the north end of town, the North Interchange may be subjected to similar pressures. Growth will impact the Old Glenn Highway. The greatest projected traffic change in Eagle River is for the Old Glenn Highway between Eagle River Loop Road and the North Interchange. It is projected that volumes could increase in this area by as much as 70% by the year 2015. This is largely due to projected increases in housing and commercial development near the North Eagle River Interchange.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

A public process was established to obtain community input on the three project components. The four key elements of this public involvement process included:

- Use of public meetings,
- Establishment of a Citizen’s Advisory Committee,
- Informal meetings and presentations by the consultant to organizations and at local public forums, and

- Presentations to public agencies and commissions.

These four measures combined were intended to ensure wide representation of community interests. Three separate public meetings were held over the course of the project. Feedback was obtained orally during the meetings and by way of written comment sheets. The Citizen’s Advisory Group was selected from a wide range of interest groups and provided a check to the public meetings. Presentations to specific interest groups set out to inform or get feedback on specific issues. The Urban Design Commission, the Eagle River/Chugiak Parks and Recreation Board of Supervisors, and the Planning and Zoning Commission served as an additional check on the design and direction of the plan.

The principal goal of the public process was to identify issues and concerns, and to obtain feedback on design issues. In this goal we were successful. The feedback we received shaped the designs that were brought forward. Most of the issues and concerns expressed by residents in the project were consistent with, and reinforced concerns that have been raised before.