

# 3

## ISSUES AND CONCERNS

The first round of public work sessions and advisory committee meetings, held in Girdwood in late March 1999, was organized to listen to residents' concerns about their community needs, the potential for their economic growth, and the patterns of their future development. The sessions yielded a summary of issues that helped the consulting team gain a clearer understanding of the problems and functional relationships to be addressed in the Master Plans and the community values to be respected. The concepts proposed in the Master Plans are in direct response to these issues:

### Commercial Stagnation

Concern about the lack of vitality and extreme seasonality of commercial enterprises in Girdwood was the impetus for the Commercial Areas Master Plan and came up repeatedly in public meetings. Causes are multiple: unattainable parking requirements, small lots, lack of "critical mass" (i.e. enough people to support businesses), lack of retail variety, lack of services oriented to locals, lack of connections between commercial nodes, seasonal swings in tourism-based business.



### Tourism: "Industrial" or "Strategic"

Because a high percentage of visitors to Alaska are on fixed itineraries controlled by larger tour operators and cruise ship lines, stops in Girdwood are short at best, and residents would like to change that. While there is a general acknowledgement that the community's economic future depends on generating dollars from tourism, there is also concern about the implications of high-volume, large-scale tourism on the small-town character of the community and the unspoiled quality of the natural environment. Unquestionably, there is unrealized potential in the Girdwood Valley to lengthen visitor stays, to increase per capita visitor spending, to extend the tourist season, and to appeal to an independent market of visitors interested in active recreation and outdoor pursuits. However, the town's existing infrastructure and lodging base are not adequate to accommodate (or attract) much growth in the number of visitors, and marketing programs are not yet in place to appeal to the kind of ruggedly appreciative, low-impact visitors the town seems to want.



*Fig. 3-1  
Seasonal business on Olympic Circle illustrate that commercial vitality is an issue, both summer and winter.*



*Fig. 3-2  
"Strategic" Tourism:  
Kenai River cabins  
of Alaska Wildland  
Adventures*



*Fig. 3-3  
"Industrial" Tourism:  
Cruise ship dock at  
Seward*



*Fig. 3-4  
Poor parking  
arrangement plus  
snow blocks  
pedestrian  
connections in  
Olympic Circle*

## Threats to the Sense of Community

Girdwood's identity is wrapped up in its natural setting, its "rough-around-the-edges" character, the small size of its resident population, and its sense of remoteness from urban life. Surrounded by large tracts of undeveloped Heritage Land Bank land, Girdwood residents are understandably concerned about the conversion of natural open space to development. This concern has made for contentious debate on issues such as the golf course, new collector roads, residential density, alternative uses for undeveloped tracts, the rail spur and the Glacier-Winner Creek ski area expansion. It will be important for the community to conduct an informed dialogue on realistic alternatives for development and to institute reasonable development standards and design guidelines to assure that new development fits well into the community context of the valley.

## Too Many vehicles, Too Little Parking

Traffic congestion in ski season, excessive numbers of diesel tour buses, and traffic speeds on Alyeska Highway are perceived as problems that will worsen as Girdwood attracts more visitors. At the same time, the shortage of convenient parking to support existing commercial nodes such as the Bake Shop area and the New Girdwood Townsite (except the Valley Entry Tesoro) is a problem that works against growth in tourism-based business.

## Barriers and Missing Connections

The lack of adequate year-round vehicular and pedestrian connections was the primary impetus for the Transportation Master Plan. Heavy winter snow levels exaggerate the already considerable problems of mobility and accessibility within Girdwood. Without aggressive intervention to develop a comprehensive circulation infrastructure, the growth in population and visitor numbers will only make the problem worse.

## Environmental Constraints

The prevalence of wetlands and streams on the valley floor and pervasive hazards from avalanche and floods are serious constraints on where and how building can take place in the Girdwood Valley. This will put added pressure on efficient planning and wise use of developable land.

## Environmental Quality

The prospect of growth in a valley limited by topography, wetlands, and natural hazards is frequently questioned as a threat to the pristine visual quality of the natural environment. Because Girdwood's appeal is so intimately tied to the beauty of its setting, it will be extremely important for new development to subordinate itself to the landscape and to make sensitive decisions about siting, scale, density, view preservation, and protection of the forest cover.



Fig. 3-5  
Flood Prone  
Glacier Creek

**GIRDWOOD COMMERCIAL AREAS AND TRANSPORTATION MASTER PLAN**