

Executive Summary – Girdwood Trails Plan Stakeholder Interviews

OBJECTIVES

Huddle AK worked in partnership with the Girdwood Trails Plan Subcommittee to develop a list of stakeholders and trail users to participate in interviews. The stakeholder group was selected to represent the variety of uses occurring on the trail system and their different perspectives of many trail users. The objective of the stakeholder conversations was to establish a baseline and better understand the current conditions of the trail system as well as varying goals and visions for the future to ensure a trails plan provides something for everyone in the Girdwood community.

METHODOLOGY

Stakeholder interviews were conducted over 60-minutes via online meeting platforms. The following set of questions was used to begin and guide each conversation:

- What is your general perception of the Girdwood trail system?
- What do you value most about the Girdwood trail system?
- What do you feel the Girdwood trail system does well? What is working? What are the strengths of the system?
- Where do you feel the Girdwood trail system could be improved? What is not working? What are the challenges within the system?
- As you look ahead to the next 15-20 years, what are the most significant challenges and opportunities for the Girdwood trail system?
- How balanced do you feel the trail system is in terms of types of trails, parks, and permitted uses on public lands?
- What are the key issues facing the trail system?
- Are there any 'missing connections' that you know of?
- What other thoughts would you like to share about the Girdwood trail system's future?
- Are there trail projects that you think need to be completed?
- What do you think about existing trail conditions and maintenance?
- What do you think about trail amenities (signs, parking, trailheads, etc.)

Huddle AK captured each conversation and provided the stakeholders a summary to review for accuracy. The interview summaries were compiled for review by the Girdwood Trails Plan Subcommittee and inclusion in the public record.

Based upon the key findings of the stakeholder interviews, an existing condition report, and a Girdwood Trail Plan Working Group work session, a vision statement for the Trails Plan process will be developed. This statement will help to focus and guide the process by creating a shared vision for the trail system informed by viewpoints and information shared by all user groups.

PARTICIPANTS

Girdwild
Alyeska Resort
Girdwood Nordic Ski Club
MTB Alliance

Ascending Path
Landowners and Managers
General Trail Users: Jonathan Lee, Carolyn Brodin, Paul Crews

KEY THEMES

Girdwood is a Trail Town and Residents Value Access to Trail-Based Recreation

Many Girdwood residents were drawn to the town due to the nature of the small community and its access to trail-based recreation. Given Girdwood's proximity to Anchorage, residents value having trail access from their front door on-foot and providing recreation opportunities within the community is important to all.

Girdwood residents and trail system users value the variety of activities that are possible within the trail system (i.e. hiking, biking, skijoring, downhill skiing, cross country skiing, etc.). The accessibility of the trail system, whether it be from residents' front door, or visitors having easy access from Alyeska Resort, is something the community of Girdwood appreciates and cited often.

The presence of Alyeska Resort, recreational opportunities, and natural beauty draws tourists year-round. There is a perception that the Girdwood trail system has the foundation, location, and potential to be a world-class trail system. With adequate public involvement in the trails planning process and a shared vision, investments in trail maintenance, improved connectivity, access, and amenities would be beneficial for residents and visitors alike.

The Girdwood Trail System Should be Equitable and Balanced

Level of Difficulty

Bearing in mind that outdoor recreation in Alaska is somewhat more 'extreme' than one might find in other places, the opportunities within the Girdwood trail system still seem to skew towards a more experienced outdoor recreator. There is a desire for trails that are accessible and safe for hikers, bikers, and skiers of all levels. Creating opportunities at all levels of difficulty is especially important as the number of youth and tourists engaging in recreation is on the rise. As with all recreation, there is a certain level of risk to be expected. However, clearly indicating trail difficulty and conditions on maps and trailhead kiosks will offer clear expectations and yield more prepared trail users who experience less injury or accidents. As the balance of trail classifications is diversified this will become increasingly important. Tourists or out of town guests may assume that a Class 4 trail poses little risk due to being well maintained and formalized and may be ill prepared for the risks of trail-based recreation.

Allowed Uses

Due to the growing popularity of various trail-based activities such as biking and skiing, the balance as well as clear indication of allowed uses on a trail is needed. There is some user conflict between hikers and bikers and their desired trail experiences. However, bikers and non-bikers alike agree that more bike specific trails and areas are needed. Trails which are not designed and built for bikers sustain damage and result in increased maintenance requirements and costs.

The construction of the Nordic 5k Loop through the efforts of the Girdwood Nordic Ski Club has created a designated area of allowed use for Nordic skiers that is generally removed from other trail users

experience that is well-marked, and well-maintained. The Girdwood Mountain Bike Alliance is pursuing similar efforts to create trail opportunities for bikers through the proper planning and channels. The possibility of zoning within the trail system will be explored as it may alleviate tension between user groups and maintain areas for specific uses and desired trail experiences.

As the designation and creation of areas for allowed uses progresses, the wayfinding, signage, and mapping should be clear and well planned to create easy to follow routes and loops. It is difficult for residents and visitors alike to understand where allowed uses change. Due to the nature of the development in the Girdwood trail system so far without a master plan, the system is incohesive. Allowed uses change frequently with little marking creating a fractured, confusing experience when a trail user must change or question whether their mode of travel is allowed on a trail. One example of this is the North Face Trail at the top of Mt. Alyeska, when the trail is open to bikers, hikers get cut off and must turn around.

Range of Opportunities for All People

Offering opportunities for every type of resident or visitor is something that the community of Girdwood values and feels is important. Whether that is the tourist seeking a photo opportunity with very little hiking, the individual pushing a stroller or using a wheelchair, those who seek a more primitive experience in a natural space, or any other variety of trail user, the Girdwood trail system can provide options for all through proper planning. Each trail cannot cater to all, but the planning process will help determine which opportunities are already provided and what updates or additions may be made to trails to create a diverse trail system that offers something for everyone.

Balance of Trail Classifications throughout the System

There is significant diversity in the experience that trail users wish to have when using the Girdwood trail system. In order to best meet this diversity in demand, the trail system should be comprised of trails of various classifications. Girdwood residents' value the diversity among types of trails and experiences as much as they value the ability to engage in many forms of trail-based recreation. They appreciate and see the need for access to class 1 (minimally developed) trails as well as class 4 (fully developed) trails. The Bird to Gird and Nordic 5k Trails are formalized, well-maintained trails that are valued by many community members to the same degree that undeveloped, primitive trail experiences are. There was interest expressed in formalization and clearer marking of some social trail networks. Formalizing select social trails will preserve the natural environment by making it clear where trail users should travel and funneling traffic onto fewer trails. Clearer marking of the formalized trail system will prevent visitors from wandering down social trails and accidentally arriving in residents' backyards rather than their intended destination. A trail system with a balance of trail classifications will lend itself well to providing opportunities for the novice as well as advanced hiker and creating a broad range of outdoor and recreation experiences.

Areas for No Trail Development

While it will be vital to provide a variety of trails when it comes to difficulty, use, and trail classification, it will also be necessary to designate areas where no trail development will occur. Recent trail development and increased use within the Girdwood trail system have altered treasured primitive trail experiences. Many residents and user groups value having access to pristine wilderness areas that are

minimally developed. The Girdwood valley is vast and with proper planning and public involvement, spaces and experiences for all user groups are possible. Areas for no trail development must still follow the proper process and channels that new trail development is subject to. It should be clear why the area has been selected, how it will be accessed, and what (if any) level of enforcement, maintenance, or involvement will be needed.

Trail Access

There are many wonderful trails within the Girdwood trail system that are missing formal access, wayfinding, or amenities. The thought of the Girdwood trail system inundated by out of town guests is difficult for many long-time residents. The process by which trail access is created will require community input and the benefit of improved trail access for safety and rescue should be kept in mind.

While the Girdwood trail system is a valued asset of the community, the trails do not benefit from being kept a secret. Striking a balance between overuse and having enough eyes on the trail for safety and maintenance is crucial. Through conversation and planning, Girdwood may consider upgrading certain trails to support higher levels of traffic and promoting them accordingly (i.e. Winner Creek Trail). Certain trails that are not yet to that standard or do not have easy access may not be as heavily promoted. The trails that are selected for tourism and promotion should be chosen by the community and clearly marked on promotional materials and maps. This communication around access, use, and level of trail development will create a clear expectation as to the type of trail experience one can expect.

Commonly cited examples such as Wagon Trail, a historic experience that many residents value, cannot be shared or promoted with visitors due to having no trailhead at either end. Upper Virgin Creek Falls is a very popular destination that is promoted well and receives high traffic but does not have parking or restrooms to accommodate visitors. Providing easy access, formal trailheads, as well as appropriate amenities and parking for the level of use anticipated on a given trail will help to alleviate many of the current issues.

Priority Projects

- Hand Tram
- Virgin Creek Trailhead
- Max's Mountain
- Iditarod Trail
- Winner Creek Improvements
- Girdwood Mountain Bike Alliance Development
- Dedicated Areas for No New Trail Development
- Increased Connectivity between existing trails (Abe's Trail and California Creek)
- Wagon Trail Access and Tread
- Beaver Pond Maintenance and Improvements
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Trail Maintenance

While all stakeholders understand that both the coordination and cost of maintenance have been challenging, the desired level of maintenance moving forward varies among trail users due to

preference and desired trail experience. Trail classification and allowed use designation will be helpful in determining the level of maintenance on given trails.

Brushing out trails, grooming, and general trail maintenance (removing fallen trees, tread, bridges, etc.) should all be considered. Trails designated for hiking or biking with a tendency to become overgrown (such as Beaver Pond) should be brushed out with some regularity. Most seem to be content with the level of grooming happening and would like to hold community conversations to reach maintenance agreements for additional grooming. General trail maintenance could be conducted more regularly, but due to financial burden the Girdwood trail system relies heavily on volunteers to conduct these activities. Areas that are designated for no trail development should be relatively unmaintained to provide a more primitive trail experience and preserve natural spaces for those who seek that.

The level of trail maintenance required, anticipated funding, and volunteer commitment should be discussed in the initial planning stages of all new trail development. Many interviewees felt that new trail projects should not be pursued until existing trails are up to date on maintenance.

Connectivity

While many are excited about the prospect of new trails and expansion of allowed uses, there is consensus among those interviewed that the trail system would benefit from increased connectivity between existing trails. Creating connectivity among existing trails may consist of new trail development to close 'missing connections' as well as formalization of social trails where hikers have taken it upon themselves to establish connections.

A framework for creating access to the trail system and connectivity among current trails should exist before additional trails and new development is pursued to avoid trail relocation in the future. There is a desire for connectivity through town and around the valley, which is bifurcated by Glacier Creek and Alyeska Highway. Creek crossings will need to be addressed eventually to create the desired valley-wide connectivity. There is interest in filling in gaps to create out and back loops. One such connection is between Abe's Trail and California Creek, creating a loop would only require a small portion of trail to be formalized.

Creating connectivity among the trail system would create a more cohesive experience and additional opportunities to travel through Girdwood. With so many residents valuing the ability to travel without a car, a connected trail system utilizing the city's infrastructure is a key part of that.

Project Approval Processes

The project approval process should be transparent and understood by all. There should be adequate public involvement opportunities and communication between all parties. There is frustration among the community around an arduous trails approval process while landowners and managers are sympathetic of this and working to simplify the process. This trails plan will provide some clarity around that process, establish a shared vision, and result in a community supported and adopted document that may be referenced during future trail development.

Topics that may be discussed and considered with all new trails and natural space projects include:

- Viewshed
- Land Ownership

- Trail Maintenance (level required, current funding available, maintenance agreements)
- Access
- Trailhead Amenities (parking, restrooms, trashcans, dog stations, etc.)
- Connectivity to Nearby Trails
- Wayfinding and Signage
- Trail Classification (Class 1-4)
- Desired Level of Awareness and Use

APPENDIX – Detailed Interview Summaries