

THE PLANNING CONTEXT AND PROCESS

OVERVIEW: THE INTERDEPENDENCE OF TRANSPORTATION AND COMMERCIAL ACTIVITY

To thrive, mountain resort communities require an appealing natural environment, vibrant commercial cores and good mobility systems. Mountain communities that attract visitors become known not only for the drama of their setting, but also for the liveliness of their core areas and the characteristics of their transportation systems. For example: Aspen for its walkable downtown, Portland for its light rail system, Zermatt for its car-free environment, Crested Butte for its funky shops and buses, Jackson Hole for its difficult accessibility.

Good mobility means that a destination is accessible from other points on the map. Good mobility also means that people find it comfortable, pleasant and convenient to move around within the community. Accessibility is challenged by the constraints of landscape, environment, existing community development patterns, community character and cost. Good internal circulation is challenged by the inherent difficulties of providing adequate public space and transportation infrastructure (including parking) in dense, active places where land area is dear and competing uses are numerous. Girdwood may be as notable for the challenges to mobility and the sleepiness of its commercial areas as for its dramatic scenery.

Successful commercial areas thrive on pedestrian activity. Mountain resort communities throughout North America are working hard to achieve development patterns that provide pleasant and

memorable environments for walking and strolling and congregating. Local businesses (other than gas stations) *need* pedestrians. People cannot spend money until they park their cars; cars are the primary sources of pedestrians. In any mountain resort, one of the principal planning challenges is to provide parking



*Fig. 1-1
Walkable downtown
street in Aspen,
Colorado*

and transit systems, road and street networks, and pedestrian connections that work well together and that support the retail/commercial component of the community. Simply offering good merchandise is rarely enough to assure economic success.

These issues are compounded in places that, like Girdwood, are facing the potential for significant growth. As Alyeska Resort becomes a stronger year-round destination and as the Turnagain

Arm area continues to experience growing numbers of visitors, there is potential for significant growth in retail, lodging and other commercial development in the Girdwood Valley. This represents both a challenge and an opportunity. Girdwood is at a crossroads, facing the dual need for an invigorated commercial environment and a circulation system that supports both economic vitality and environmental quality. The special challenge in Girdwood, as in all beautiful places, is to promote mobility and enhance the quality of the visitor experience while at the same time protecting what local residents cherish about this unique place.

*Fig. 1-2
Alyeska Resort has
helped Girdwood to
become a stronger
destination for visitors*



Good connections between the commercial areas within the Girdwood Valley can significantly enhance the potential synergies among them and add much to the overall vitality and appeal of the valley. The keys to success appear to lie in promoting the uniqueness of each commercial area at the same time each is seamlessly connected to the others (preferably by means other than driving). In addition, better connections are needed between the commercial areas and the valley's other destinations, including the Glacier Valley Development Corporation golf course project, future parking and transit centers, the ski mountain (not just the base), and the world outside the valley, especially Anchorage, nearly forty miles away.

UNDERLYING OBJECTIVES: THE PLANNING CONTEXT

Guiding objectives have been established for Girdwood through a virtually continuous sequence of planning efforts initiated by the community and the Municipality of Anchorage (MOA) during the past ten years. (See list, Appendix A.) The 1995 Girdwood Area Plan (GAP) established broad objectives for the community's future development. The Municipality's subsequent process to draft land use regulations applicable specifically to Girdwood will, when adopted, establish land use parameters, development standards and design guidelines to implement the community vision articulated in the Girdwood Area Plan. (A final draft of the proposed Girdwood Land Use Regulations in Title 22 of the Anchorage Municipal Code is being presented for public review.)

The community goals that evolved from public dialogue during these previous planning efforts generally relate to Girdwood's economic vitality, its quality as a tourist destination, the efficiency and utility of its circulation networks, and preservation of its sense of community. In particular, the plans express the community's desire to:

- Create a town center with a unique identity and strong connections to the resort, the surrounding residential neighborhoods, and recreational facilities.
- Promote the continued growth and economic viability of the commercial areas of the community and connect them to one another.
- Expand the town core as a commercial and community center.
- Provide a variety of year-round resort/recreational opportunities for the benefit of local residents and visitors alike.
- Establish and preserve a system of open spaces.
- Preserve Girdwood’s small-town character.
- Assure that physical development blends with the area’s natural qualities.
- Create an effective multi-modal circulation system for improved community-wide access and linkage.

PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The Municipality of Anchorage (MOA) initiated the Commercial Areas and Transportation Master Plan process in March, 1999 in order to move toward more specific strategies for public improvements and guidelines for private development based on the general recommendations in previous studies and plans. The specific objectives of this planning effort were to:

- Develop a plan that reunifies the community’s fragmented network of old and new commercial and resort development areas through a coherent system of development standards, design elements, circulation modes and pathways.
- Identify the primary function and identifiable characteristics of each commercial node and make

recommendations for strategies that build upon these to create a unique identity for each node and a unified image for the community.

- Provide specific direction for the organization and design of new commercial development in order to assure appropriate scale and character.
- Suggest strategies for internal circulation and roadway system improvements that will mitigate the potential negative impacts of community growth on local traffic volumes; to avoid future congestion by reducing dependence on automobile use.
- Link Girdwood more effectively to Anchorage and the tourist corridor between the city and Seward; to provide better access for visitors to Girdwood’s resort and recreational areas; in particular, to assess the feasibility of a rail spur from the Alaska Railroad’s main Seward-to-Anchorage line.
- Involve the Girdwood community in the development and evaluation of alternatives.
- Utilize and build upon the base of knowledge already acquired through previous planning studies relating to transportation, commercial planning, and community development in Girdwood.

THE PLANNING PROCESS AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

The development of the master plans has been a three-phased process, with intensive on-site public work sessions and meetings in each phase.

Phase 1: Problem Identification

The primary goals of the first phase were to establish a broad community consensus on the mission and objectives of the project, to develop a clear understanding of the problems and needs in the

commercial areas of the community, and to clarify circulation issues. Because this initial phase was essential to provide a firm foundation for subsequent recommendations, the emphasis was on community input, data gathering, and problem analysis. The first phase ended (and the second commenced) with the first round of intensive community work sessions and meetings in Girdwood during the week of March 29, 1999.

Phase 2: Conceptual Planning

The specific goals of the conceptual planning phase were to generate ideas to address issues identified the first phase, to produce materials to assist the community in comparing and evaluating alternative concepts, and to select preferred approaches for later refinement in the master plan.

The first public meeting on March 30, 1999 solicited community perceptions of issues and constraints. A second public meeting was held at the end of that week to summarize and verify the issues, discuss possible conceptual directions, and narrow the range of options to those that appeared most realistic. Following those initial on-site meetings, the consulting team began to generate conceptual plan alternatives for the commercial areas and for transportation systems, and HDR launched a feasibility study of potential rail corridors. The second round of week-long public meetings began in Girdwood on May 25, 1999, when participants gave input on draft conceptual site plan diagrams that illustrated alternative approaches to transportation systems and commercial area uses and linkages.

Phase 3: Master Planning

The third phase of work brings the planning process to a conclusion with the production of a document that refines preferred conceptual directions into an integrated set of planning recommendations and strategies. Draft master plan recommendations and drawings were reviewed at the third and final round of public meetings in Girdwood during the week of September 7-11, 1999.

The final drafts of master plan documents have been revised to reflect public comment at those meetings and will be submitted to MOA for formal public review and adoption.

Public Involvement

Many community members have participated in public meetings during the seven-month process, as have representatives from the MOA, the Alaska Railroad, the Heritage Land Bank, the Mental Health Trust, Alyeska Resort, the Glacier Valley Development Corp., and the Alaska Department of Transportation (DOT). In addition, two advisory committees of interested citizens, one focusing on transportation and the other on the commercial areas, were formed to assist the consulting team. Additional meetings, open to the public, were held with the advisory committees during each of the three on-site work weeks. *[Notes from the public meetings are included in the appendix.]*

PROCESS FOR PUBLIC REVIEW, ADOPTION AND AMENDMENT OF THE PLAN

This final draft of the Master Plan report will go through the normal process of community review and public hearings. It will be submitted to the Girdwood Board of Supervisors for their review, as well as to the MOA's Planning and Zoning Commission, the Heritage Land Bank Advisory Commission, and the Urban Design Commission. The boards, who will be asked to make recommendations to the Anchorage Assembly, may review the plan concurrently or jointly to streamline the review process. Their recommendations are advisory; the final decision rests with the Assembly.

Once adopted, the Master Plan and the assumptions on which it is based will be reviewed and updated at least every five to ten years. Amendments to the plan may be made as needed according to the normal MOA public hearing process.

STRUCTURE OF THIS DOCUMENT

The Transportation Master Plan for Girdwood is designed to ensure the success of the Commercial Areas Master Plan. Because each plan informs and shapes the other, the two parts of this planning process have run in parallel, with transportation issues and tradeoffs addressed in the evaluation of alternative development patterns for the community's three primary commercial areas. To reflect their close interrelationship, the two plans have been combined into one document composed of three major sections:

- The introductory section offers background on the Girdwood community and its land use patterns (Chapter 2); describes the physical constraints that influence development patterns in the valley and summarizes the major issues and concerns expressed in community meetings (Chapter 3); and identifies the community's top priorities (Chapter 4).
- The second section presents the valley-wide elements of the Transportation Master Plan. General transportation concepts are summarized in Chapter 5; recommendations for a public transportation system are presented in Chapter 6; and modifications to the road, street and trail network are outlined in Chapter 7. (Recommendations relating to pedestrian system improvements are also addressed in the Commercial Areas Master Plan.)
- The third section comprises the Commercial Areas Master Plan. General concepts for commercial vitality are explained in Chapter 8. Chapters 9, 10, and 11 focus on individual commercial areas – the New Girdwood Townsite, the Valley Entry and Old Girdwood, the Old and New Resort Bases, respectively, integrating recommendations for commercial development with recommendations for improvements in vehicular and pedestrian circulation

in those areas. These commercial nodes are identified on Map 1 on the following page.

- A final chapter (Chapter 12), discusses general approaches to implementation and phasing.



The Girdwood Valley viewed from Mount Alyeska. Turnagain Arm is in the upper left, and peaks in Chugach State Park edge the valley in the background. Alyeska Highway is visible on the valley floor.