4.5 Parks, Recreation & Open Space

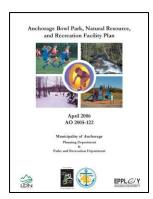
4.5.1 Introduction

Parks, recreation, and open space assets in West Anchorage were described by all participants in the WADP as key features to their neighborhood and points of pride. The following sections capture the recreational opportunities and values expressed by residents, compares them with the recommendations of existing functional plans, documents key priorities and deficiencies, and makes recommendations to address these through future parks, recreation, and open space planning efforts and adequate funding levels.

4.5.2 Functional Plans and Programs

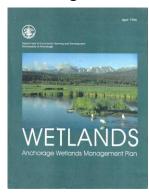
Following are descriptions of the key functional plans that relate to park, recreation and open space planning in West Anchorage.

Anchorage Bowl Park, Natural Resource, and Recreation Facility Plan



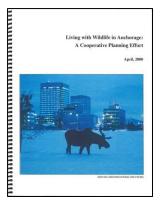
The 2006 Anchorage Bowl Park, Natural Resource, and Recreation Facility Plan (Parks Plan) is the primary long-range recreational planning document in the Anchorage Bowl. It consists of two sections: an overview of all of the parks, facilities and services currently available in the Bowl and an implementation framework. The plan identifies Level of Service (LOS) ranges for various parks and recreation infrastructure and an evaluation of deficiency and adequacy for subareas of the Anchorage Bowl. The Parks Plan provides a comprehensive, long-term strategy for meeting park and recreational facilities needs of all residents. It is an essential tool for capital planning because a well-conceived plan helps advocate for competitive funding opportunities.

Anchorage Wetlands Management Plan



The 1996 Anchorage Wetlands Management Plan contains an inventory of wetlands within the MOA, describes allowable activities in wetlands, specifies conditions under which MOA authorizes discharge permits, and brings consistency with the State of Alaska's Coastal Zone Management Program.

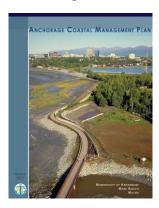
Living with Wildlife in Anchorage Plan: A Cooperative Planning Effort



The 2000 Living with Wildlife in Anchorage Plan was a cooperative effort between the Municipality of Anchorage and the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) that recommended major efforts like habitat, corridor, and key species capacity assessments in order to maintain diversity and populations of wild animals in an urban setting. It identifies the major species involved in human interactions, summarizes resident attitudes, and provides a list of priority actions. Most action items recommended were not completed (for instance, conservation tax incentives, land use ordinance changes, pet and waste control ordinances, and education and planning efforts). Since 2000, action has been taken to prevent bear and moose conflicts, including the creation of the

Anchorage Bear Committee (now inactive).

Anchorage Coastal Management Plan



The 2007 Anchorage Coastal Management Plan complies with the Alaska Coastal Management Act by defining issues of local concern and guiding the development needs within the Anchorage coastal zone boundary. It contains an inventory, an analysis of impacts from uses and activities, and describes policies implemented by local, state, and federal agencies that implement the goals and objectives.

4.5.3 Discussion and Recommendations

The following objectives reflect community preferences to achieve the recommendations outlined in the *Parks Plan* as well as the goals and vision of *Anchorage 2020*. These include an equitable distribution of indoor and outdoor recreation opportunities across the district, adequate maintenance of recreational facilities, renewed maintenance agreements for state lands used for recreation, and a non-motorized network to link residents to our public land treasures. In studies across the nation, it is shown that parks, greenways, and natural resource areas proximal to residential units increase property values and contribute to improved community health.

Parks Objective #1

Provide indoor and outdoor active recreation opportunities for all ages.

Residents of West Anchorage place a high value on the recreational opportunities present in the area. Kincaid Park is one of the jewels of the MOA Park system and a strong source of neighborhood identity. Another West Anchorage recreational jewel is the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail, the most popular multi-use trail in the entire city. Multi-use trails around Lake Hood and along the Chester Creek and Campbell Creek greenbelts are also tremendously popular for recreation, visitors, and bicycle commuters.

As the population and demographics of Anchorage evolve, the ways that park and recreational facilities are used change. Therefore, the maintenance and expansion of MOA park lands and facilities need to be continually assessed in order to keep pace with ever-changing public recreational needs and expectations. When recreational demands

are unmet, existing facilities can be damaged; overuse or misuse of public lands can spill onto adjacent properties.

Park Planning

West Anchorage contains the majority of the Northwest and Southwest Park Districts, and a portion of the Central Park District identified in the *Parks Plan*. The *Parks Plan* provides overall guidance for the level of improvements, park acreages, and private partnerships needed to achieve recreation services at current or improved levels in West Anchorage. It also acknowledges that political will and community support are needed to maintain existing service and/or achieve expanded service.

The WADP recommends that the MOA fund a mid-range park planning effort (for 5-year prioritization and goal-setting) since the annual update process described in the *Parks Plan* is infeasible given current fiscal limitations. A mid-range view would facilitate realistic action plans that balance broad visionary park and recreation goals with existing fiscal realities. Five-year plans for each district are a way to address recent changes to development and demographic patterns in West Anchorage in order to reevaluate park adequacy and reset goals.

In West Anchorage, a five-year park plan should address the following questions:

- Are there adequate neighborhood use parks in the Sand Lake area after construction of the new schools and park in the Lucy Pit area?
- What park and open space improvements are needed to provide an adequate level of service for recreation in Spenard after proposed residential density increases?
- Are there adequate Community Use (CU) parks in Spenard/Midtown after completion of the Cuddy Midtown Park?
- For how long would CU parks be adequate in the Northwest Parks District after construction of the proposed Charles W. Smith Park described in the draft Midtown District Plan?

Outdoor Recreational Opportunities

The *Parks Plan* recommends that the MOA provide Neighborhood Use Parks (NU, close-to-home recreation areas) and Community Use Parks (CU, larger parks that support several neighborhoods or a large section of the community) for local residents. Both should be available at a ratio of 1.5-2.5 acres per 1,000 people and located in close proximity to residences for convenient walkable access.

According to the *Parks Plan*, as the population continues to increase, the Northwest and Southwest Parks Districts will be deficient in NU parks. Not discussed in further detail in this section, a portion of the Central Park District is in the West Anchorage planning area. This area east of Minnesota is predominantly industrial and commercial with some residential pockets. Overall, the Central Park District contains the fewest recreational facilities and is deficient in both NU and CU Parks.

Sand Lake, North Star, and Spenard neighborhoods are especially underserved by NU parks. The Spenard Road corridor has few parks, especially within walking distances of residents. This shortage will become more pronounced since the WADP proposes increased densities here. To address this, opportunities for "pocket parks" (small parks about the size of a residential lot) should be explored. "Pocket" recreation areas should be reserved when multiple parcels are assembled for larger redevelopment projects. The MOA could also acquire individual lots in advance and construct recreational facilities when needed to accommodate future population increases. The identification of potential "pocket parks" is part of the future Spenard Strategic Planning effort discussed in Section 4.1.5.

Spenard, Turnagain, and Sand Lake areas are projected to be underserved by CU parks in the future. Defined more specifically, CU parks should serve neighborhoods within a 1-mile radius. Despite containing the popular Kincaid Park, Sand Lake is deficient in CU parks because these facilities are over a mile away from most residential areas.

Exhibits 4-13 and 4-14, extracted from the *Parks Plan*, depict general areas for NU parks in the Sand Lake area, particularly south of Raspberry Road and for CU Parks in Turnagain. These images were selected because there are clear opportunities where the use of school sites would meet some recreation needs.

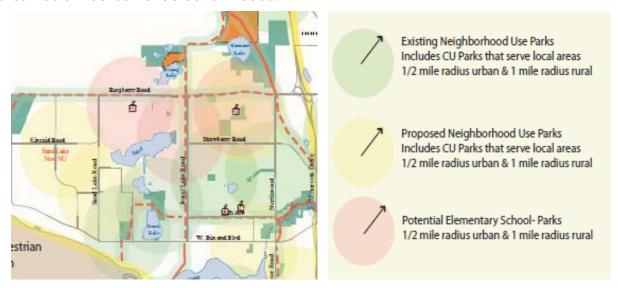


Exhibit 4-14a Neighborhood Use Parks - Sand Lake Area (Source: 2006 Parks Plan Map 2 - Neighborhood Use)



Exhibit 4-14b Community Use Parks - Turnagain Area (Source: 2006 Parks Plan Map 3 - Community Use Areas)

The *Parks Plan* recommends the use of school-park partnership sites to expand outdoor recreational opportunities and fill-in areas of deficiency. In particular, the ASD schools identified in Table 4.5-1 occur in areas of West Anchorage with facility deficiencies. The approach of making more effective use of existing facilities like athletic fields and playgrounds to expand year-round recreational opportunities is especially attractive during times of constrained public funding for the purchase of new public lands.

Table 4.5-1 West Anchorage – Priority Schools for Joint Outdoor Community Recreational Use		
School	Facilities Available	
West-Romig Campus	Track, grass football field, general grass fields, tennis courts	
Dimond High School	Track, turf football field, tennis courts	
Mears Middle School	Track, soccer field	
Campbell Elementary	Playground equipment	
Gladys Wood Elementary	Playground equipment	
Kincaid Elementary	Playground equipment	
Northwood Elementary	Playground equipment	
Willow Crest Elementary	Playground equipment	

Indoor Recreational Opportunities

Existing indoor public recreational opportunities in West Anchorage are available at the Spenard Recreation Center, West High Swimming Pool, and Kincaid Park Recreation Center (Bunker). Indoor recreation needs in Anchorage are met through public recreation centers, private ice arenas (e.g., Dempsey Ice Arena), public and private (athletic club) pools.

Opportunities for additional indoor recreation needs can be met by expanding existing public/private partnerships and reinstituting the community school program (similar to outdoor school-park partnerships). The following groups provide programs, facilities or staff for general recreational, youth activities or community meetings using public and privately owned buildings such as churches or schools located in West Anchorage.

- Religious organizations (Lumen Christi, Calvary Church, Our Lady of Guadalupe, etc.);
- YMCA (before- & after-school programs already at Kincaid Elementary);
- Boys & Girls Club (Woodland Park Club); and
- Cultural groups (Asian Pacific Center Northwood Elementary).

Parks Objective #2

Ensure that existing and future parks and recreation facilities are safe and regularly maintained.

During the planning WADP process, residents expressed concerns that open spaces are not maintained, vandalism and conflicts may be occurring with increased frequency, upgrades to fields and playing areas that are overdue, and worry for homeless people who turn to parks for campsites.

Park Maintenance

Park maintenance priorities are set during planning of the annual budget. Providing a fair and equitable balance of parks and facilities to all residents includes adequate maintenance and funding for services. The first strategy promoted by the *Parks Plan* is to "improve maintenance and stewardship of what we have." The allocation of available maintenance funds should continue to prioritize public health and safety, with a reflection of the current public demand for special uses. The *Parks Plan* describes the use of surveys and comments from community groups during CIP recommendation discussions. For example, broken equipment and lighting replacement should stay high on the

maintenance priorities for safety purposes. In the future, shoreline buffering along stocked lakes may become a priority because fishing permits show a dramatic increase.

Considerations during annual maintenance planning should include:

- Honor existing maintenance commitments where uses are consistent or increasing.
- Look for long-term operational efficiency opportunities within an overall annual maintenance prioritization program.
- Support the Anchorage Park Foundation (http://www.anchorageparkfoundation.org/)
 that engages sports-, neighborhood-, or park-based groups that raise money, provide direct labor, and monitor public areas for safety.
- Encourage the creation of sport groups in the model of Nordic Skiing Association of Anchorage that achieve higher levels of facility maintenance than MOA can provide.
- Expand maintenance funding opportunities via grants, bonds, and increased mill levees.
- Underbrush clearing for safety and forest management should consider wildlife impacts.

The WADP recommends increased funding for operations and maintenance of MOA parks and open spaces. It was expressed repeatedly that maintenance is lagging while these areas contribute to the character and quality of West Anchorage neighborhoods.

Wildlife Safety



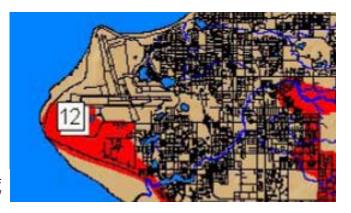
Young bull moose in Turnagain Bog

Actions that would be most relevant and effective in West Anchorage include the use of bear-proof garbage cans at Kincaid Park and for property owners in Sand Lake, maintaining good visibility along the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail, and education about tax incentives for conservation easements for private land owners.

Exhibit 4-15 ADF&G Map of Huma-Bear Interactions

Bear-human interactions indicated in red

A recent public opinion poll found that Anchorage residents hold positive attitudes/perceptions about wildlife in the city similar to those held in 1996 when the Living with Wildlife in Anchorage Plan was written.1 Consequently, its recommendations remain largely valid. Key wildlife interactions in West Anchorage relate to moose and bear. Moose movement is found in all wooded areas, greenways, and wetlands while bears gravitate toward Kincaid Park and the rural residential neighborhoods in Sand Lake to the east of Kincaid.



¹ "Anchorage Residents' Opinions on Bear and Moose Population Levels and Management Strategies" conducted for the Alaska Department of Fish and Game by Responsive Management, 2010 http://www.wildlife.alaska.gov/aawildlife/bears/abc/moose_bear_report_2009.pdf

According to ADF&G biologists, the simple action of keeping solid waste in a secure location until the morning of pick-up would have a direct and immediate effect on reducing bear-human encounters. Exhibit 4-15 shows the West Anchorage portion of an ADF&G map of human-bear encounters in red. Area 12, covering Kincaid Park and the residential areas adjacent to the park, should be considered for expanded bear-proof trash containers with late-morning pick-up. Additionally, an ordinance could be written prohibiting the outdoor storage of trash and other bear food sources in areas ADFG identified as high risk for bear encounters pending buy-in from homeowners on the appropriate measures to reduce conflicts.

Human Safety

WADP participants described the occurrence of homeless camps or loitering in the following parks and open spaces: Earthquake, Arctic-Benson, Chester Creek and Campbell Creek greenbelts, Fish Creek near La Honda, and the woods in front of Dempsey Arena. Mears students described their general concerns about the welfare of homeless people. Additionally, WADP participants described vandalism in parks and sports fields.

It is beyond the scope of this plan to present solutions, but the land use recommendations do not present barriers to organizations and agencies working to improve housing conditions for homeless people. Additionally, it is the role of law enforcement (CAP teams, neighborhood patrols, school resource officers) and other social service organizations, as well as the Parks and Recreation Department, to improve conditions that result in safety in parks and the absence of vandalism.

Parks Objective #3

Maintain motorized and non-motorized access to a safe and functioning network of parks, waterways, trails, lakes, and natural open spaces for the use of residents and visitors.

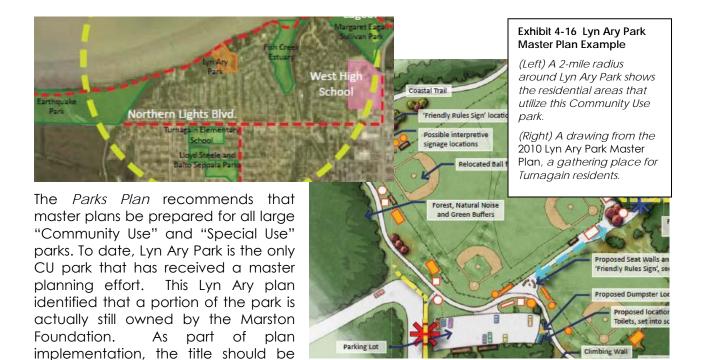
Local residents cannot fully enjoy recreational areas without convenient access. In particular, the ability to walk or bike to a nearby park or open space area without driving is particularly prized. Connecting parks, schools and neighborhoods together with trails and walkways makes a community more cohesive and less automobile dependent. It also encourages park use by removing impediments to non-motorized travel that could otherwise discourage use by nearby residents.

Non-Motorized Connections

In general, as discussed in Section 4.2, implementation of the Anchorage *Non-motorized Transportation Plan* would address most of the non-motorized deficiencies identified in West Anchorage. The WADP supports recommendations for pedestrian, bicycle, and trail segments that connect residential areas to neighboring parks, schools, shopping areas, and work. See the Transportation Section 4.2 for details on these connections and the identification of needed linkages.

Park Planning

Many of the recreation issues identified by residents in the West Anchorage planning effort are also reflected in the Parks Plan. With increased facility use, MOA will need to spend parks planning efforts on managing known conflicts associated with user groups, improve its communication plan to foster effective communication between user groups, and establish equitable policies. For instance, it was described that new immigrant groups use open spaces for some subsistence activities like fishing and plant gathering. The content of current educational programs will need adjustment to effectively communicate about the appropriate and/or safe use of public lands to an increasingly diverse use group.



cleared for this area.

The WADP supports the *Parks Plan* and recommends that master plans be prepared for the West Anchorage CU parks described in Table 4.5-2 (shown in Exhibit 2-13) in order to determine needed improvements, associated costs, phasing sequence, and non-motorized connections between the park and local neighborhoods.

Table 4.5-2 West Anchorage – Recommended Community Use Park Master Plans		
Park	Area	
NEW MASTER PLANS		
Jade Street	Strengthen connections to neighborhoods and possibly to Campbell Creek estuary for coastal access.	
Campbell Creek Greenbelt	The most significant (and loved) feature of the Central Park District.	
Jewel Lake Park (swimming area and winter skiing)	Popular Sand Lake neighborhood attraction. Private residents provide groomed ski trails. Surrounding wetlands need resource planning.	
Balto Seppala Park	Two soccer fields and a small playground are surrounded by dense residential housing. Public comments on safety/unsavory activity in the parking lot. Parking overflow impacts the neighborhood.	
Lloyd Steele Park	Soccer complex lacking adequate non-motorized access and confusing motorized access.	
MASTER PLAN UPDATES		
Kincaid Park	Sand Lake	
Last update 1973	A design and development plan was done for the soccer fields by the Kincaid Group, but no recent master plan for Kincaid.	
Sullivan Westchester Lagoon Last update 1976	Very popular recreational area for the entire city especially due to its connections to the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail and Chester Creek Greenbelt.	
Connors Lake -Strawberry Bog Last update 1989	Heavily used dog park has displaced some skijor winter activity over the years. Opportunity for non-motorized connections that connect Spenard with Sand Lake neighborhoods.	

Parks Objective #4

Manage, protect, and enhance municipal parks, greenbelts, and natural open space areas (including riparian and wildlife corridors) that support fish and wildlife habitats and wetland functions.

The MOA manages, protects, and enhances municipal parks, greenbelts and natural open space areas by implementing the *Parks Plan, Non-Motorized Transportation Plan, Living with Wildlife Plan*, and cooperating with the State on the *Anchorage Wetlands Management Plan* and *Anchorage Coastal Management Plan*.

Natural Resource Areas

As described in the *Parks Plan*, Natural Resource Use (NRU) areas "retain and filter storm water, improve air quality, serve as buffers between incompatible land uses, lend definition to neighborhood areas, provide links between residential areas, parks and schools, and protect wildlife and fish habitat, while providing recreation opportunities close to home." Because they are tied to natural processes, the amount and location of greenbelts, natural resource areas and preservation lands are based on "environmental, social, and

recreational values" rather than being driven by population or LOS standards. The *Parks Plan* recommends *designated* parklands convert to *dedicated* parklands and retaining public lands identified as NRU with minimal disturbance.

"<u>Natural Resource Preservation Areas</u>" (i.e., areas with high ecological values) include: the majority of Kincaid Park and the western, coastal portions of Woronzof Park below the bluff.

"Natural Resource Conservation Areas" (i.e., areas with significant natural vegetation that provide environmental benefit and serve as visual or noise buffers) include: Jewel Lake Park, coastal portions of Kincaid Park and Woronzof Park, Earthquake Park, and Lyn Ary Park.

The Campbell Creek stream corridor is identified as a natural resource preservation area. The WADP recommends protection and purchase (when possible) of drainages within the Coastal Zone Management Area. In other words, the *Parks Plan* recommends MOA acquire land on both sides of streams as it becomes available.



Exhibit 4-17. Jewel Lake Park Wetlands

Connectivity between residences, schools, and parks would be better served with an east-west connection between West 84th rather than a connection between lakes. The preferred route is also shown on Exhibit 4-4, Trail Recommendations.

The Parks Plan calls for improvements to Sand Lake Park and the 1997 Trails Plan shows trails connecting Sand Lake and Jewel Lake. Aside from the popular beach area, the majority of Sand Lake Park is a wetland (see Exhibit 4-17). MOA should reassess community support for maintenance of the Sand Lake and Jewel Lake Park parcels as "natural resource preservation areas" before wetlands are filled for trails or recreational facilities.

Coastal Protection

The Parks Plan calls for improved access to the Coastal Wildlife Refuge, consistent with the 1991 Anchorage Coastal Wildlife Refuge Management Plan (Refuge Plan) and previous municipal plans. If planned and located properly, public access increases the value of the refuge without conflicting with goals for habitat preservation. The 2007 Anchorage Coastal Management Plan identifies areas meriting special attention in West Anchorage because of physical, biological, or cultural attributes and biological productivity. These areas include the Fish Creek Estuary, Point Woronzof Coastal Wetlands, and Point Woronzof Bluffs.

Wetlands Protection and Management

To a casual observer, all wetlands may appear equal. However, for various reasons, they are not. Some are privately owned and some are public owned. Some are designated for permanent preservation while others are available for development. Some are critical to the hydrology of the area and others have lesser functions and values. Wetlands fill and development projects fall under the jurisdiction of the Corps of Engineers, who administer permits.

The MOA has categorized freshwater wetlands according to their functional value (Exhibit 2-14). The WADP recommends that high-value wetland parcels be retained or acquired for permanent preservation. Wetlands owned by the Municipality should be preserved with a conservation easement or transferred to an appropriate public agency for long-term preservation and management. Low-value wetlands in public ownership could be traded or sold to acquire higher value private wetlands. Exhibit 4-18 reflects the current MOA disposition status of wetland parcels in West Anchorage.

Water Quality

Water quality should be monitored and managed at heavily used areas and development sites adjacent to high-value wetlands and creeks (e.g., Chester Creek Greenbelt, Campbell Creek Greenbelt).

Water quality in urban watercourses comes under compliance with the MOA's NPDES permit. Green infrastructure opportunities should be managed through acquisition of natural resource areas prioritized based on: function, community value, availability, and funding.

The *Parks Plan* recommends that natural resource management plans be developed for larger parks and natural resource use areas to identify those with high ecological value and/or that perform an important environmental function (e.g., streams, riparian zones, steep slopes, seismic hazard zones, flood hazard areas, etc.). The WADP includes the following parks and natural resource areas in West Anchorage appropriate for evaluation to determine preservation, conservation, and usage characteristics.

Table 4.5-3 West Anchorage – Recommended Natural Resource Evaluations		
Resource Area	Considerations	
Westchester Lagoon	Recent channel restoration project for improved fish passage.	
Earthquake Park	Contains wetlands and scenic bluff that is subject to competing incompatible use for wildlife habitat and recreational sight-seeing.	
Fish Creek/Fish Creek Estuary	The Fish Creek Estuary coastal wetland is valued for its unique physical features, biological productivity and scenic views from the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail in an urban context. Restoration of the Fish Creek stream corridor has been a topic of public discussion for many years and is identified as an acquisition target in the Parks Plan. This could include the reintroduction of daylight sections of the watercourse south of Chugach Way, near Spenard Road and Minnesota Drive.	
Northwood Park	This park contains Class A wetlands and is connected to one of the few undeveloped portions of Fish Creek.	
Jewel Lake Park	This park contains a popular swimming beach as the only active use. Consideration is needed as to preservation of the wetlands north of the beach and/or trail connections through them.	
Point Woronzof Park	Point Woronzof Park lies west of the airport and contains both upland and coastal wetlands areas separated by the coastal bluff. The park is undeveloped except for the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail.	

Objective #5:

Ensure continued public access to parks and open spaces located on TSAIA lands.

There is a history of public use of certain TSAIA parcels for recreation purposes. These areas function as parks but are leased or under use agreements from TSAIA. Continued public education is needed to promote understanding about the status of these lands since people assume they are in municipal ownership. In addition, the MOA should continue to seek renewals of interim maintenance agreement agreements in the short term, while also pursuing permanent acquisition of these lands through a comprehensive land exchange with TSAIA. This topic is discussed more thoroughly in Section 4.3.5 (Airport Objective #5) and Section 4.3.6 (Comprehensive Land Exchange Considerations).

Parks Objective #6:

Acquire and permanently preserve the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail from Kincaid Park to Westchester Lagoon as a well-maintained, continuous, public recreational corridor with vegetative buffer.

Portions of the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail that lie within the TSAIA boundary are available for public use at the airport's discretion. These sections could eventually be subject to future airport development. The WADP recommends that the MOA pursue a comprehensive land exchange or other acquisition method with TSAIA to permanently acquire the full length of the trail under municipal ownership. This topic is discussed more thoroughly in Section 4.3.5 (Airport Objective #2) and the Coastal Trail Interface Area Exhibit 4-9a and Compatibility Concepts Exhibit 4-9b.

Other issues that affect the trail include coastal bluff erosion; critical points of erosion near Point Woronzof threaten stability of the trail and road corridor over the long term. The Tony Knowles Coastal Trail has already been relocated once due to erosion. Also, if and when the AWWU Water Treatment Plan is expanded, the trail would need to be rerouted completely around the perimeter of the facility. The WADP recommends that these issues be monitored and addressed.

