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TRANSPORTATION PLAN OVERVIEW

Girdwood Valley will change in many ways over the next couple of decades. For residents and others who cherish the place, some of these changes may be uncomfortable. However, the one outcome that is not a realistic option is “no change” in the valley. Hence, the challenge for the Municipality and for other stakeholders is to guide the changes, to mold the future using the tools at hand. One of the most important tools available for this task is transportation planning and investment.

The development of Girdwood Valley’s roads and streets network, public transportation system (today non-existent), pedestrian facilities and trails will shape future land development patterns. The various transportation elements are of fundamental importance to realization of the community’s (and the Municipality’s) objectives for strategic, non-intrusive, non-destructive, environmentally based tourism and visitorship in the valley. They are also fundamental to the valley’s quality of life, sustainability and economic well-being.

One of the changes that will be most obvious and troublesome in the future is growth in traffic on valley roadways. Currently, traffic levels on Alyeska Highway on peak days (a March powder Saturday or sunny July Sunday) exceed 5,000 vehicles per day. In the year 2016, according to the 1997 *Girdwood Transportation Study*, traffic on peak days will range from about 9,800 on a summer weekend day to about 13,800 on a winter weekend day during ski season. By 2020, traffic could routinely exceed 10,000 vehicles per day and could often exceed 15,000 vehicles per day on busy weekends.

Under these conditions, residents and visitors alike would have the impression of heavy traffic and congestion in the valley. The 1997 study indicated that intersections would continue to function at an acceptable level of service in 2016. However, traffic congestion is a highly subjective issue and this level of traffic -- if allowed to occur -- would create the perception in the future that Girdwood had become crowded or congested and was no longer the kind of place that people remember it being in 1999. For example, this level of traffic through the Alyeska/Hightower intersection would probably require a traffic signal to manage traffic flows. The mere presence of a traffic signal in Girdwood Valley would represent a change with significant implications for community character.

UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES

This Transportation Master Plan is designed around the core concepts described in Chapter 4:

- Environment (clean air, dark skies, wildlife, etc.)
- Community character (small-town atmosphere)
- Quality of life (connection to natural environment, safety, etc.)
- Strategic tourism (low impact, environmentally-based)

In order to balance the reality of anticipated growth with these core concepts, three basic principles for development of a transportation system in Girdwood Valley are articulated and recommended in the plan:

1. *Significant improvements are needed in the pedestrian environment including walkways (separated when possible) along existing and newly constructed roads in the trails network.. It must be possible for short trips (less than one half mile) to be made safely and comfortably without driving. This will not only reduce anticipated growth in traffic, but will improve the economic viability of the valley's commercial areas and will protect quality of life for residents and visitors. In successful communities -- with resorts or without -- walking is the primary mode, not an alternative mode.*
2. *The valley must have a strong public transportation system. The experience of other more mature mountain resort communities in snow country -- in the Lower 48, in Europe and throughout the world -- clearly demonstrates that managing the automobile is of paramount importance. Communities suffer greatly when they allow themselves to be overrun by motor vehicle traffic and parking. Their quality of life is diminished and the viability of their resort-based economies deteriorates.*

On the other hand, communities that have taken steps to replace vehicular travel with public transit systems (from Aspen to Zermatt) not only continue to be highly desirable places to live, but have strong, resilient economies. Sooner or later, snow country resort communities look to some form of rail transport to alleviate traffic and parking problems and to take over where the capacity limitations and other constraints of bus systems leave off. Usually, this is a difficult to impossible undertaking. Introducing a rail system into a built-out environment raises almost insurmountable issues, not the least of which is cost. In the case of Girdwood, the Municipality has the opportunity to plan for this now and to take steps today to shape the development of the valley around public transportation, including a rail element.

3. *Girdwood must have a more complete road and streets grid. Today, too much of Girdwood is accessible by only one route and too many destinations in the valley lie at the "end of the road." Alyeska Highway is the spine of the community and carries some portion of virtually every vehicle trip. The schools, the Alyeska Prince Hotel, the ski resort and the neighborhoods east of Glacier Creek are all reached via Alyeska Highway -- a single route with a single bridge over California Creek and a single bridge over Glacier Creek. This raises issues of emergency services access and disaster evacuation. In the future, this will also exaggerate congestion by concentrating traffic on a few roads (Alyeska Highway, Arlberg Road, Hightower Road). As development occurs in the valley, the Municipality must take steps to ensure that a complete network of collector roadways is built and that local streets do not become a maze of poorly connected dead ends.*

These three principles provide a foundation for the specific transportation elements described in the next two chapters. If these principles are implemented, some of the growth in traffic and parked vehicles described at the beginning of this chapter can be avoided altogether, and the rest can be better distributed. The result will be higher quality of life and a more viable economy based on eco-tourism. Most of the key decisions required to achieve this outcome must be made now, as the continued residential development of the valley floor will preclude them one by one over the years.