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THE VALLEY ENTRY AND THE ORIGINAL GIRDWOOD TOWNSITE

At the intersection of the Seward Highway and the Alyeska Highway, the area now designated as the entry to the Girdwood Valley was originally settled in the late 1800's to supply the placer and lode gold mines in the area north of Turnagain Arm. First called Glacier City, the small, rugged settlement boomed again in the 1920's with the sawmills built nearby to assist construction of the Alaska Railroad. Other pulses of activity followed construction of the Seward Highway in 1949 and the opening of the first chairlift on Mount Alyeska in 1960, which attracted weekenders from Anchorage. But the March, 1964 earthquake dealt it a crippling blow, as local subsidence of as much as eight feet forced the residents to abandon most of the original townsite. Today, the few remaining cabins and weathered outbuildings hint at what the town might have looked like in the early part of this century. Although subsequent growth in the Girdwood Valley has been more recreationally based and has been concentrated closer to the ski mountain, the Valley Entry still serves a significant function as a commercial crossroad and as the community's front door.

COMMUNITY OBJECTIVES FOR THE VALLEY ENTRY

A number of guiding principles established in the Girdwood Area Plan were frequently repeated in public meetings during the master plan process - an expression of the value the community places on the remnants of Old Girdwood. These objectives provide the foundation for planning decisions in the original townsite area:



*Fig. 10-1
View north from
the intersection
of Seward and
Alyeska
highways at the
entry to
Girdwood
Valley*

- Preserve the expression of community history.
- Respect the environment, especially high-value wetlands, and preserve the sense of connection to the natural landscape.
- Maintain the area's eclectic mixed-use, small-scale development pattern.
- Provide an attractive gateway to Girdwood.
- Improve community and regional connections.

FACTORS THAT WILL INFLUENCE DEVELOPMENT IN OLD GIRDWOOD

Map 14 depicts existing environmental constraints and development considerations that are particular to the Valley Entry area. A number of factors

influence development suitability and the land uses that can be accommodated in this area, among them:

- *Lot size.* The small size of lots in private ownership in the original townsite will preclude larger commercial uses unless adjacent lots can be aggregated under one owner.
- *The Mental Health Trust.* The large parcel (approximately 23 acres) held by the Mental Health Trust must be managed and/or developed in accordance with the Trust's mandate to maximize revenue from land in order to support public sector social programs. This means that some commercial use of the developable portion of the site will be sought by the Trust in order to generate income. It is therefore not a realistic possibility to leave the entire parcel in open space. The Girdwood Area Plan classified the parcel for commercial use, recognizing that, although there is a large area of high-value wetlands, the site could be essential to support future regional and local transportation functions, with related commercial uses.
- *Draft Title 22 Land Use Regulations.* The newly proposed land use regulations for Girdwood, presently being reviewed, will require a master site plan review for the Mental Health Trust parcel prior to any development (Section 22.50). This process will require that specific uses (both public and private), building area, parking,

Fig. 10-2
Wetlands on the
Mental Health Trust
Parcel at the Valley
Entry



internal circulation, and drainage systems be identified and a detailed wetland delineation be completed. The master site plan must be reviewed and approved by the MOA Planning and Zoning Commission.

- *Wetlands.* Everything on the south side of the Seward Highway is undevelopable, being wet, and is classified as open space. Almost all of the Mental Health Trust parcel is covered with wetlands, with exception of the access road to the DOT maintenance yard. Most of these wetlands are presently mapped as critical resources and not developable. However, there is a relatively small upland area in the northeast corner of the MHT parcel, at the junction of the existing rail line with the Alyeska Highway, which is encircled with lower value wetlands that are classified as developable. There is also a possibility that some of the area close to the DOT facility is wet because of drainage patterns DOT has caused. If this is the case, a master plan for the site might propose some wetland impact if appropriate mitigation measures are part of the plan.
- *Flood hazard.* Virtually the entire original townsite area is subject to shallow flooding in a 100-year flood event. The northeast corner of the townsite is in an active floodway zone associated with Glacier Creek. No structures are permitted within the designated 100-year floodplain unless a flood hazard permit is secured (see AMC 21.60).
- *Access to the Old Townsite.* The Alaska Department of Transportation (DOT) controls both the Alyeska and the Seward Highways. Out of concern for safe and efficient circulation at and near the intersection of these two roads, DOT is unlikely to approve applications for additional access points from the Seward Highway to adjacent properties. This has already proven to be a serious constraint on access to the Old Townsite. There is no safe

way to turn across oncoming traffic from Seward Highway into the townsite area, and there is no formal access from Alyeska Highway. (The Gold Avenue ROW was platted but never constructed.) DOT is unlikely to approve any accel/decel lanes other than those already at the main intersection.

- *The DOT maintenance yard.* This site north of the rail line would appear to be a suitable site for redevelopment. However, access to it across the Mental Health Trust parcel has never been formalized, and DOT is unlikely to allow a new, formal access from the Seward Highway. Nor is relocation of the maintenance facility a likely possibility. There is concern that, as rail and tourist car traffic in the region increases, the industrial appearance of this facility is inconsistent with the desired character of Girdwood and should be screened.
- *The railroad track as a barrier.* The main Alaska railroad line introduces issues of safety for any trails and roadways that must cross it. This suggests that any highway-oriented commercial development or transit facility should be located on the south side of the track, that any crossings of the track be engineered in concert with Alaska Railroad, and that adjacent uses be designed and screened to reduce noise.

APPROPRIATE LAND USES AND DESIRED CHARACTER

The draft land use regulations for Girdwood identify three distinct sub-areas at the valley entry. The large parcel west of Alyeska Highway, held by the Mental Health Trust, is zoned commercial (GC-1). The two blocks east of Alyeska Highway, bounded by Seward Highway on the south and Gold Avenue on the north and including the Tesoro convenience center, is also zoned commercial (GC-2). The small lots that make up the remainder of the Old Townsite are zoned commercial/residential (GC-3). Sections



Fig. 10-3
Small,
eclectic
structures
in the
Original
Girdwood
Townsite

22.100.020 to 040 in the draft code detail permitted uses and development standards for these three districts.

Uses that are encouraged in the two commercial districts include lodging, highway-oriented retail and commercial services (food, gas, visitor-oriented shops, etc.), and transportation-related facilities and services. A State Trooper facility would also be a complementary use in any transportation facility.

The following excerpts from the draft code articulate the intended character of each district:

GC-1 (MHT parcel): “The overall design goal for this site should be to create a mix of rail, bus, trail and highway-related commercial uses. This is a possible site for a passenger terminal, trailhead for the Iditarod trail and/or a transfer point between private autos and carpools, buses, or other forms of transportation. The site contains both intertidal and high value freshwater wetlands and also has high visibility. Consequently, the master plan for this site will need to carefully consider both environmental and community aesthetics. This site should become an attractive gateway to the Girdwood Valley, with a visual character appropriate to the entry to a mountain resort community.” (Section 22.100.020)

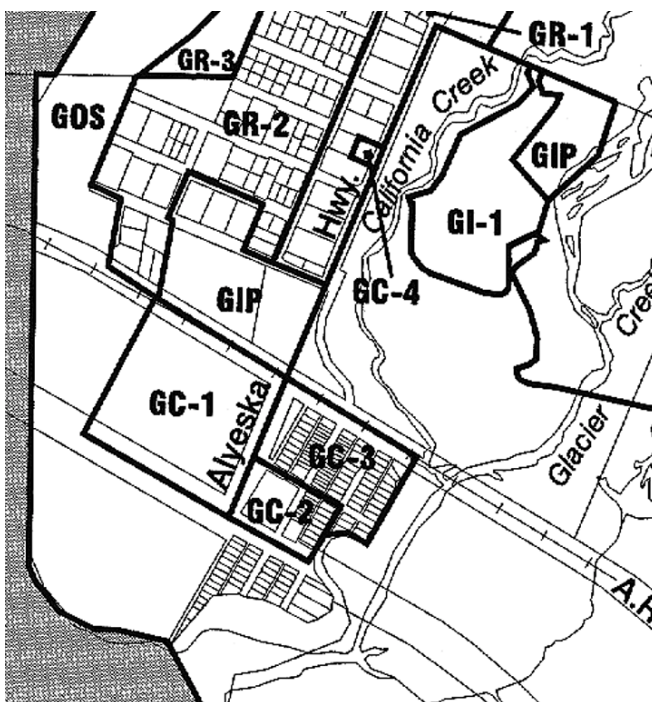
GC-2 (Seward Highway frontage): “Because of the proximity to the Seward Highway, residential uses are not appropriate in this district. The easterly portion of this district is largely vacant and consists of small lots with potential for

servicing the commercial needs of the transient guest as well as the local community. [It] should be developed as part of an attractive gateway to a mountain resort community.” (Section 22.100.030)

GC-3 (northern half): “This district reflects the development pattern of early Girdwood, with a mix of houses and small businesses on small lots that creates the appearance of a small, historic town. There are still many vacant lots in this district that could be developed with either residences or small commercial and craft-oriented businesses to retain the unique scale and visual quality of development in this district.” (Section 22.100.040)

The draft code specifies that buildings in districts GC-1 and GC-2 can be no larger than 15,000 sq.ft. and no higher than 25 feet. Limits in GC-3 are 7,500 sq.ft. and 25 feet high. Site coverage in all three districts cannot exceed 50%. Responding to the district’s small lot dimensions, parking in GC-3 only may encroach into a portion of the front setback but not into the public right of way (Section 22.170.080). These development standards are consistent with the Master Plan vision for the area.

Fig. 10-4
Use Districts
at the Valley Entry
(Draft Title 22 Land
Use Regulations)



CIRCULATION IMPROVEMENTS

The following improvements are recommended in the Valley Entry/Old Townsite area to rectify deficiencies in the existing vehicular circulation system and to enhance opportunities for using alternative modes of transportation:

- Transit.** Undertake development of a multimodal transit facility on the Mental Health Trust parcel. Key principles that should guide its design are outlined in Chapter 6 (Public Transportation System), with the general objective of accommodating multiple modes of transportation as well as associated private retail and commercial development. The Alaska Railroad estimates it would need no more than 1,200-1,500 sq.ft. for its mainline passenger terminal, leaving room on the site for an additional 30,000-40,000 sq.ft. of retail/commercial space. Assure interconnections between transit services and local pedestrian and vehicular circulation.
- Parking.** Provide parking at the multimodal center that can serve commuter needs as well as visitors using the Iditarod and Bird-to-Gird Trails. Required parking for the retail element at the facility could be reduced somewhat to reflect the fact that some of the shoppers will come by modes other than private vehicle.
- Gold Avenue.** Extend Gold Avenue to its platted intersection at the Alyeska Highway to access the Old Townsite and connect it with the multimodal center. Upgrade Gold Avenue to collector road status between Alyeska Highway and Main Street. (See Map 9 in the Roads and Streets Plan, Chapter 7.) Add accel/decel lanes on both sides of Alyeska Highway at the new intersection and reconfigure the bike path as needed to accommodate the roadway improvements.
- Tesoro entries.** Consolidate the access points into the Tesoro station from the highways. Replace the

northernmost access from Alyeska Highway with a new entry from Gold Avenue.

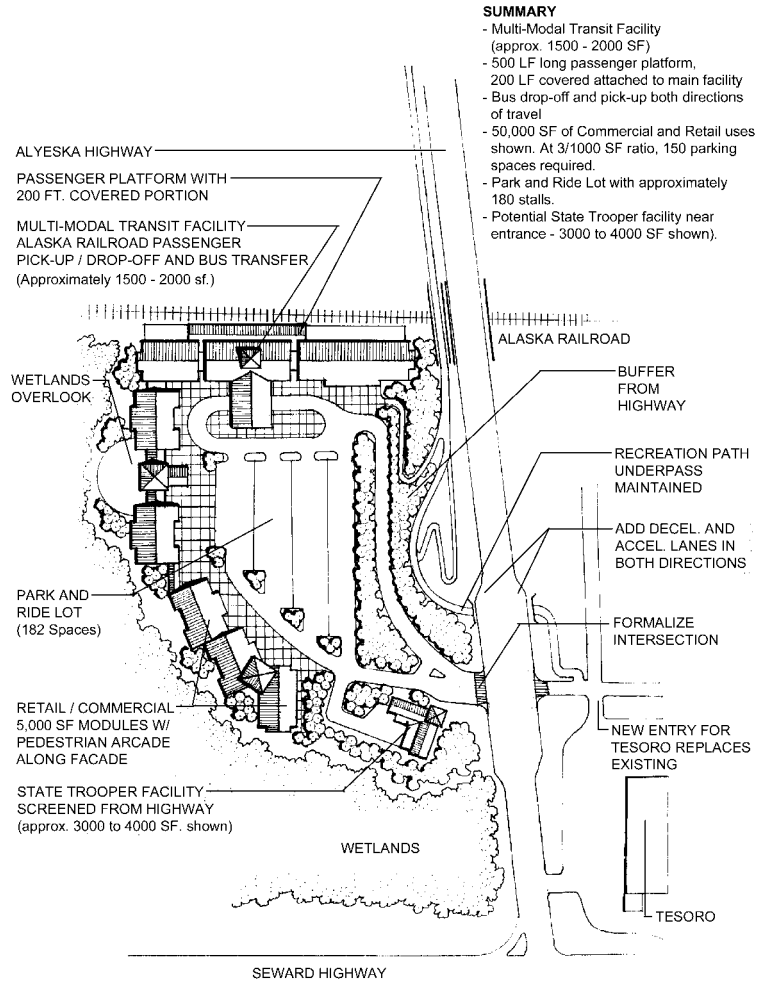
LAND USE GUIDELINES

Other strategies and guidelines recommended to organize uses and enhance sites in the Valley Entry area include:

- Encourage relocation of industrial and unsightly uses in the Old Townsite to another location (possibly on Ruane).
- Encourage landmark-quality elements in any new development that can be seen from the highways. The façade of any retail/commercial development associated with the multimodal facility and facing the Seward Highway should avoid a “back-door” appearance; the architecture should be welcoming even though the primary customer entry will be from the parking area. Service functions should be screened from view. Pedestrian amenities around this development might include boardwalks to wetlands and waterfowl viewing areas.
- Establish site development and landscape guidelines for the public right-of-way in the highway corridors.
- Involve local residents in formulating standards for design and property maintenance in the Old Townsite.

DEVELOPMENT STANDARDS AND DESIGN GUIDELINES

Community input has emphasized that any future development in the Old Girdwood area should be highly sensitive to its potential to create memorable first impressions of the Girdwood Valley. New buildings in all three districts at the Valley Entry should embrace the simple forms, small scale and natural materials characteristic of the historic mining settlement.



SUMMARY
 - Multi-Modal Transit Facility (approx. 1500 - 2000 SF)
 - 500 LF long passenger platform, 200 LF covered attached to main facility
 - Bus drop-off and pick-up both directions of travel
 - 50,000 SF of Commercial and Retail uses shown. At 3/1000 SF ratio, 150 parking spaces required.
 - Park and Ride Lot with approximately 180 stalls.
 - Potential State Trooper facility near entrance - 3000 to 4000 SF shown).

Buildings in all three districts are limited by the draft Title 22 regulations to 25 feet in height – essentially two stories, which is appropriate given the scale of what is already there. Reflecting the potential for larger building sites in districts GC-1 and GC-2, buildings as large as 15,000 square feet are allowed there. The design of larger buildings should make every effort to reduce the perception of building mass and make the building appear to be an aggregation of smaller, simple forms.

Fig. 10-5 Valley Entry Multimodal Concept Design with highway oriented commercial and commuter parking

In the old townsite district (GC-3), where lots are very narrow, buildings are limited to 7,500 square feet in area. Even this reduced area may make possible new buildings that are much larger than their residential neighbors, and the Master Plan recommends consideration of a lower cap on building size here (perhaps 5,000 square feet).

To maintain overall neighborhood integrity, it will be extremely important that any new buildings in the old townsite have a residential character, even though the zoning also permits commercial uses. This suggests predominantly pitched roofs, porches, traditional windows (no blank walls), protected entryways, small-scale outbuildings, and avoidance of materials associated with industrial uses. It also discourages excessive utilization of the site for commercial parking or storage of commercial and construction materials. The old structures in the townsite, despite some disrepair, offer an important connection to the past, and their retention is encouraged.

Specific (and mandatory) design standards for architecture and site development in commercial districts are detailed in section 22.170 of the draft code. Provisions in the draft that will be important for the character of the Valley Entry and Old Girdwood, summarized here, are endorsed by the Master Plan:

- Building mass organized to appear as an arrangement of smaller connected structures;
- Special attention to the detailing of windows, doors, arcades and protected entries on the ground floor;
- Retention of at least 50% of all large trees within setback areas;
- Revegetation of all disturbed areas with native or adapted plant species;
- Site grading that mimics the natural character of the land;
- Setbacks from streams and preservation of natural channels;
- Walkways connecting all buildings, well defined to separate pedestrian areas from vehicular circulation or parking areas.