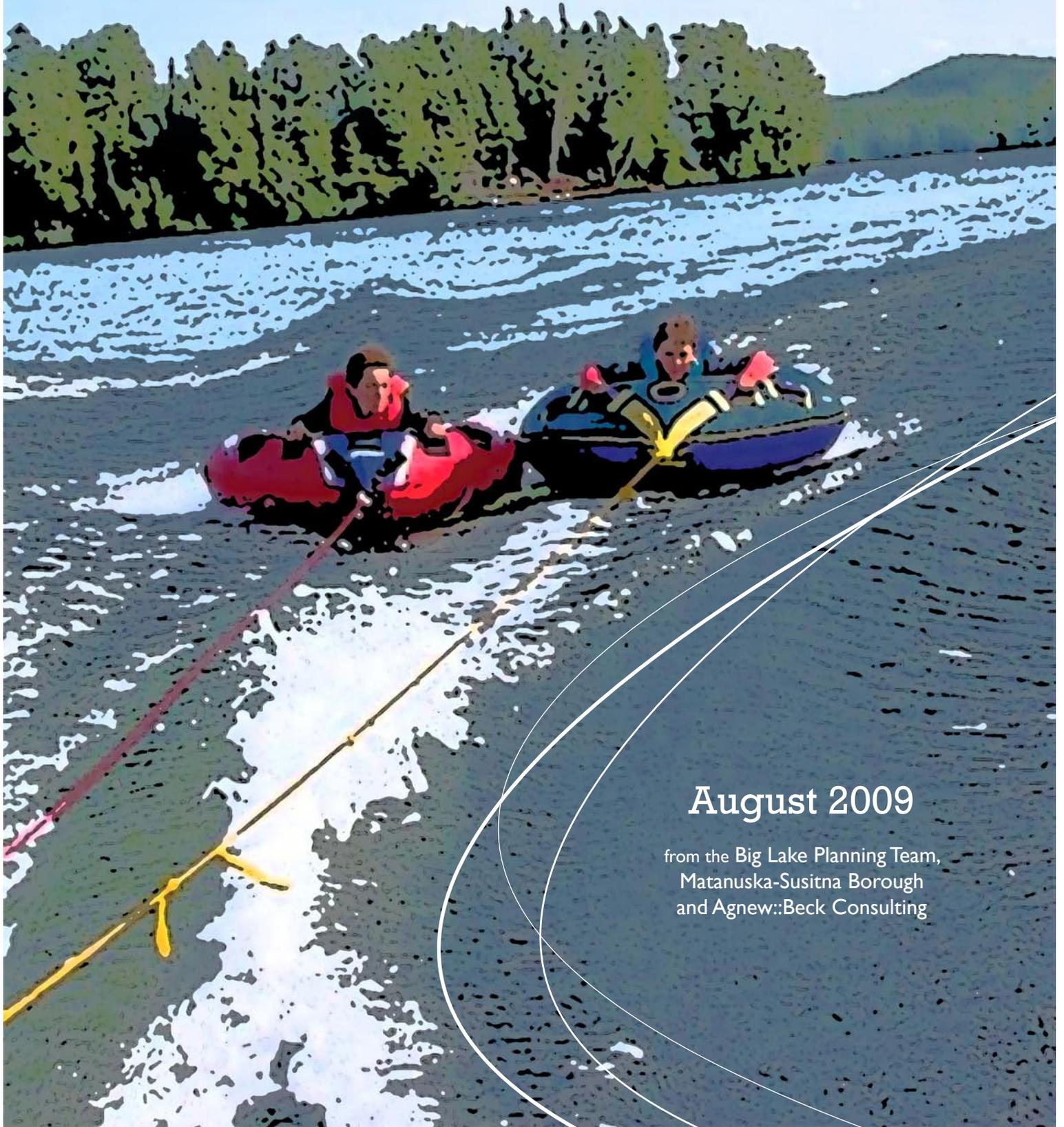


# BIG LAKE

## COMMUNITY COUNCIL AREA

Comprehensive Plan Update



August 2009

from the Big Lake Planning Team,  
Matanuska-Susitna Borough  
and Agnew::Beck Consulting

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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For a summary of the 2009 Big Lake Comprehensive Plan Update, please refer to the Big Lake Comprehensive Plan Update Guidemap. The guidemap includes a comprehensive overview of the major outcomes of the Big Lake comprehensive planning process.



Big Lake is facing challenges and opportunities associated with growth in rural Alaska. As in many other parts of the state, many Big Lake residents are concluding that while they don't welcome the idea of planning, or more meetings, they nonetheless want to have a voice in the growth of their community. In 1996, the Big Lake Community Council developed its first Comprehensive Plan, which was approved by the MSB Assembly. A little over a decade later, Big Lake has elected to update that plan to address the challenges and opportunities facing the community today and into the future.

## **Project Area Overview**

Big Lake is an unincorporated community of 3,082 people, as estimated in 2006 by the State Department of Commerce and Community Economic Development.<sup>1</sup> Big Lake takes in a total of approximately 80,000 acres including over 4,000 acres of water. Located in the Matanuska-Susitna Borough, Big Lake is 13 miles southwest of Wasilla, next to Houston and Knik-Fairview (See Map 1). Land is held by a mix of public and private entities, with major landowners including the Mat-Su Borough, the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority (AMHTA), Native Corporations and the State of Alaska.

Big Lake is an area with many beautiful lakes and rivers, wooded areas, wildlife, and attractive views. The area is part of an extensive, complex surface and subsurface watershed, beginning east in the Meadow Lakes area and draining west to the Little Susitna River and southeast into Fish Creek. Maintaining the area's clean water for drinking, recreation and habitat is an important issue and an ongoing challenge. In winter, the area is a Mecca for snowmachiners who enjoy the area's wide open meadows and take advantage of an extensive trail system. These natural features endear Big Lake to its long-time residents, as well as drawing recreational users, second-home buyers and retirees. Residents also value the diversity of lifestyles available in Big Lake, from small-town urban amenities to rural, semi-wilderness living.

Some important social trends have surfaced at the Big Lake Planning Team meetings. As outlined by the Planning Team, Big Lake has gone through significant changes in the last several decades. In the 1970's and 80's, Big Lake was primarily a location for second homes, most of which were of modest size and mostly owned by Anchorage residents. During this time Big Lake also was a place where people with little money could find and purchase land, usually well back from the lake, for low prices.

Recently, more people are living in Big Lake year round, commuting to jobs in the southern Borough or in Anchorage. In addition, more people are coming to Big Lake to retire. Modest cabins are being transformed into larger, costly second homes and several popular lakefront "watering holes" have closed. Much of the rowdiness for which the area was known has declined. In sum, the area is becoming more of a family-oriented, year-round community.

While the area has experienced an influx of relatively wealthy second home owners and retirees, there are still many people in the community with very modest means. Evidence supporting this conclusion includes the fact that Big Lake Elementary is a Title 1 school. Title 1 schools are schools where at least 35 percent of the children in the attendance area are from low-income families. In the words of one Planning Team member, "there are now two Big Lakes, one

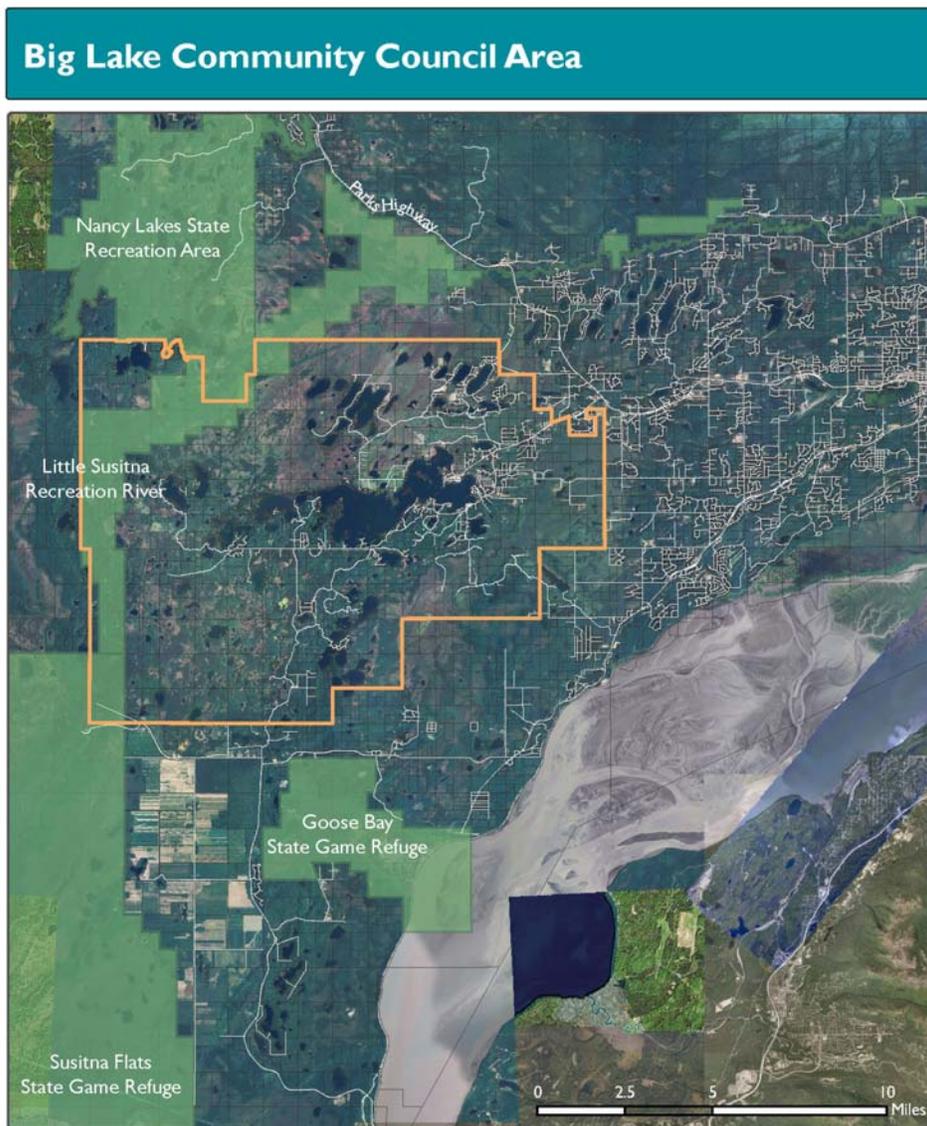
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<sup>1</sup> This 2006 figure is an estimate, but is not "DCCED certified;" Big Lake population in 2000 Census was 2,635

relatively wealthy and one relatively poor.” Team members have emphasized the need for a Comprehensive Plan that serves the needs of all residents.

One of the biggest challenges for this plan will be to find ways to create a more stable, prosperous community. For example, by finding resources to upgrade community facilities and social programs; by attracting new, year-round middle class residents; and by encouraging economic development that helps raise incomes for local residents.

**Map 1. Big Lake Community Council Area**



Alaska State Plane, Zone 4, NAD 1983  
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All data courtesy of Matanuska-Susitna Borough.  
This map was compiled for the community of  
Big Lake, with assistance from Agnew::Beck.



## **The Purpose of This Plan**

The purpose of comprehensive planning is to promote the type of environment that a community desires. In 1996, the Comprehensive Plan for Big Lake was created. The objective of the new plan is to update the 1996 Plan, re-visit the topics identified in 1996 in light of development over the last decade and consider current community issues and goals. Through this process, the plan can respond to new opportunities and challenges focus on current community priorities and continue to guide future development.

Key components of this plan include a broad, long-term vision for Big Lake's future; policies to guide land use, growth, and development; priorities to improve public facilities and services; and policies to promote economic development, retain community character and protect the natural environment.

In Alaska, Title 29 of the Alaska State Statutes mandates all organized municipalities to develop comprehensive plans. The key elements of the statutes (Sec. 29.40.030) are summarized below:

The comprehensive plan is a compilation of policy statements, goals, standards and maps. They are intended to guide the physical, social, and economic development, both private and public, of the municipality. These may include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Land use plan;
- Community facilities plan;
- Transportation plan; and,
- Recommendations for implementing a comprehensive plan.

To be effective, this Comprehensive Plan must not only be adopted but must be used to make informed decisions on Big Lake's future growth and development. The first step in creating an effective plan will be to gain the approval of the Big Lake Community Council, followed by approval by the Matanuska-Susitna Planning Commission and then adoption by the Borough Assembly. After adoption, Big Lake will need to take actions to achieve the general goals established by the plan.

## **Plan Time Frame and Plan Authority**

The plan takes a long-term view, establishing broad goals and policies intended to guide growth over the next 10 to 20 years. At the same time, the document recognizes the need to allow flexibility to respond to unexpected challenges and opportunities. To respond to inevitable changes in conditions, the community and the Matanuska-Susitna Borough will need to revisit and update the plan every five years. In addition, the community, working with the Mat-Su Borough, may amend the plan on an ongoing basis through a formal revision process.

A comprehensive plan is a legally recognized document, with the authority to guide decisions on land use, public facilities and services, transportation and other issues. At the same time, comprehensive plans are intended to set broad goals that will remain relevant over multiple years. Consequently, by design, this plan does not set out precise binding rules on development, such as might be established in a Special Use District. Nor does it make final decisions on the specific locations of new roads or public facilities. What it does do is present general goals on the type of place the community wants to be in the future and then outline general strategies on how to reach these goals.

## **The Comprehensive Planning Process**

The process of creating the Big Lake Comprehensive Plan is anticipated to take about 12 months and has involved a number of parties. First and foremost are community residents, who have driven the entire process. Other important participants include land and business owners, the Big Lake Community Council, state and local governments and large land owners like Native Corporations, the University of Alaska and the Alaska Railroad.

The Matanuska-Susitna Borough (Mat-Su Borough) encourages communities to develop comprehensive plans (Assembly Resolution 86-7; PC Resolution 93-27). The Mat-Su Borough helps communities prepare and implement plans by providing technical assistance, background information, staff and/or consultant support and the opportunity to take part in the Mat-Su Borough's annual capital improvements programs.

The Mat-Su Borough appoints a Planning Team to guide preparation of comprehensive plans. For the Big Lake Plan, as required under Mat-Su Borough Resolution 07-02, a general notice was mailed to Big Lake area property owners and registered voters notifying them of the planning effort, the proposed schedule and a request for planning team nominations in 2007. Interested individuals were required to complete a Comprehensive Plan Commitment Form. Commitment Forms were reviewed by the Mat-Su Borough Planning Commission and 41 community members were invited to become Planning Team members. The Big Lake Planning Team began to meet on a monthly basis in January 2008. The initial meetings allowed the group to ask questions about the process, share important background information and begin to identify important issues to be addressed in the Comprehensive Plan. This group has continued to meet through the planning process and will be responsible for recommending approval of the plan to the Community Council. The members of the Big Lake Planning Team are listed below.

Noreen Austermuhl,	Carol Kane, Heidi Kelley,	Rosa Shilanski,
Walter Ballard, Lisa Behrens,	Victoria Knapp, Dan Kruse,	Michael Smulski,
Gerard Billinger, Ed Blocker,	Linda Lockhart,	Terry Snyder, John Stallone,
Albert Bolea, Sanford Bowles,	James (Dan) Mayfield,	Casey Steinau,
Jo Cassidy, Jay Cross,	Ina Mueller, William O'Hara,	Gregory Strong,
Todd Denman,	Randi Perlman,	Mike Szymanski,
William Dugdale,	Daleann Pond, Cindy Riley,	Lawrence Taylor, Jr.,
Lori Flannery,	Eric Robson, Yvonne Ruth,	Monica Thomas,
Kurt Hansmeier,	Floyd Shilanski,	Kenneth Walch,
Leone Harris, Viki Kaas,		Marlene Westland, and Kim Woodbury.

Agnew::Beck Consulting, of Anchorage, was hired by the Borough to assist the community in the development of this updated Comprehensive Plan.

An initial community workshop was held in May 2008 to share with the greater Big Lake community the initial work that had been done to date. The workshop was an important opportunity for community members to give feedback on the direction of the planning process and to add their knowledge, ideas and concerns to the process. The consultants took this information and worked with the Planning Team and Mat-Su Borough planners to prepare this draft Comprehensive Plan that will be reviewed at the November community workshop.

The feedback provided at this second workshop will allow the consultants to work with the Planning Team and Mat-Su Borough planners to refine the plan and its implementation strategies over the next several months.

Finally the Comprehensive Plan will go through the formal Borough approval process, anticipated for Winter 2008-2009. The Mat-Su Borough relies on the local Community Council to ensure that the Comprehensive Plan reflects community views. The Community Council will review and approve the final plan at a public meeting. One of the main values of adopting a Comprehensive Plan is to allow the Big Lake community to speak to the Mat-Su Borough and other interests in a collective voice and most importantly to present a vision for Big Lake.

Once the Community Council approves the Comprehensive Plan, it then submits it to the Mat-Su Borough. First the Mat-Su Borough Planning Commission and then the Mat-Su Borough Assembly will hold public hearings to review and approve the Big Lake Comprehensive Plan. Once adopted, it will replace the 1996 Plan as the official planning document for the community. When necessary, it can be further amended or updated through the same process.

The consultants from Agnew::Beck provide expertise in the fields of Community Planning and Community Development and will help shepherd the Comprehensive Plan through the drafting and approval process. Though Agnew::Beck offers assistance to the community, the Planning Team and the Mat-Su Borough throughout the project, it is the community that sets the objectives and guides the outcomes. The following graphics depict the steps involved in the comprehensive planning process, the Mat-Su Borough approval process and the proposed schedule for the Big Lake Comprehensive Plan Update.

**Figure 1. The Comprehensive Planning Process**

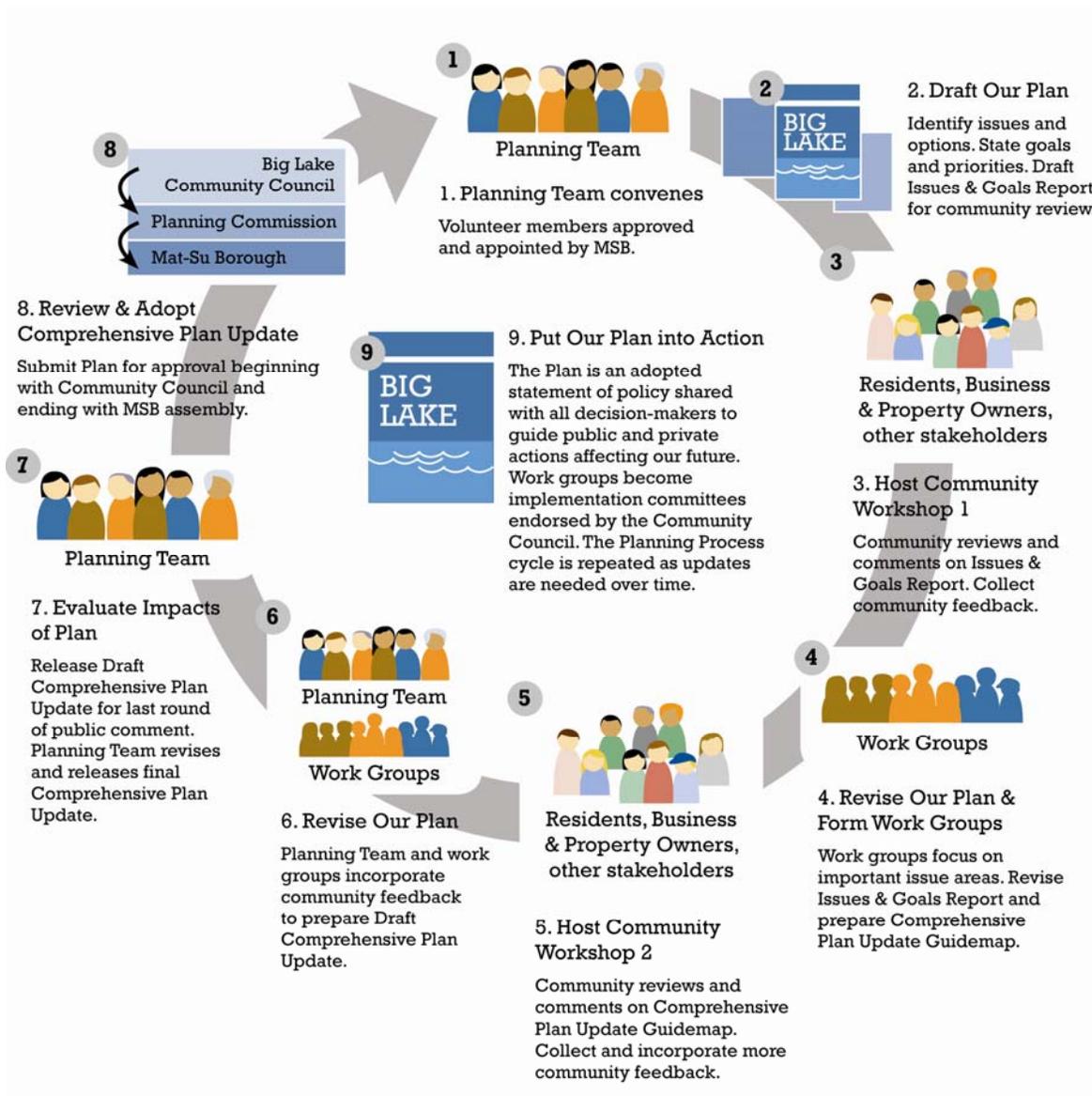
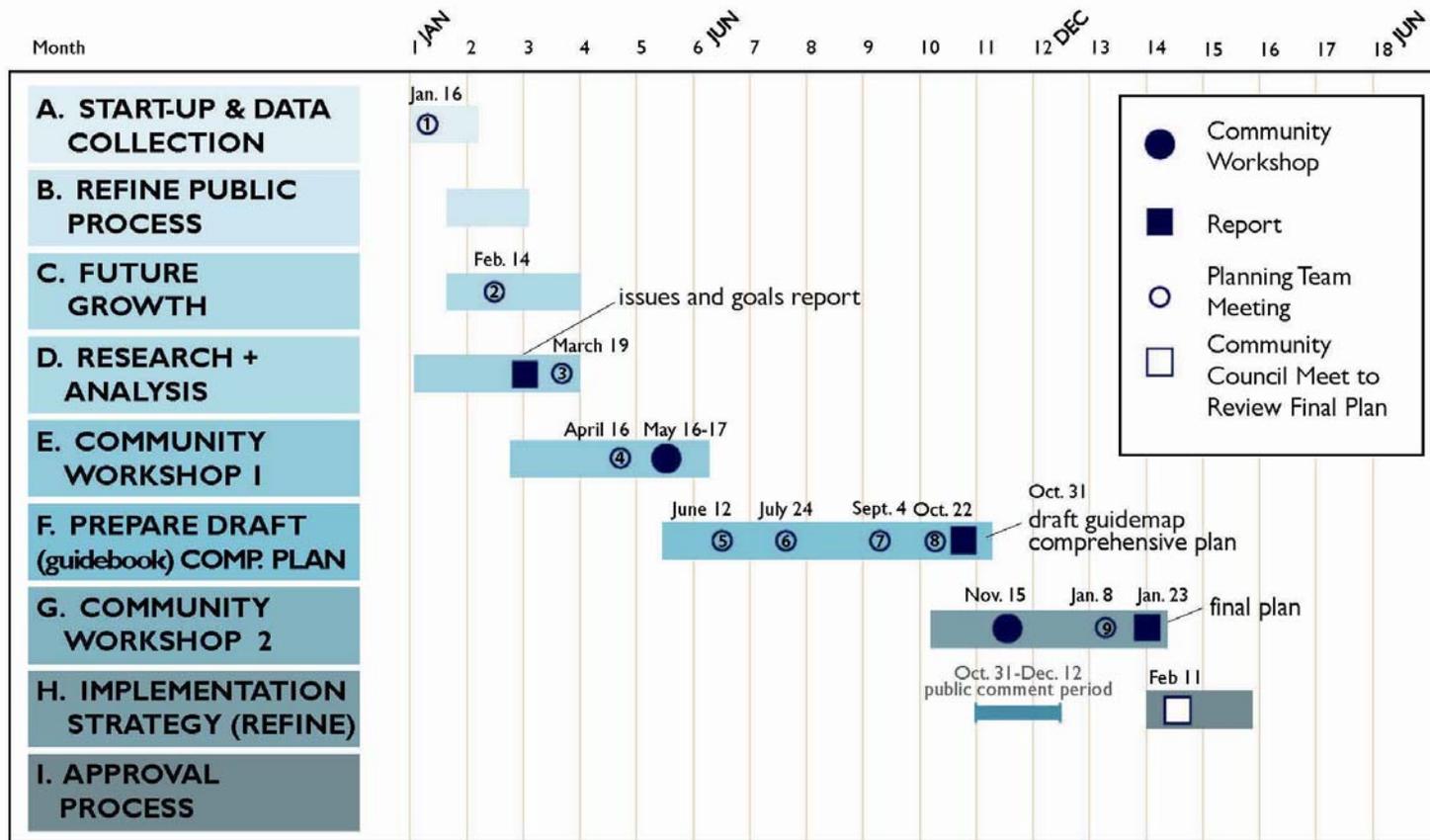


Figure 2. Final Schedule

## SCHEDULE FOR BIG LAKE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN UPDATE



## Introduction

This section provides a brief overview of the history of the Big Lake area and sets the context for the policies in this plan. Items covered include Big Lake’s history, natural environment, land use and economic trends and activity.

## History and Culture

Big Lake’s first inhabitants were the Athabascan Dena’ina Indians. Archeological records suggest the Big Lake area was heavily used by Alaska’s original people. Evidence includes the remnants of extensive encampments in many locations around the area, mostly near where streams entered or exited local lakes.

Around 1899, the Boston and Klondike Company made the first sled trail north into the Talkeetna Mountains from Knik via Big Lake. A number of homesteads were staked out in the area, beginning in the late 1920’s and continuing after World War II. Materials were transported into the area from the Pittman railroad station over eleven miles of rough trail. By 1959, a number of lodges and several children’s camps were operating on the lake, and at least 300 cottages and camps were owned by individuals. Lake-front lots became more accessible in the 1960s and 1970s, with the expansion of roads and power. In June 1996, the “Miller’s Reach” wildfire destroyed more than 37,500 acres in the Big Lake and Houston area, including 433 buildings and homes valued at \$8.9 million (Source: DCCED). Low land costs, the semi-rural lifestyle and a one-hour commute to Anchorage and even shorter commute to the growing Mat-Su employment centers have supported continued growth in the area in recent years.

## Land Use

The total area of the Big Lake Community Council is 87,371 acres. As Table 1 on page 2 shows, land ownership in Big Lake is largely split between Borough and private ownership. Other major landowners include the Mental Health Trust, Native Corporations, the University of Alaska and the State of Alaska. Nearly 45 percent of land in the community council area is state or borough land, which gives the community opportunities both to reserve public lands for recreation, habitat and watershed purposes, and to influence the location of future settlement areas. At the same time, there is significant private land ownership that provides large areas for year round homes, recreational cabins, commercial development and wide range of other private uses. Native Corporation, University and Mental Health Trust lands are all managed essentially the same as any other private lands, although because these lands are in large blocks they offer more options than individual private parcels.

**Table 1. Land Ownership**

Land Owner	Acres	%
Big Lake Community Council*	87,371	
Private	22,289	26%
Borough	21,310	25%
State of Alaska	16,592	19%
Mental Health Trust	8,813	10%
Native Corporations	4,336	5%
University of Alaska	1,935	2%

\* Land ownership acres do not add up exactly to the council area total, due to the presence of large waterbodies, rights of ways and other features not included in individual ownership categories. Only the largest landowners are listed here.

Map 3 on page 4 on the following page shows the land use designations established for state lands in the Southeast Susitna Area Plan. The brighter colors on the map indicate areas intended for land sales; the cooler colors areas for retention in public ownership. Any sales of state land in the Big Lake area will require construction of access roads consistent with MSB subdivision standards. Through this plan the community may wish to work with the state to reassess the decision to sell the two small parcels of state land (H-19, H-16) at the eastern edge of the community council area. These parcels are a nuisance for the state to hold but may be valuable for community uses, as there is very little public land in these areas.

The Borough owns substantial blocks of land in the community council area. Through this plan the community can express intentions for use of this property.

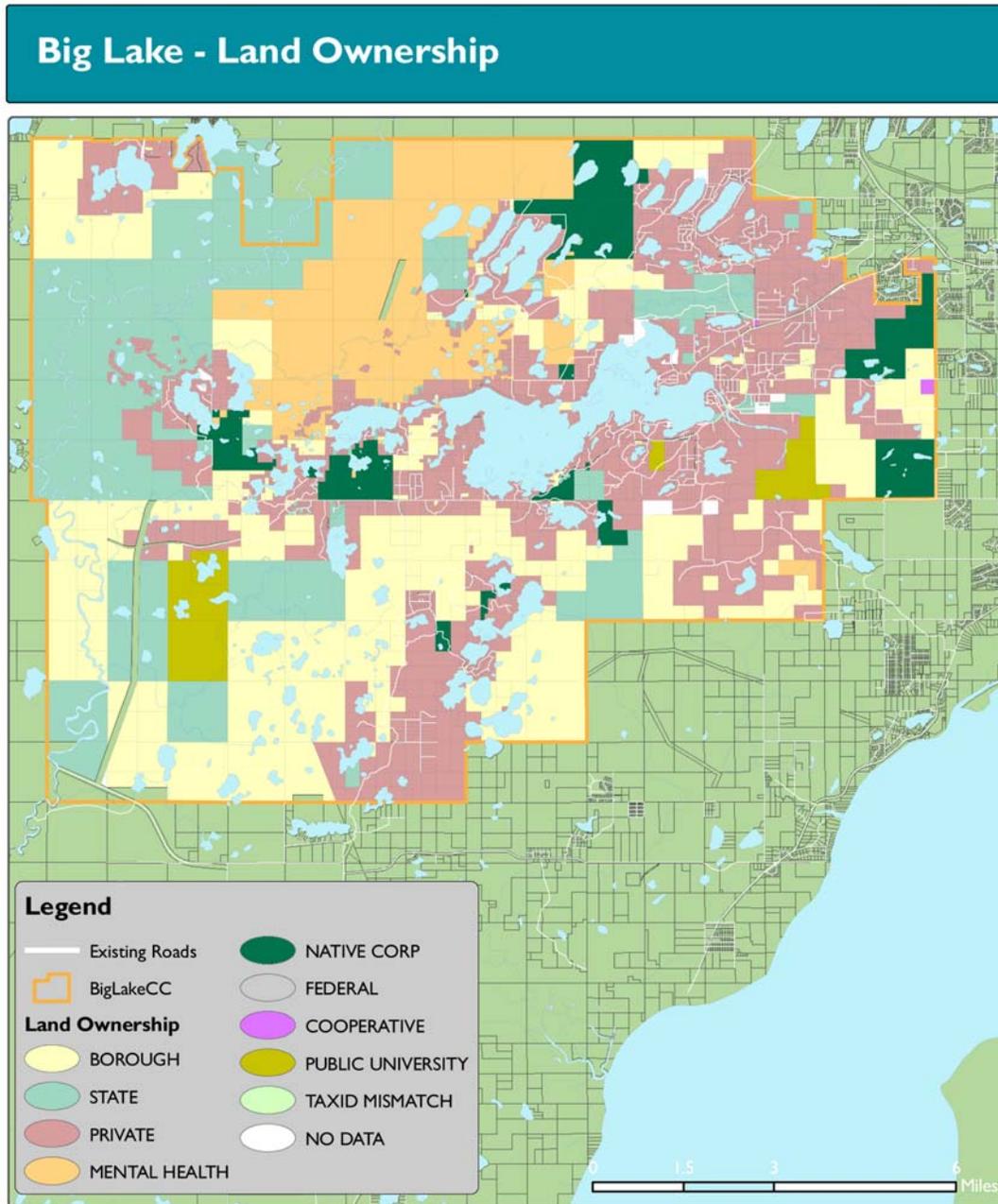
## **Social Environment**

### **Regional Growth**

The rapid growth of the Matanuska-Susitna Borough has been well documented, with growth rates among some of the highest in Alaska. For the 1990's the Borough was in the top 40 fastest growing areas in the US. Between 2000 and 2006, the borough's population grew by 30 percent, compared to just 9 percent for Anchorage and 7 percent for the state as a whole. (<http://labor.state.ak.us/>). This continued growth has resulted in the borough capturing a growing share of the combined Anchorage/Mat-Su region's total population. Mat-Su's population in 1990 represented 14 percent of the region's total; by 2006 its share had grown to 21 percent.

(Note: much of the data presented in the remainder of this chapter is derived from the US Census, which historically has only been updated for communities every 10 years. While more current information is available for the Borough as a whole, there is no detailed Big Lake information on topics such as housing types, age, etc.)

**Map 2. Land Ownership**



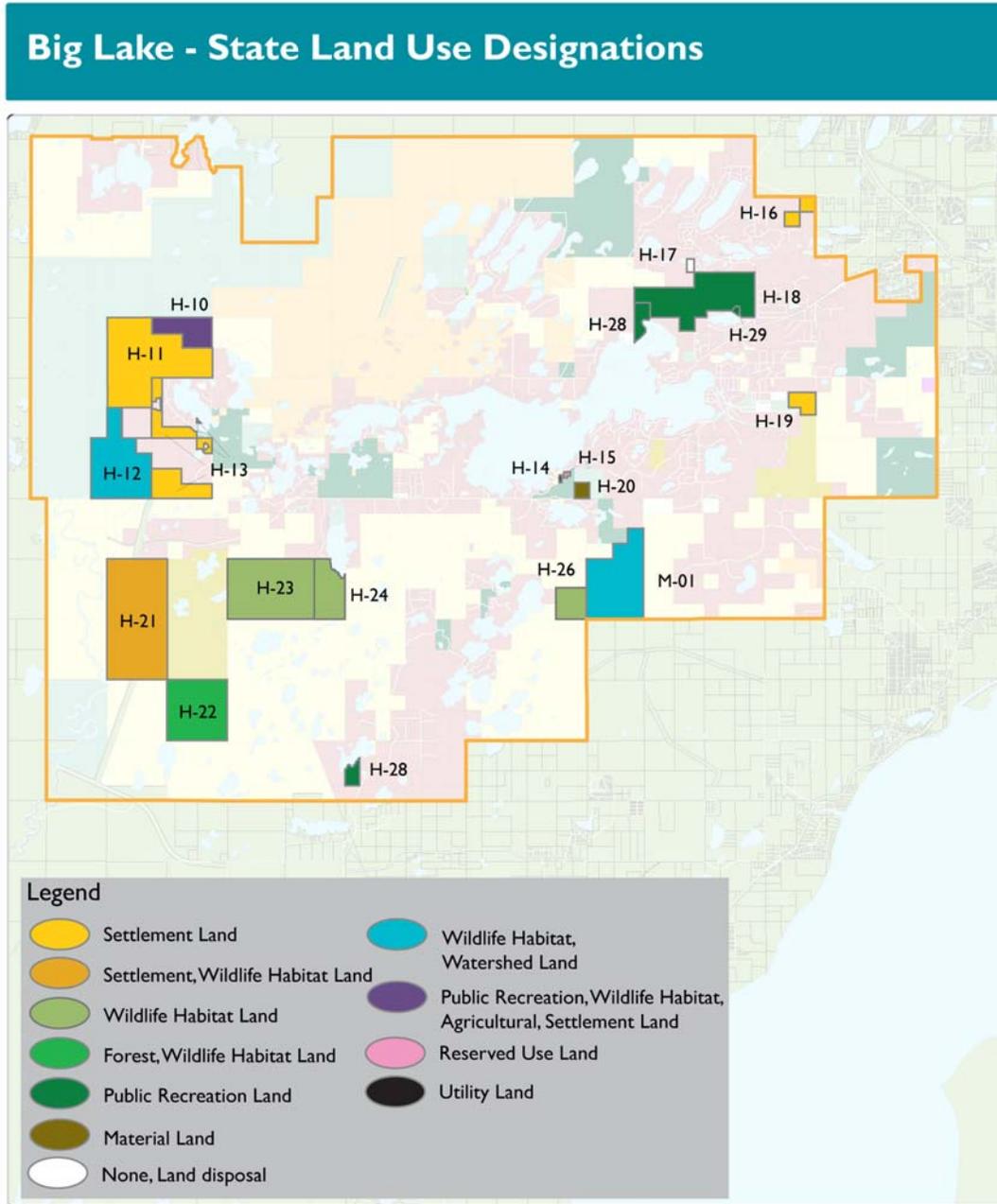
Alaska State Plane, Zone 4, NAD 1983  
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All data courtesy of Matanuska-Susitna Borough.  
 This map was compiled for the community of  
 Big Lake, with assistance from Agnew::Beck.



**Map 3. State Land Use Designations**



Alaska State Plane, Zone 4, NAD 1983  
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 I:139,406



All data courtesy of Matanuska-Susitna Borough.  
 This map was compiled for the community of Big Lake, with assistance from Agnew::Beck.



## Big Lake Population Trends and Demographics

Both the Borough and the Big Lake area have undergone rapid growth in the past twenty years with Big Lake's growth outpacing the Borough's at points. More recently both the Borough and Big Lake have grown less quickly but still at a pace that equals or exceeds the rest of the state. Big Lake's early growth was driven by its reputation as a recreational playground. More recent population increases reflect Big Lake's transition into a commuter suburb and retirement community.

**Table 2. Population Statistics**

Year	Big Lake Population	Average Annual Growth	MSB	Average Annual Growth
1960	74	-	5,188	-
1970	36	-7.0%	6,509	2.3%
1980	410	27.5%	17,816	10.6%
1990	1,477	13.7%	39,683	8.3%
2000	2,635	6.0%	59,322	4.1%
2006	3,082	2.6%	77,174	4.5%

Source: Alaska Department of Commerce, Community and Economic Development.  
February 20, 2008.



### Shifting Age of the Population

Compared to the Alaska as a whole as well as the Borough, Big Lake has a relatively older population. Table 3 and 4 provide comparative age statistics and a breakdown of population by age groups from 1990 to 2000. Big Lake’s higher median age – 37.8 years – reflects several trends: the aging of long time Big Lake residents, growth in retirees and declines in families with young children.

**Table 3. Comparative Age Statistics**

Location	Median Age	Percent 65 & Up
Big Lake	37.8	7.4%
Mat-Su Borough	34.1	5.9%
Alaska	32.4	5.7%

Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development. Alaska Trends: The Matanuska-Susitna Borough: [www.labor.state.ak.us/trends/jan03.pdf](http://www.labor.state.ak.us/trends/jan03.pdf). February 20, 2008.

**Table 4. Big Lake Age Statistics**

Age	1990 Population	2000 Population	2000 Population MSB
Under 5 years	113 (8%)	144 (5%)	4,147 (7%)
5 to 19 years	367 (24.8%)	638 (24%)	16,553 (28%)
20 to 34 years	277 (18.7%)	420 (16%)	9,743 (16%)
35 to 54 years	457 (30.8%)	977 (37%)	21,005 (35%)
55 to 64 years	160 (11%)	262 (10%)	4,374 (7%)
65 years and over	103 (7%)	194 (7%)	3,500 (6%)
Total:	1,477	2635	59,322

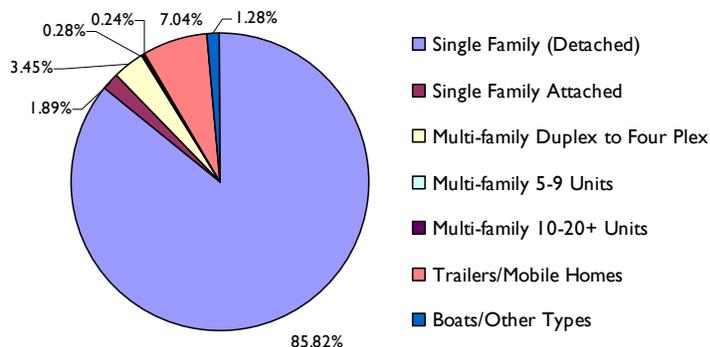
Source: US Census Bureau. Available at [http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/DTSUBJECTSHOWTABLES?\\_ts=134660043415](http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/DTSUBJECTSHOWTABLES?_ts=134660043415). February 20, 2008.

### Land Use and Housing

At the time of the publication of this draft document, MLS currently lists 44 homes for sale in the Big Lake area with a median price of \$180,000. [http://realestate.yahoo.com/Alaska/Big\\_Lake](http://realestate.yahoo.com/Alaska/Big_Lake)

The predominant type of residential development is singly family detached housing (86 percent of existing housing in 2000). Trailers and mobile homes are the second most common housing type (7 percent).

**Figure 3. Big Lake Housing Types**



## Housing Characteristics

Table 5 below shows the number of housing units for Big Lake and the MSB in 1990 and 2000. Housing units increased by three percent annually in the MSB between 1990 and 2000, growing from 20,953 housing units in 1990, to 27,329 housing units in 2000, while the number of housing units in Big Lake increased much less quickly – growing by just under one percent annually. Housing in Big Lake grew from 1,933 housing units in 1990 to 2,122 units in 2000. Many Big Lake area homes were destroyed in the 1996 fire, and not immediately rebuilt. This is likely one reason for this relatively slower growth rate.

The rapid growth of the MSB has been driven by two factors. First, the Borough’s low land prices combined with proximity to Anchorage has spurred growth by residents who commute to jobs in Anchorage. Second, in the last decade, the Borough has reached a population threshold where it is large enough to support local services previously only available in Anchorage, including stores, entertainment and a major new hospital. Big Lake’s relatively small growth in housing stock and modest increase in population could be explained by the large drop in the vacancy rate as people turned vacation/recreation homes into permanent residences.



More recently, the Borough-wide real estate market has showed signs of slowing. The Matanuska Electric Association reports that the number of new residential hookups for the first quarter of 2007 was down by over 50 percent when compared to the same period in 2006 (Alaska Economic Trends, June 2007). This change parallels national trends.

**Table 5. Number of Housing Units in the Affected Area**

	MSB		Big Lake	
	1990	2000	1990	2000
Total Housing Units	20,953	27,329	1,933	2,122
Average Annual Percent Change		3.0%		1.0%
Number of Vacant Units	7,559	6,773	1,385	1,151
Vacancy Rate	36.1%	24.8%	71.7%	54.2%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2008.

Compared to typical communities, both the Borough and Big Lake have very high housing vacancy rates. The Census Bureau describes vacancy status by units that are available for rent, for sale, used for a recreation, seasonal or occasional home, for migrant workers or other. These categories also provide insight into housing uses. Table 6 shows the reasons for the vacancy status above. Two notable points are visible in this table: first, the rate of vacant homes in Big Lake fell notably between 1990 and 2000. The second point is that among vacant housing units almost 90 percent of those are vacant for seasonal, recreational or occasional use. This is greater than the borough-wide figure of 81 percent in 2000.

**Table 6. Reason for Vacancy**

	MSB	Big Lake
Total Vacant Housing Units	6,773	1,151
For rent	5.8%	1.2%
For sale (only)	5.2%	2.3%
Rented or sold (not yet occupied)	4.9%	4.9%
For seasonal, recreational, or occasional use	81.0%	89.0%
For migrant workers	0.0%	0.0%
Other vacant	3.1%	2.7%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2005.

Table 7 shows the sizes of private lots in the Big Lake area, based on figures from the MSB Assessors office. What is most striking about these figures is that such a large percentage of Big Lake lots are smaller than the 40,000 square foot minimum currently required for parcels relying on on-site wells and wastewater systems. The number of small lots reflects the fact that many subdivisions took place before the State or Borough actively applied these lot size minimum standards. The result is that Big Lake has 2,500 lots that are smaller than 40,000 square feet and 1,200 parcels less than 1/2 acre. Meeting water quality standards in a community with so many substandard lots will be a significant challenge, both for the owners of these parcels, and the community as a whole.

**Table 7. Number and Sizes of Private Lots in the Big Lake Community Council Area**

Size (acres)	Number of lots	Percentage
> 160	7	<1%
160 to > 100	20	<1%
100 to > 40	86	2%
40 to > 20	127	2%
20 to > 10	128	2%
10 to > 5	299	6%
5 to > 2	757	15%
2 to > 1	1071	21%
1 to > .5	1516	29%
.5 to 0	1180	23%
<b>Total</b>	<b>5191</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: MSB Assessor's Office

One acre = 43,560 square feet; MSB standards require homes relying on on-site well and septic systems to be a least 40,000 SF. 90% of the parcels in the 1>0 acre size class are smaller than 40,000 square feet.

As the pictures in this document show Big Lake includes many beautiful homes and idyllic scenes. While not pictured here, the area also has a large share of much more modest homes, including some marginal residential structures.

## **Natural Environment**

### **Overview**

The Big Lake Community Council area is part of the Susitna River Basin and includes numerous lakes, rivers and streams as well as muskegs, meadows and wooded hills. The topographic relief ranges from level terrain to rolling hills with a maximum elevation of less than 250 feet. The Little Susitna River flows along the northwestern and western extremes of the planning area with several other creeks including Meadow Creek and Fish Creek traversing the area. The largest of the several lakes within the planning area is Big Lake with a water surface of approximately 3,025 acres.

### **Uplands**

The Big Lake planning area consists mainly of flat to gently rolling terrain with lakes and muskegs scattered among wooded hills (Alaska Regional Profiles, Southcentral Region). These rolling hills represent much of the buildable land in the area.

### **Hydrology: Watersheds & Wetlands, Lakes and Ponds & Streams**

The Big Lake Community Council area contains a substantial amount of surface water including rivers, streams, lakes and wetlands. The major drainage within the planning area is the Little Susitna River although there are other smaller drainages which drain into the Knik Arm.

There are two main watersheds within the Big Lake Community Council area; the Little Susitna River Watershed and the Fish Creek Watershed (see Map 4). The Susitna Watershed includes the north-west portion of the council area and the Fish Creek watershed takes in the south-east section of the area. The Little Susitna River Watershed extends far beyond the boundaries of the planning area and drains to Cook Inlet Arm. The Fish Creek watershed receives drainage from Lucille, Goose, Fish Creek and Meadow Creeks through Big Lake and drains to Knik Arm.

The National Wetland Inventory provides the wetland inventory for the area and divides wetlands in the area into four categories: lakes, riverine and freshwater emergent wetlands, forested/shrub wetlands and ponds. Looking at only the freshwater emergent wetland and the freshwater forested/shrub wetland, characterized by herbaceous march, fen, swale and wet meadow or forested swamp or wetland shrub bog or wetland, respectively (<http://wetlandsfws.er.usgs.gov/NWI/tips.html>), the Big Lake Community Council has approximately 30,000 acres of wetland. The community council area is over 80,000 acres.

There are over 13,000 acres of lakes and ponds in the community council area. They range in size from 3,400 acres to less than 1 acre.

There are countless unidentified streams and creeks in the council area. Of more established waterways, include Meadow Creek, Little Meadow Creek, Fish Creek, Threemile Creek, Goose Creek, Lucille Creek and the Little Susitna River.

### **Vegetation and Woodlands**

The predominant vegetation type is lowland spruce-hardwood forest which is described as a dense to open lowland forest of evergreen and deciduous trees, including pure stands of black spruce. This vegetation usually occurs on areas of shallow peat, glacial deposits, outwash plains and on north-facing slopes. Associated grasses, herbs, etc. include cottongrass, horsetail, fireweed, parsley fern, marsh fern, etc.

The other vegetation type within the planning area is low brush bog and muskeg. In this vegetation type, dwarf shrubs usually dominate over a mat of sedges, mosses and lichens. Ponds or standing water are often present in the peaty substrate. This type is found in wet flat basins where conditions are frequently too moist for tree growth.

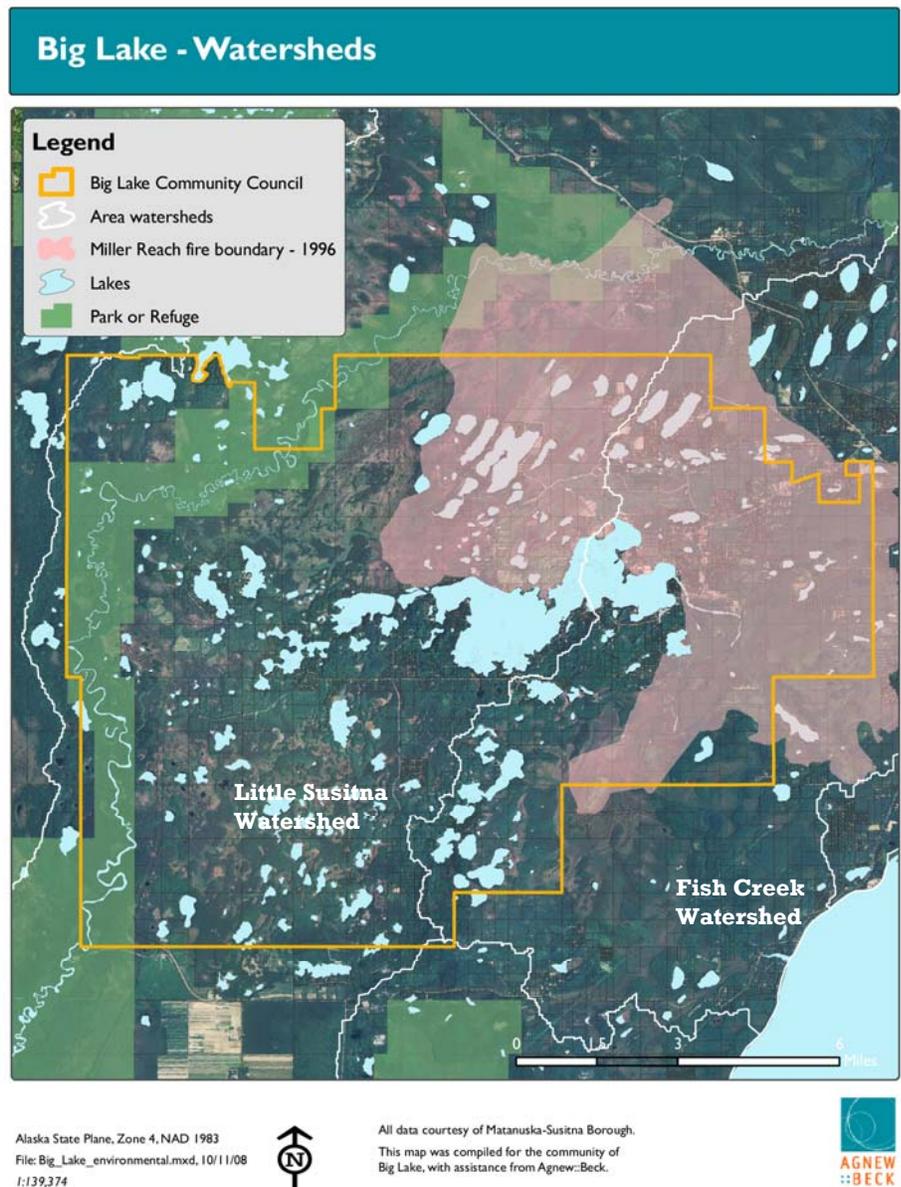
**Fish**

Big Lake area provides spawning, rearing and migration habitat for five species of salmon as well as resident fish species including rainbow trout, dolly varden, arctic char, two types of stickleback, whitefish, burbot, two types of sculpin and eels.

**Geology and Soils**

The geology of the planning area reflects comparatively recent glacial action. It remains much as it was left by the receding ice with the exception of the stream channels which have eroded into or below the glacial surfaces. Glaciers and streams deposited unconsolidated gravel, silt, clay and sand which over time have been covered by an uneven layer of wind-borne silt and sand.

**Map 4. Watersheds and Miller Reach Fire Boundary**



## **Economy**

### **Overview Matanuska-Susitna Borough**

The Mat-Su Borough is the third largest borough in the state, both physically and in terms of population. At 24,683 square miles, it is about the same size as West Virginia; however, 90 percent of its residents live in a relatively narrow east-west corridor that stretches between the community of Sutton to the east on the Glenn Highway, and the community of Willow to the west on the Parks Highway. The Borough has only three incorporated cities: Houston, Palmer, and Wasilla. These cities account for about 19 percent of the Borough's population (Alaska Department of Labor, Fried 2003).

Historically, most of the communities in the MSB were established to support farming, gold and coal mining. Mining largely disappeared from the Borough when the Valdez Creek gold mine closed in 1995, but potential for other mining such as coal bed methane and possibly even diamonds exists.<sup>1</sup> While the Mat-Su Valley is still the largest agricultural producer in the state, growing 61 percent of the state's total agricultural production, farming has been largely overshadowed in importance by other economic players.

Today, the MSB economy derives its vitality from a variety of sources, the most prominent of which is its role as residence of choice for many people who work elsewhere – either in Anchorage or on the North Slope. In 2005, approximately 33 percent of the MSB's labor force worked in Anchorage, with a total of 44 percent working outside of the Borough. Those 44 percent earn 58 percent of the total wages earned by Mat-Su residents, the reason why so many Mat-Su residents commute. Wage and salary jobs in the Borough are largely in trade and services in support of resident households. While commuting remains important, a large and growing share of the economic base is based in the Wasilla-Palmer area.

### **Income and Employment**

Table 8 shows the employment status for residents of the Big Lake area and MSB, 16 years and older, according to the 2000 Census. Over 66 percent of MSB and 53 percent of Big Lake residents are in the labor force. The unemployment rate in Big Lake is just above 8 percent, compared to over 10 percent Borough-wide.

Both the Mat-Su Borough and Big Lake have relatively high percentages of residents 16 years and older not in the labor force. Possible explanations for not being in the workforce include staying at home to raise children or care for an elderly parent, illness, retirement, reliance on subsistence resources, or giving up actively seeking employment because of a lack of opportunities, travel time and the current spike in gas prices.

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<sup>1</sup> A placer gold miner from Palmer discovered purple and orange garnets in gravel he dredged up a few years ago close to Shulin Lake, 24 miles southwest of Trapper Creek. Geologists consider garnets "indicator minerals," suggesting that diamonds might be in the vicinity (Dobbyn, 2005).

**Table 8. Comparative Employment Status**

Employment Status	Big Lake	MSB
Population 16 Years And Over	2,017	42,705
Total Employment (%)	53.4	66.1
Civilian Employment (%)	53.4	65.2
Unemployment Rate (%) *	8.4	10.3
Military Employment	0	0.9
Not In Labor Force (%)	39.1	33.9

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000.

\* The unemployment rate is based on the number of people in the civilian labor force.

Table 9 shows the median household income for households in Big Lake and in the MSB. In 1999, the median Big Lake household income was 16 percent less than the MSB median household income.

**Table 9. Comparative Median Household Incomes**

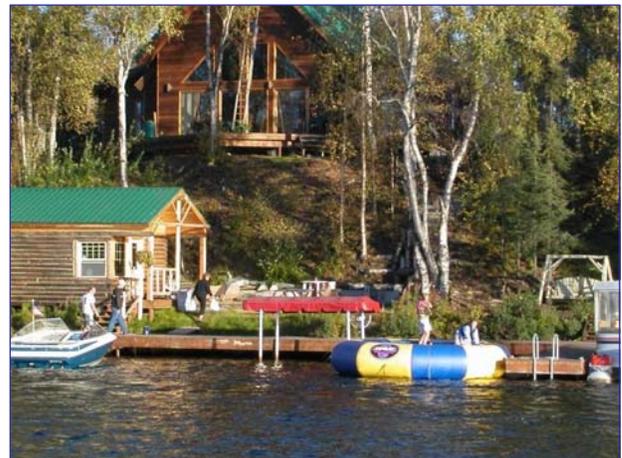
	Big Lake	MSB
1989	\$36,583	\$40,745
1999	\$43,382	\$51,221

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000, SF-3 and Census 1990 STF-3.

## Trends & Implications

Big Lake is a particularly attractive portion of the growing Mat-Su Borough, with scenic lakes, excellent recreation, undeveloped public lands and less of the sprawling commercial development found in neighborhood communities. These qualities, combined with proximity to growing employment centers in the Borough and Anchorage, increase the odds the area will continue to grow.

In addition to Big Lake's natural setting several other trends and projects will likely impact future pressures for development in Big Lake. The aging of the baby boom is leading to more retirees moving to the area, which then leads to the conversion of vacation homes to year-round homes. An increase in jobs within easy proximity of Big Lake will mean increased employment opportunities for area residents. Since 2000, more than three quarters of all wage and salary job growth in the Borough has come from the services sector (<http://labor.state.ak.us/>). Collections of sales taxes in Palmer and Wasilla have grown faster than either population or employment. These two trends indicate that area residents are increasingly spending their time and income in area service outlets and that there is an increase in employment opportunities as a result.



Additionally, several large projects may bring important near- and long-term changes to the Big Lake community (see Figure 4). The largest of these is the construction of the Goose Bay Correctional Center at Point MacKenzie. A joint project between the State of Alaska and the Mat-Su Borough, the Center is expected to cost an estimated 20 million dollars to build, providing 1,536 beds and will employ approximately 500 people. The construction process will bring many job seekers to the area, which in turn will look for local housing and Big Lake would be the community closest to this project. The second, less definitive project, is the construction of the Knik Arm Bridge, directly connecting Anchorage and the Borough. A third related project is a planned new road, connecting the Pt Mackenzie area to the Parks Highway, travelling directly through the Big Lake community. The last project is the proposed construction of a rail spur, which has several route alignments travelling through or near the Big Lake community.

Each of these projects will bring increased traffic, both people and vehicles, through the Big Lake area. Planning for these projects can greatly increase benefits for the developing community.

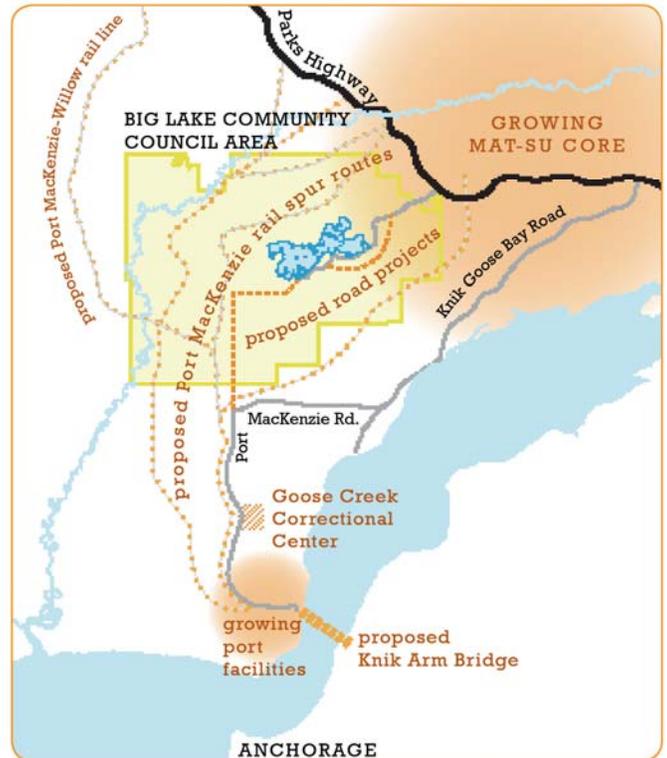
Taken together, the set of facts presented in this chapter and their impact on area growth support the conclusions below:

- Big Lake’s demographics are changing. Many retirees and older workers are coming to Big Lake, changing land prices and expectations about public services and facilities.
- The natural environment is important to Big Lake’s economy and way of life. The community clearly desires to maintain the natural environment. New strategies will be needed to protect this environment as the community grows.
- Meeting water quality standards in a community with so many small and substandard lots will be a significant challenge, both to the owners of these parcels, and to the community as a whole.
- While Big Lake has experienced an influx of relatively wealthy year round residents and retirees, the community remains home to many low income families.

The plan must consider the needs of this segment of the community, for example, by encouraging development of new job opportunities and construction of moderate priced housing.

- Increased job prospects in and near the Big Lake area will increase both the challenges and opportunities available. Thinking about these trends now will help to maintain and develop a local economy that builds on the community’s strengths and character.

**Figure 4. Potential projects in Big Lake area**



“  
*These days, no place stays special by accident*  
”

### **Introduction**

This purpose of this chapter is to present intentions on land use and environmental issues in the Big Lake area, including the conservation of natural resources and development of the built environment. Goals and strategies on these topics are listed below and discussed in the remainder of the chapter. Unlike other plan chapters, strategies here are tied to more than one goal. For each strategy there is a brief history of overall issues, as well as specific steps for implementing a strategy. Because this is a comprehensive plan, these goals and strategies are presented in broad terms, to provide general direction on big issues, rather than diving into details or establishing specific regulations.

### **LAND USE AND ENVIRONMENT PRIORITY GOALS**

1. Coordinate the planning of land use and community services and facilities
2. Strengthen the Big Lake economy
3. Protect the natural environment
4. Provide for freedom to enjoy our properties
5. Protect Big Lake for future generations

### **Strategies to Achieve Land Use Goals**

1. Develop a land use “roadmap” setting out general intentions for the location and intensity of future development, to provide for growth, protect Big Lake’s environment and rural character, encourage concentrated commercial development, and allow for the efficient provision of community infrastructure
2. Create a Big Lake town center, **an attractive, walkable, concentrated center for Big Lake commercial, civic, recreational and social activities**
3. Protect the natural environment, including water quality, air quality, and natural beauty of the area
4. Establish community-wide development guidelines to guide the character of future development
5. Investigate and address the issue of small lots and water quality
6. Improve awareness of and enforcement of existing land use guidelines

### **Background: the Big Lake Environment**

The qualities that give Big Lake its unique character come from both the area’s natural environment and from people – their current and past actions, and their buildings, yards, roads and trails. The second chapter of this plan describes the character of the Big Lake built and natural setting. This section briefly summarizes the character and current health of the Big Lake natural environment.

### **Uplands and Forested Environments**

As is shown on Map 5, roughly half of the Big Lake community area is forested, including stands of birch, spruce and aspen (the white areas on the map). This includes areas that are well drained, where birch and aspen flourish, and also less well drained areas that are still forested, but where spruce dominate. Forested uplands are the location of large majority of development in Big Lake, because these areas offer both good building conditions and the attraction of a forest setting. In addition to creating an attractive place to live and visit, forested areas serve important environmental functions, providing habitat for a number of mammals and birds, and absorbing and infiltrating snow and rain.

This component of the Big Lake environment is judged to be generally in a healthy condition, with two important caveats. First, a significant portion of the area's forests burned in the 1996 Millers Reach fire. These areas are recovering, but are still in the early stages of forest succession. The second caveat is that as the Big Lake area continues to grow, forest vegetation continues to be removed to make way for homes, parking and other developed uses. As long as large lots and modest homes make up most Big Lake development, the general sense of "community in a forest" can remain intact. As a higher percentage of lots are developed, and as densities increase and home sizes grow, the ratio of natural forest to developed areas will change, creating a community with a different look and feel, and reducing the functional value of this environment.

### **Wetlands, Lakes, Ponds and Streams**

As is shown on Map 5, about half of the total Big Lake area is made up of wetlands, lakes, ponds and streams. In different terms, if you were to be randomly dropped somewhere in the community about half the time you would find yourself with wet feet or the need to start swimming. This system of water features performs a number of functions that are critical to daily life in Big Lake. These include providing for clean water for domestic use, absorbing runoff, supporting a wide range of fish and wildlife, and providing recreational opportunities for residents and visitors. Wetlands and lakes, when frozen in winter, become important open areas for travel by snow machine, dog sled, skis and in some instances cars and trucks.

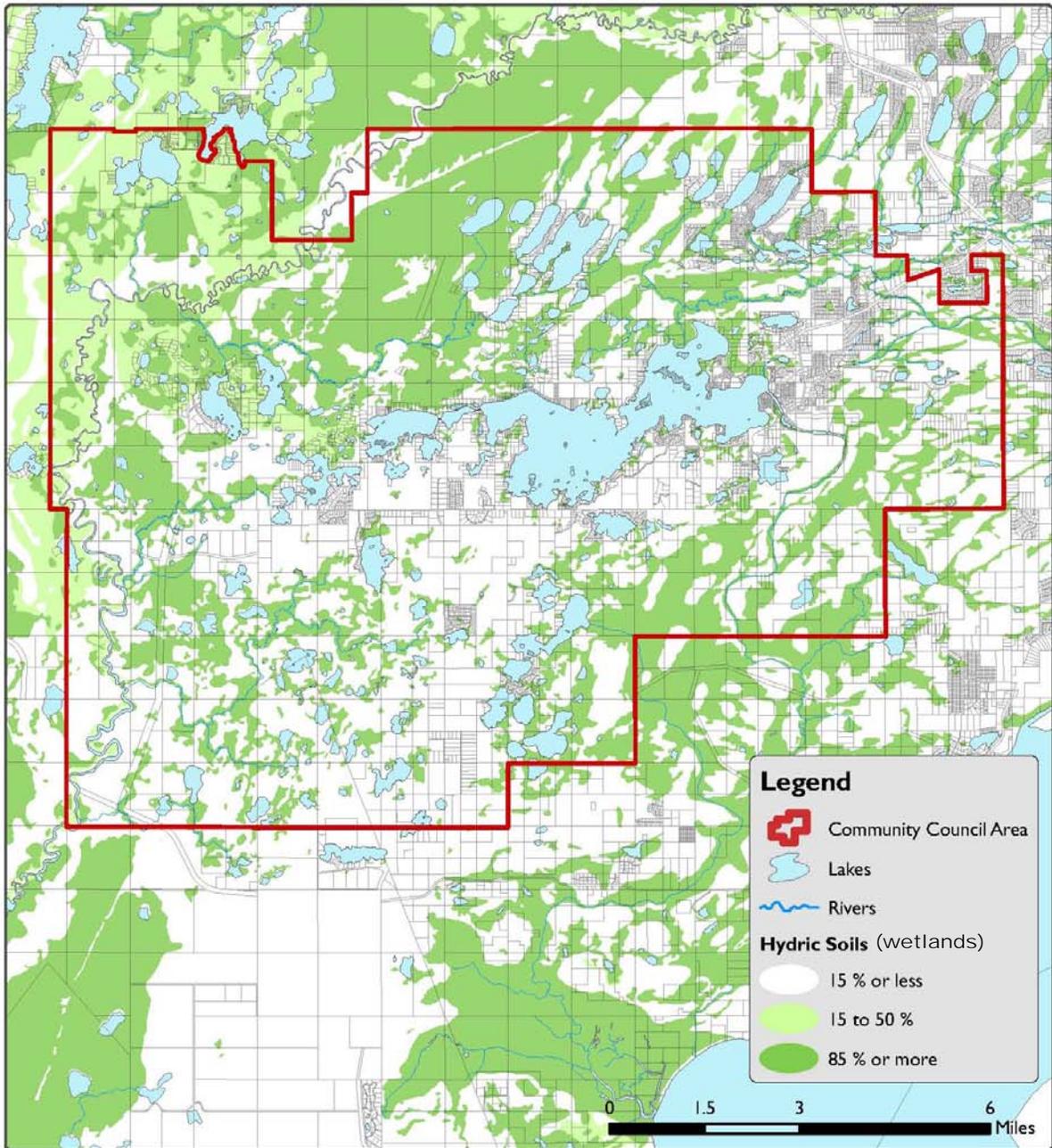
The hydrologic systems of Big Lake are more vulnerable than and not as healthy as the area's forested environments. Problems facing these areas include: impacts of oil and gas in the water associated with motorized watercraft, runoff from adjoining developed areas, diversion and blockage of waterways (e.g. by undersized culverts), shore erosion, and fill of wetlands. These issues are not universal problems in Big Lake, but are steadily increasing as the area continues to grow. *(See 2004 report by the Alaska State Department of Environmental Conservation on Big Lake water quality for details)*

Strategy 3 below provides specific information about what Big Lake Residents value about the area's natural environment, and how these features can be protected.



Map 5. Big Lake Wetlands

## Big Lake - Soils



Alaska State Plane, Zone 4, NAD 1983  
File: Big\_Lake\_soils.mxd, 4/01/08  
1:139,406



All data courtesy of Matanuska-Susitna Borough.  
This map was compiled for the community of  
Big Lake, with assistance from Agnew::Beck.



## **Background: The Need for Land Use Policy**

Big Lake has grown and changed in the past, and almost certainly will grow and change in the future. The purpose of this plan is to help the community respond to these changes in a way that accommodates growth while holding onto characteristics that make Big Lake a good place to live and visit. Specific examples of needs for land use policy include those below:

- As more people want to visit Big Lake, or own a home and live in the area, impacts on the natural setting tend to increase. Poorly planned land uses can have an increasingly detrimental effect on the environment in general and reduce enjoyment of each individual's home. A plan can provide guidelines to reduce the potential impacts of new (and past) development.
- As the population grows the need for private and public services increases – places for shopping, dining, and other private services, as well the need for public services like schools, fire and police service, roads, trails and parks. A plan can help the community anticipate these needs and plan for new infrastructure and new uses. Decisions on the location and intensity of development greatly affect the cost and requirements for new public infrastructure, particularly for water and wastewater services.
- Big Lake could evolve into many different types of communities in the future, some more desirable than others. No plan can control the future, but it can help the community head in a direction that residents desire, for themselves and their children.

## **Land Use and Environment Goals**

The overarching goal of this plan is **protect Big Lake's special character as a place to live and visit while accepting and even encouraging growth**. Without guidance, as the area grows, the community risks losing these qualities that makes Big Lake a distinctive place – its undeveloped open spaces, good views, wildlife, and out-the-door access to recreation. At the same time, growth in the community can bring many benefits, providing new places for people to live, creating new opportunities for local employment, and generally leading to a more vital community. More specific land use goals are listed below:

- **Coordinate the Planning of Land Use and Community Services and Facilities** – Plan for and coordinate expansion of the community and of associated public services. Public services can be provided more efficiently and at lower cost if the community anticipates and plans for the location and quantity of growth.
- **Strengthen the Big Lake Economy** – Improve local opportunities for jobs and businesses, to help Big Lake become a stronger, more stable year round community. Business development is encouraged to provide a stable economic financial base in addition to a more stable tax base.
- **Protect the Natural Environment** – As the area grows, actions are needed to avoid detrimental effects on well water, quality of surface water, habitat, wetlands and other natural environmental features.
- **Provide for Freedom to Enjoy our Properties** – The plan supports a balance of freedom to use property as individuals chose up to that point where one person's use limits the rights of neighbors to enjoy their property. Responsible land use should be in harmony with surrounding land use without damaging the health, safety and welfare of adjacent property.

- **Protect Big Lake for Future Generations** – The community supports the concept that we are not only owners of our property for a period of time but that we have certain obligations as “caretakers” of that property for the benefit of future “owners” and obligations to the overall health of our natural and social environment.

## **Strategies to Achieve Land Use Goals**

The remainder of this chapter presents six strategies to achieve these broad goals. In many instances one strategy (e.g. creating a town center) serves multiple goals (e.g. improving quality of life, protecting the natural environment, and strengthening the economy).

### **Strategy 1: Develop a land use “roadmap” setting out general intentions for the location and intensity of development – to provide for growth, protect Big Lake’s environment and rural character, encourage concentrated commercial development, and allow for the efficient provision of community infrastructure**

Several facts provide the background for considering this issue:

- The large majority of the Big Lake community council area is currently vacant and undeveloped.
- Significant portions of the area (about 45%) are in public ownership – state or borough lands. The state has adopted a plan for these properties (see Map 3 in Chapter 2); some are identified for sale, some for retention in public ownership. Decisions on the future use of borough lands can be affected through this community plan.
- Large portions of the Big Lake area are wetlands where development is costly and risks harm to area’s water quality and habitats.
- Development in the southern Mat-Su Borough continues to increase, leading to increasing pressures for development in the Big Lake area. This includes the steady expansion of employment in the Wasilla and Big Lake area, the Pt MacKenzie Port and ferry, and significantly, the construction of the new Goose Bay prison just south of Big Lake. This project will produce the single largest building in Alaska and provide for 500 new full time, year round jobs (400 day/100 night).
- Big Lake is likely to be crossed by several major regional transportation corridors in the future, including a railroad and a major road passing north through Big Lake from Point Mackenzie. These transportation corridors will accelerate change in the area.

Perhaps the most important point on this topic is that the community can influence the future pattern of future development. There are many different ways these pressures, and others unanticipated, could play out. Through this plan the community is establishing a generalized, flexible development “roadmap” that respects individual property rights but encourages a pattern of development that protects Big Lake’s environment and rural character, encourages clustering of commercial development, and allows for the efficient extension of community infrastructure.

Map 6 on page 8 and the information below presents this “roadmap” for development. Because this is a comprehensive plan, the intent is not to establish restrictions on land owners, but to identify and begin encouraging a general pattern of development that best meets community goals. By establishing this map, the community has a reference point for encouraging the location and kind of growth it wants for the future. This in turn can help identify road routes and other public services and facilities needed to serve expected growth, and help retain natural areas the protect Big Lake’s special character.

The overall pattern set out on this map identifies a spectrum of use areas, from more concentrated development, to more dispersed development, to a system of connected conservation areas intended to protect water quality and other natural resources. Specific land use categories are discussed below:

### 1. Town Center

The “Town Center” use area is intended to be the center of Big Lake life. Desired characteristics are listed below (Strategy 2 following presents more details)

- Mixed use: shops, food, retail goods and services; housing, including higher density housing, within walking distance of shops and services
- A central area for library, schools, fire station, community center, parks, etc.
- Pedestrian friendly, walking access
- An alternative to strip commercial development



### 2. Heart of Town Center

This area is defined by a ¼ mile radius circle in the center of the town center area. Experience in other US communities has shown that if uses are clustered in an area of about this size (¼ mile translates to roughly a 5 minute walk) the large majority of people will regularly walk between stores rather than drive.<sup>1</sup> The objectives for this core area are generally the same in this area as the town center as a whole; this area may be the most concentrated portion of the town center.

### 3. Gateway Mixed Use Corridor

This corridor extends along Big Lake Road, including the first row of lots on either side of the road. This corridor is the primary entry to Big Lake. The intent for this area is to balance two objectives: to allow for a range of uses and, at the same time, to ensure this corridor provides an attractive entry to Big Lake. Specific objectives for this area include:

- Allow a mix of uses, including commercial activities and residential uses
- Discourage large scale, industrial uses



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<sup>1</sup> <http://walkable.org/article1.htm> This website offers 10 strategies for creating a walkable town.

Number 1 is listed here: **1. Intact town centers.** *This center includes a quiet, pleasant main street with a hearty, healthy set of stores. These stores are open for business a minimum of 8 hours a day. The stores include things like barbers/beauticians, hardware, druggist, small grocery/deli, sets of good restaurants, clothing, variety store, ice cream shop, stores that attract children, many youth and senior services, places to conduct civic and personal business, library, all within a 1/4 mile walk (5 minutes) of the absolute center.*

- Encourage development to be attractive and to create a positive impression of the area, for example, by retaining trees between lots and along the road.

More detailed planning and more specific guidelines will be needed in the future to refine the precise boundary of this corridor and reach the objectives above.

#### 4. Highway-Oriented Commercial and Light Industrial Uses

Highway-oriented commercial/light industrial uses are encouraged in two areas: the area around the existing airport and the area southwest of Big Lake that ultimately will be the junction two major regional roads – the upgraded Burma Road and the South Big Lake Road. Development of this latter area is not expected for many years into the future.

Unlike the town center, where the hope is to concentrate uses to invite walking, these areas are expected to be more traditional, auto-oriented commercial developments.

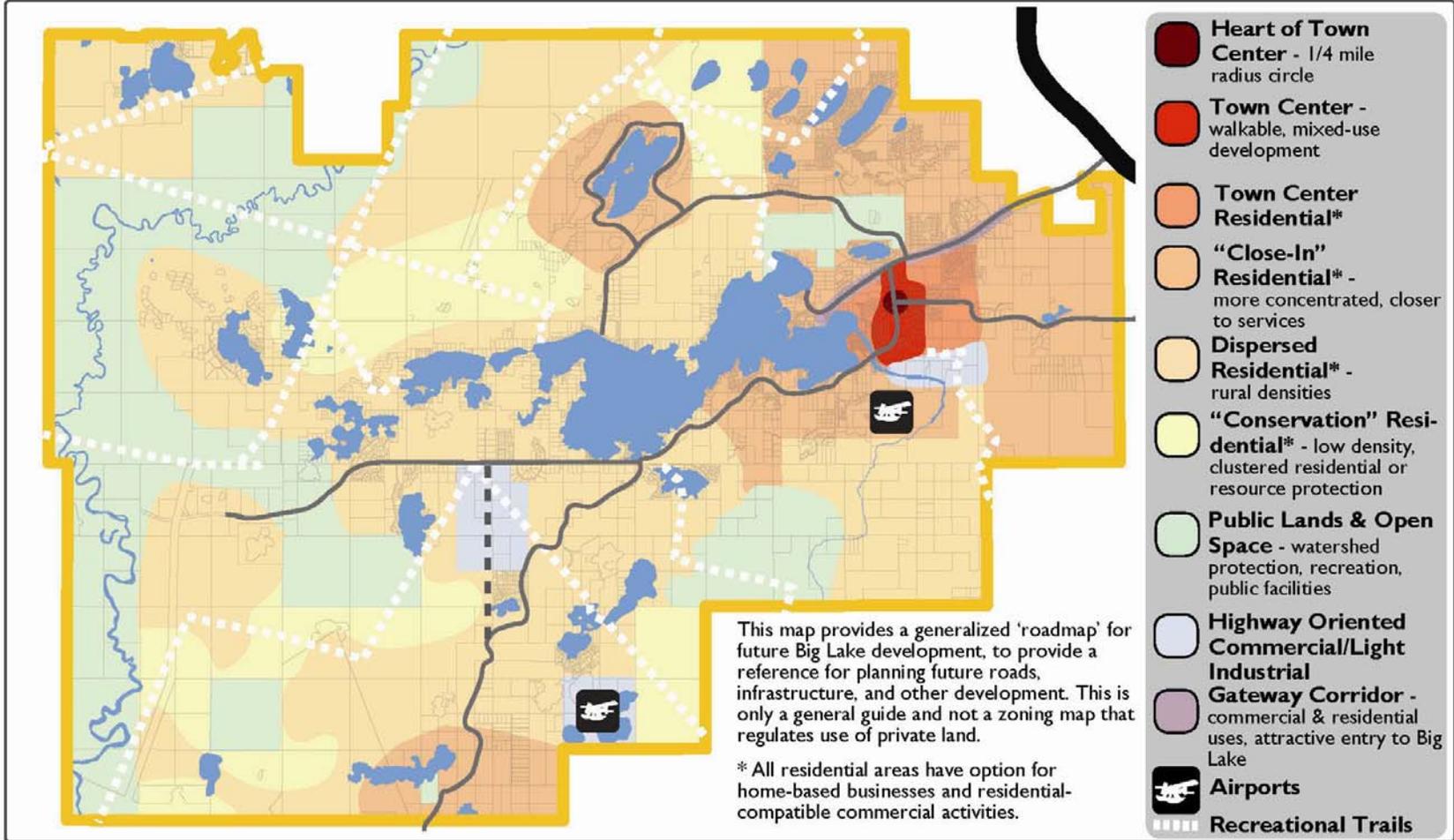
#### 5. Residential Areas

Four types of residential areas are identified. In all four of these areas, the predominate character is encouraged to remain residential, as it is today; however home-based businesses and other commercial uses are acceptable. If and when such non-residential occurs, such uses are encouraged be developed in a manner that is compatible with the predominately residential character of these areas.

- Town Center Residential – Uses encouraged in this area are the current residential uses, with the option over time for higher density housing (smaller lot single family residential homes, plus well designed multifamily homes). These uses are encouraged in this location to complement town center development, by providing places to live within walking distance of services, which is a benefit for residents, and also by encouraging spending in the town center, which helps support town center commercial activities. Increased density here and in the town center will require new approaches to water and wastewater.
- “Close-In” Residential – This district takes in relatively concentrated residential areas, generally near the town center area; these areas are distinguished by being closer to services than dispersed residential areas.
- Dispersed Residential – Rural residential areas, where lots are larger and the natural setting is more dominate. This is the primary current land use type in the Big Lake area.
- Conservation Residential – Areas where the intent is a combination of resource protection and low density or clustered residential development. The conservation residential category is used primary in two situations: 1) in places where the large majority of the land is wetlands and 2) in corridors along important streams.



# Big Lake - Guidemap



Alaska State Plane, Zone 4, NAD 1983  
 File: Big\_Lake\_trails.mxd, 1/07/09



All data courtesy of Matanuska-Susitna Borough.  
 This map was compiled for the community of Big Lake with assistance from Agnew::Beck.



## 6. Public Lands & Institutional Intended for Retention in Public Ownership

This category identifies areas of state and borough land that generally will be retained in public ownership, and managed to provide a range of public recreational, watershed, habitat uses. In a few instances these lands will be used for public facilities such as fire station or future school. State lands intended for sale are shown in one of the residential categories.

Specific types of uses within this category are listed below. The large majority of these lands are in the natural open space category.

- a. Natural open space (e.g., Little Susitna State Recreation River)
- b. Parks – areas to be developed for community (e.g., state land north of town center)
- c. Institutional uses – land for schools, fire stations, other community facilities
- d. Borough wetland mitigation lands



### **Strategy 2: Create a Big Lake Town Center**

The term town center refers to a central district in a community, a place where residents can get the goods and services they need, as well as enjoy the chance to see friends and acquaintances, and walk and linger in an inviting, attractive setting. Traditional American small town main streets are good examples of such places.

Big Lake has a good start on a town center today – existing “downtown Big Lake”, where the library, school and grocery store are located. Improvements are needed so this area provides a greater clustering of goods and services, is more attractive and more walkable. These improvements will give the area a stronger sense of place, and provide a positive image for Big Lake. This in turn will improve the quality of life for both residents and visitors and strengthen the local economy. In addition, providing a relatively concentrated area for new development helps maintain the natural character of alternative, more outlying areas.

Key to the creation of a town center is allowing for more concentrated uses, and a related system of streets and sidewalks. This can provide for harmony between the automobile and the pedestrian so moving around the area by foot or vehicle is enjoyable, safe and efficient.

#### ***Specific Actions to Promote Creation of a Town Center***

Most of the town centers that people have experienced and enjoy – ranging from main streets in older US downtowns, to European villages, to downtown Talkeetna – have developed organically over the years. Most began in a time when the auto was not the dominant means of transportation, and parking wasn’t a high priority land use. However, in the last several decades, many U.S. town centers have been built up from only flimsy beginnings or even “from scratch”. Creating an attractive, walkable, concentrated town center in Big Lake is entirely possible, but will take time, patience and significant public and private investment.

Major steps needed include those below. The accompanying sketch provides a conceptual illustration of these concepts; photos from other town centers provide examples.

- Concentrate public “anchor uses” in the area, to draw users, e.g. a new community center building

- Improve pedestrian circulation. The town center needs safe, attractive sidewalks, as well as trail connections into the remainder of the community. This also could be done through an LID.
- Better access to Jordan Lake Park and to Big Lake itself. Improve park amenities; provide a walking trail to the lake.
- Provide a “finer grained” network of roads. Most successful town centers have blocks that are between 200-400 feet in length. A grid of streets creates better circulation for cars and pedestrians and more corner locations for businesses. Improving roads in this manner will likely require a local improvement district (LID).
- Plan for public water and sewer. This is a longer term, but critical strategy. Concentration of uses is what makes a town center come to life, and concentration is not possible if all uses must rely on on-site water and septic systems.
- Improve opportunities for community recreation, including improved playfields, playgrounds
- Continue and expand community events – create more reasons for people to come “downtown”



**Above: Sisters, Oregon – concentrated use creates a good place to walk**



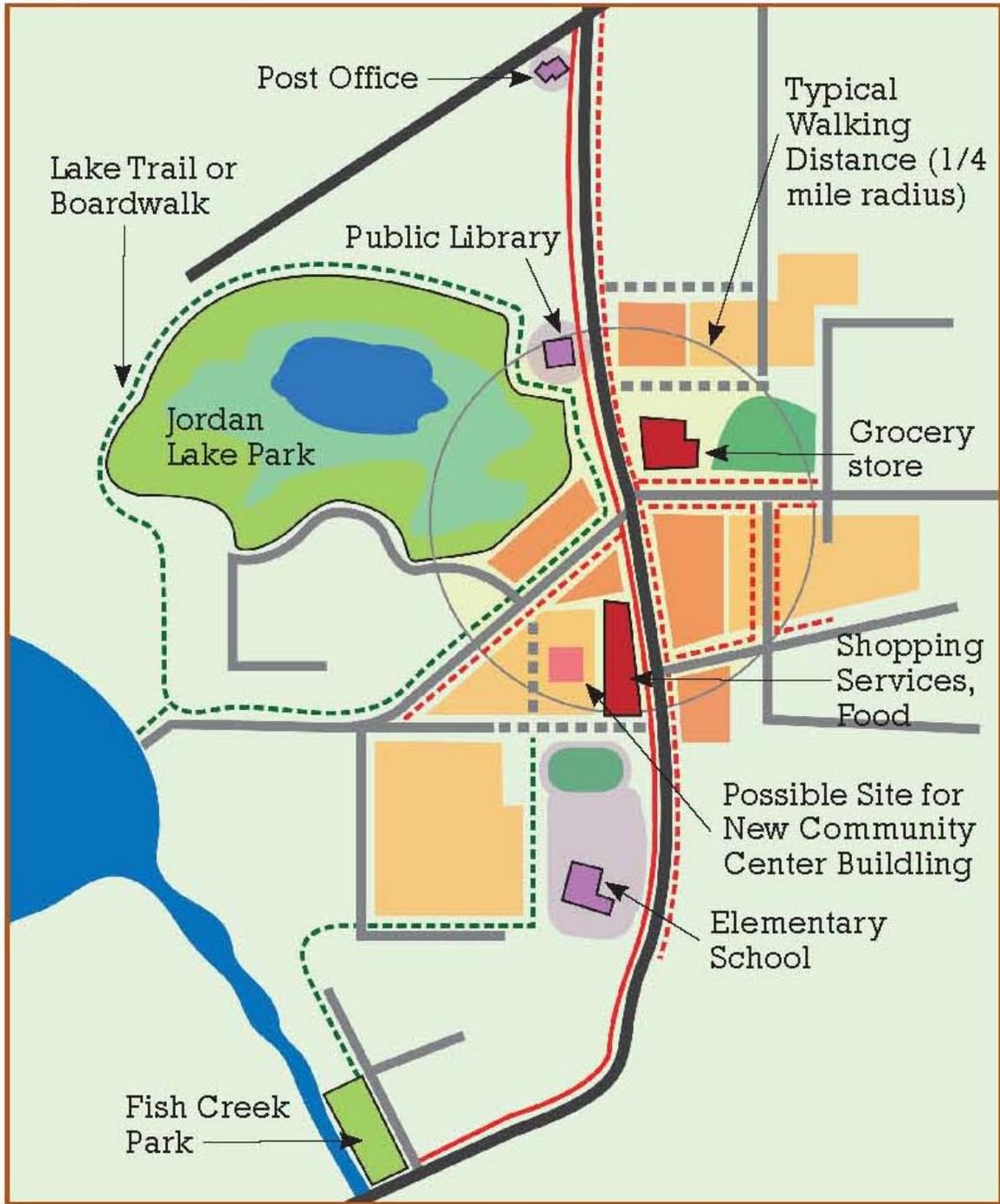
**Above: Kamloops BC - nice place to walk plus good on-street parking;**

**Below: Corvallis Oregon - housing adjoining the town center supplies people, customers.**



Figure 5. Town Center Development Concepts

## Proposed Big Lake Town Center Plan



- Proposed Trail
- Proposed Sidewalk
- Proposed Road
- Proposed Park
- Proposed Mixed Use Area (commercial, residential, civic uses)
- Proposed Commercial Area

### **Strategy 3: Identify and Protect Key Features of the Natural Environment**

The Big Lake natural environment is at the heart of the community’s quality of life and economy. Over the course of the meetings to prepare this plan, the public was clear on what they value about the Big Lake natural environment:

- Clean water – keep lakes, streams, wetlands, etc. free from septic pollution, hydrocarbons, non-point source pollution such as nitrates & fertilizers, etc.
- Clean air – keep it clean; discourage air polluting industries
- Natural beauty – retain the landscape that reflects the natural beauty of the land
- Dark night skies – minimize light pollution
- “Natural quiet” – minimize noise pollution

Policies are needed to protect, and in some instances, restore Big Lake’s lands, waters and wildlife, both for their own sake and to meet essential human needs. With the right approach to development, Big Lake’s natural resources will be conserved so future generations may enjoy and benefit from these resources as people have in the past.

Conserving Big Lake’ natural environment will require several different approaches. These include encouraging future land uses to avoid the most environmentally sensitive areas, investigating alternatives for on-site wastewater disposal, and establishing development guidelines on issues like waterfront development. The rest of this section focuses on the first of these approaches; others are covered in other portions of this chapter.

#### ***Protecting the Function and Quality of Natural Systems – “Green Infrastructure”***

“Green infrastructure” is a recently coined label for a long-established goal – the desire to protect and benefit from elements of the natural landscape, such as streams and wetlands.

While “infrastructure” typically emphasizes constructed utilities like roads or storm drains, the green infrastructure approach emphasizes the functional value of natural systems and processes. Natural systems can provide functional benefits equal to or greater than traditional built infrastructure (sometimes referred to as “grey infrastructure”), helping to protect water quality, absorb stormwater and recharge aquifers. With a green infrastructure approach, for example, instead of managing runoff primarily using costly storm water pipes, runoff can be managed through retention of natural vegetation and drainage swales linked to a system of natural streams and wetlands.

The defining feature of the “green infrastructure” approach is the creation of connected system of open spaces, to provide for drainage, wildlife corridors, water quality protection, trails and other open space uses. The general locations of this connected open space system are defined in this plan, and future development should be designed to protect this connected system. With this approach, open space in one area can be connected to open space in another area, making the whole system more effective and more valuable. This reduces both the costs and the impacts of new development.



**Creation of a multi-purpose retention pond at the Cuddy Family Midtown Park in Anchorage shows an (urban) example of the benefits of “green infrastructure”. This pond was needed to replace wetlands and ponds originally existing in this area. As well as providing (and paying for) a great amenity at the park, this pond captures and infiltrates stormwater from surrounding areas. Building the pond saved hundreds of thousands of dollars that otherwise would have been needed to replace culverts carrying the stormwater runoff from the increasingly developed midtown area to Knik Arm.**

### *Steps to Identify and Conserve Big Lake “Green Infrastructure”*

- Map Functional and Environmental Values: Identify environmental features and processes (stream corridors, wetlands, wildlife corridors, aquifer recharge areas, etc.).
- Map Recreation Areas: Identify recreation areas (trails, parks and other open space recreation use areas) that are best protected by allowing the land to remain largely undeveloped.
- Layer maps of environmental features, open space and recreation to create an integrated “green infrastructure” map; identify connections between environmental features, with a goal of creating a connected, multi-purpose open space system. (see Map 7)
- Formally adopt the green infrastructure map recognizing that site-specific developments may lead to changes in the features that need protection for particular development projects. This will happen with the adoption of this Big Lake Comprehensive Plan.
- Use the green infrastructure map to shape the land use “roadmap” and to identify areas where natural resource functions and open space values should be maintained as land is developed. Require future developments to maintain the integrity of the system of the features shown on the green infrastructure map (for example, a drainage corridor crossing multiple parcels).

Map 7 presents the current version of the Big Lake green infrastructure system. Water – streams, wetlands, lakes – is the primary organizing element of this system. Protecting watershed corridors helps protect domestic water supplies, provide for recreation, and sustain the most valuable and sensitive habitats in the area for fish, wildlife and bird species. Specific components of this system are outlined below. The section that follows and Strategy 4 presents guidelines to help maintain the value of these important resources, while allowing for ongoing use and development.

- **Legislatively Protected Areas - Little Susitna River Corridor** (dark green) – The Little Su is a river of statewide significance, supporting a large salmon run and intensive recreational use. The river is also the destination of many of the drainages in the Big Lake Area. This river corridor is largely state owned, and has been designated for special protection by the Alaska Legislature as a State Recreation River.
- **Watershed Corridors (medium green)** – These areas are larger blocks of lands, mostly in state or borough ownership, that coincide with stream corridors or large wetlands. Key parcels include several parcels near the Little Susitna River, the existing State park at the northeast end of Big Lake, and a block of lands east of Stephan and 7-Mile lakes that is a large wetland and, in winter, a popular dog mushing area. State lands within these areas were designated to be retained in public ownership and managed for environmental and open space values; borough lands in these areas should be similarly managed. Where private lands are developed in these areas, special care should be taken to maintain these values.
- **Conservation Corridors (light green)** – This area, located north of Big Lake and on either side of Horseshoe Lake, is the largest contiguous wetland in the Big Lake area. This area is largely in private ownership. As is the case in the watershed corridors, development here should be designed to protect habitat and watershed values, and to allow for recreation use, particularly winter recreation, consistent with habitat and watershed protection.

- **Wetlands (pale olive green)** – The map shows all areas identified as wetlands based on the location of hydric (wet) soils in the area. These wetlands are places that collect and filter runoff, and feed water into the larger wetlands and river corridors listed above. Development should be designed to minimize disruption and/or loss of these areas.
- **Streams & Lakes, Major Stream Buffers (blue)** – This layer of the map identifies lakes and other important streams in the area, including the creeks draining into and out of Big Lake, and several smaller tributaries to the Little Susitna River. Most of these streams and many of the lakes are surrounded by private land. A range of actions are needed to protect water quality and riparian areas along these waterbodies, including improved management of domestic wastes, development setbacks, and improved management and education related to recreation activities.

#### Land Ownership & Other Features

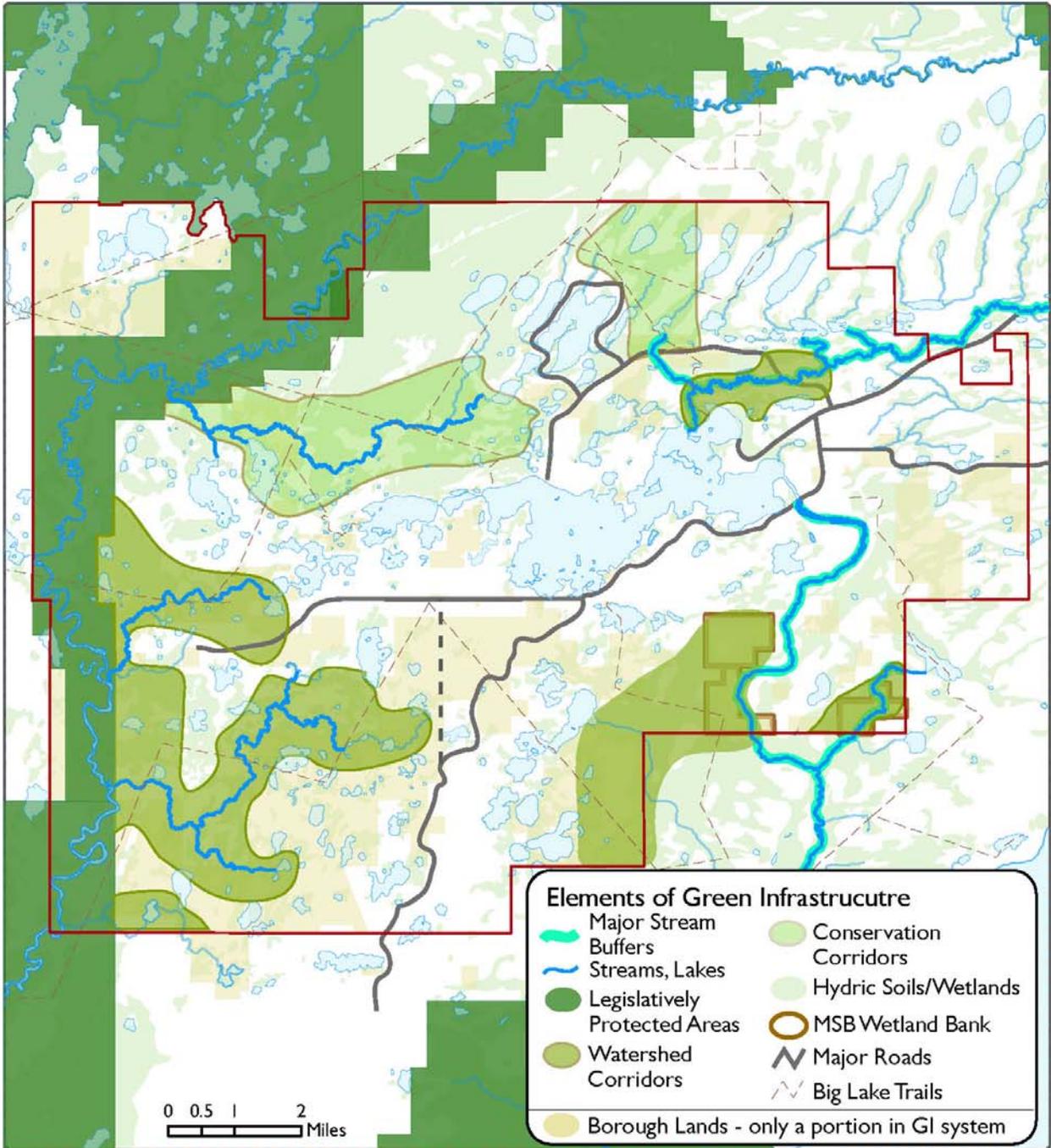
- **Mat-Su Borough Lands (light brown)** – This map also shows all MSB property. Approximately half this land is recommended to be retained in public ownership for open space uses; the remainder can be sold for development.
- **State Lands** – The state of Alaska owns approximately \_\_\_ acres in the Big Lake area. Of this land about 60% is designated to be retained in public ownership and managed to protect habitat, watershed and open space values. These areas are covered in the corridors identified above; state lands intended for land sales are not shown.
- **Trails** – The map indicates locations of the primary recreational trails in Big Lake as defined by the Big Lake trails committee (see more in recreation chapter)

#### *Environmental Protection Policies*

Strategy 4 in the following section outlines a set of guidelines that address a range of environmental issues, including protection of the Big Lake natural environment. Three guidelines specifically related to wildlife are presented below:

- Encourage practices that reduce human-wildlife conflicts. Two examples:
  - Develop policies for “living with our wildlife” including guidelines for trash disposal and other steps to avoid creating bear problems.
  - Be sensitive to waterfowl nesting areas and take actions to protect such areas, for example, through restricting motorized recreational use in these areas.
- Improve monitoring of surface and groundwater quality; ensure that water flowing into the Big Lake area from up stream is clean and suitable for domestic use and for fish & wildlife.
- Preserve lands for wetland mitigation (three parcels have been designated in Big Lake)

## Big Lake - Green Infrastructure - Natural Features to be Protected



Alaska State Plane, Zone 4, NAD 1983  
 File: Big\_Lake\_GI.mxd, 1/12/09  
 1:132,955



All data courtesy of Matanuska-Susitna Borough.  
 This map was compiled for the community of Big Lake, with assistance from Agnew::Beck.



#### **Strategy 4: Establish Community-Wide Development Guidelines**

Previous sections have addressed the general locations and intensity of development; this section presents guidelines that address the character of development. The intent of these guidelines is to allow for a wide range of uses to coexist in Big Lake, but to encourage these uses to occur in a way that minimize impacts on the quality of life of neighbors and the natural environment.

The same use – say a new store – can have very different impacts, depending on how it is developed. For example, in one instance the developer might clear all the vegetation from the site and direct runoff from parking lots into a nearby stream. A different developer might leave more of the original vegetation, and direct runoff to a swale where dirt and oil are filtered out before the runoff goes into the adjoining creek.

Below is a list of general development guidelines. The community may later wish to refine these and adopt them as enforceable regulations.

##### ***Development Guidelines***

- Natural Vegetation/Site Disturbance – Encourage retention of existing natural vegetation and replant disturbed areas. Grading and clear cutting the entire parcel prior to selling or developing land is strongly discouraged.
- Drainage– Development should not disrupt drainage patterns, for example by diverting or blocking a small stream. The general form of natural contours should be retained. Construction of driveways, parking lots and other impervious areas should not increase summer runoff or winter ice on adjoining roads or properties.
- Continue to encourage use of “firewise” standards to reduce risks of wildfire.
- Water Quality & Erosion - Use drainage swales, holding basins and similar best management practices to ensure runoff from developed areas does not degrade quality of water in adjoining streams and lakes.
- Hazards and Sensitive Areas – Avoid development in hazard areas, including floodplains and on steep slopes. Minimize impacts on wetlands and other sensitive natural environments.
- Protection of Water Quality – Use of land adjoining waterbodies should be designed to minimize impacts on water quality. Actions to achieve this goal include minimizing removal of natural vegetation along the majority of the edge of lakes, streams or wetlands, to keep lawn chemicals, silt, and septic effluents out of the watershed, to inhibit bank erosion and provide habitat for wildlife such as ducks and loons, while also providing some screening of development.
- Building Setbacks from Water bodies (new structures) - Require at least the MSB 75’ minimum development setback from streams, lakes, wetlands and other water bodies; “development” is defined as habitable structures. Non habitable structures, such as boathouses, sheds, decks or saunas can be built within 75’ of lakes and streams, but these improvements should be designed to have minimal environmental and visual impact on the adjoining waterway.
- Building Setbacks From Water bodies (existing non-compliant structures) – For buildings developed after the date (1987) of the setback ordinance (Chapter 17.55 of the Borough Code of Ordinances) and prior to the adoption of the Borough’s land use permit (2007), special consideration should be given, in keeping with state statutes, to approving setback violation appeals caused by inadequate information and communication of that information to property owners. This is not advocating blanket approvals of setback violations but rather that leeway be given to approving violations that have no adverse impact on

surrounding properties and water bodies, and which occurred as honest mistakes and not as overt violations of the criteria by people who knew or should have known better. The plan recommends these approvals contain restrictions on expanding the encroachment or rebuilding a destroyed structure. However, all requests for variances, must be considered in accordance with Alaska Statute 29.40.040(B).

- Building Height – Establish a policy that prevents building rising to heights that create serious and detrimental impacts to the community relating to visual quality of the surrounding neighborhood. (Note: in general, fire standards for locally available equipment argue for not allowing buildings over 3 stories in height.)
- Commercial Uses/Home-based Businesses in Predominately Residential Areas – The plan supports a variety of home based businesses and residential-compatible commercial uses in predominately residential areas, but encourages these uses to be designed to not impact neighbors. Subdivisions can address this to some extent through protective covenants. Guidelines for home-based businesses and other commercial activities in predominately residential areas include:
  - Discourage high-volume or high-traffic activities; businesses should not create nuisances of excessive people and vehicle traffic
  - Minimize the offsite evidence of business operation - noise, smells, litter, odors, and public safety calls
  - Use special screening and wider setbacks to reduce visual impacts of business operations on surrounding residences.
  - Screen dumpsters, service entries
  - Avoid using bright lights that wash onto adjoining properties
  - Use unobtrusive signage.
- Trail Reservations on Private Land – To the greatest degree possible, reserve for public use all important existing community trails crossing private land when that private land is subdivided. This can be done through the “open space subdivision” policy outlined below. Trails may be reserved along traditional routes, or moved to new locations within the parcel.
- Conservation Subdivisions – Conservation or “open space” subdivisions preserve the land’s natural features by allowing flexibility in lot boundaries and lot sizes. This approach should be available in Big Lake, but is not required. Under this approach, lots are designed to respond to the specific character of the individual parcels. This in turn allows better protection of streams, wetlands, trails or other natural features. Flexibility in the layout of subdivisions is one important way to retain lands identified on the green infrastructure map.

**Figure 6. Conservation Subdivision**



The above example of a conservation subdivision, reprinted from the National Lands Trust, is called Plumsook at Williston in Pennsylvania. It features an overall density of 0.57 units per acre, with an average lot size of 0.5 acres. Seventy percent of the subdivision (50 acres) consists of wooded open space with ponds and streams.

- Signage – Allow adequate signage for businesses to succeed, at same time, limit the size and guide the character of signs to maintain community’s visual quality.
- Lighting – Maintain dark skies by encouraging downward directed lighting; minimize glare of lighting onto adjoining properties. Discourage glaring into adjoining or surrounding properties.
- Underground Utilities - Underground utilities are recommended for all future development in the Big Lake community – discuss with community; this issue is likely adequately addressed under existing MSB policy.
- Vegetation Buffers in Residential and Highway Oriented Commercial/Industrial areas. Commercial and Industrial development should have some visual buffering between the development and the highway to be aesthetically pleasing. To accommodate the need for marketing visibility and screening from the roadway for some commercial businesses; a goal might be 25% screening vegetation, but with ability to modify requirements depending on the need for exposure to the public.
- Airport-Industrial – the plan identifies two public airports: the existing facility on the east side of Big Lake, and the area identified for a major future float plane airstrip at 7-Mile Lake. This area, located in the southern portion of the community council area, was designated for this future use in the Borough’s adopted aviation plan. General guidelines for the use and development of these areas include:
  - Plan airport use and future residential uses in the vicinity of the airport to minimize conflicts and safety issues. For example, identify and maintain safe approach paths for air traffic.
  - Promote small airport and airport-related commercial and industrial activities.
  - For the existing Big Lake Airport, retain and enhance options for moving float planes safely and conveniently between Fish Creek/Big Lake and the Big Lake Airport.
- Neighborhood Road Development and Accessibility to Lots – Under MSB policy, property may be subdivided without legal road access (e.g., with waterfront access only) if the property is located in remote areas well off the road system, in areas that are only sparsely populated. In the past portions of Big Lake met these criteria. Today, while the area is no longer sparsely populated or remote, there are many subdivided lots in the community without road access, including lots as small as 10,000 SF or less.
- Establish Community-Wide Development Guidelines:

#### Highway–Oriented Commercial and Light Industrial Uses

- a. Highway-oriented commercial/light industrial uses are encouraged in two areas: the area around the existing airport and the area southwest of Big Lake that ultimately will be the junction of two major regional roads; the future upgraded Burma Road (at the current fire-break road) and Susitna Parkway.
- b. Industrial uses in predominantly residential areas is discouraged. To maintain the quality of residential areas, industrial uses should:
  - i. Not be harmful to public health, safety and general welfare
  - ii. Minimize negative impacts on surrounding land uses from excessive traffic, noise, odors or lighting

- iii. Provide visual screening, vegetation buffers or wider setbacks to reduce visual impacts of industrial operations on surrounding uses.
- iv. Protect the natural environment and the integrity of the surrounding area
- v. Obtain all necessary local, state and federal permits.

Big Lake is now a much more developed area than in the past, and continues to grow, with many new homes being built. The need for adequate road access for fire fighting access, public health and safety issues, school bus access, and the overall demands of a growing community imposes an increasing need for improved road access to those roadless properties that physically can connect into the local road system. The plan recommends a policy to expand the local road system to serve these properties. See transportation chapter for more details.

In this same spirit, the plan recommends that roads in future subdivisions be paved. While increasing the upfront costs of development (and in turn, increasing housing costs), this policy greatly reduces ongoing costs for road maintenance. Studies in several Alaskan communities have found that average road maintenance costs are 10 times higher on dirt or gravel roads than on paved roads.

## **Strategy 5: Investigate and Address the Impacts of Small Lots and Water Quality**

### ***Background***

The size of residential lots has a major impact on a range of issues in Big Lake, including protection of rural character, cost of infrastructure, availability of public open space, and the reliance on on-site water and wastewater systems. The community needs to further examine this important, complex issue.

For most of the Big Lake area today and into the foreseeable future, water supply and sewage disposal requirements will be met with on-site systems (septic tank treatment and drain fields, and private water wells). These systems provide an affordable and effective way to provide for water and wastewater needs, if certain conditions are met. Current Borough standards require a minimum lot area of 40,000 square feet, of which at least 20,000 square feet have to be sufficiently well drained to accommodate a working septic system. In addition, the Borough requires a minimum setback of septic tanks from water, and from adjoining water wells.

Many lots in Big Lake were subdivided before these lot size and water quality rules were established or regularly enforced. As a result, a number of existing well and septic systems do not comply with current standards, and a large number of existing lots in the Big Lake Community are too small to sustain conventional on-site septic and water supply systems (Big Lake has over 1100 lots that are 20,000 square feet or smaller). This issue is made more challenging because many parcels in the area have high water tables.

In addition to water quality issues, lot sizes contribute to the rural and rustic, open space atmosphere of the Big Lake area, which residents enjoy and want to maintain. At the same time large lot residential development can increase infrastructure costs, by spreading out development and requiring longer roads, higher costs for busing students, and higher costs for providing fire and

police service, and telephone and electricity. Smaller lots and public water and sewer will likely be needed in areas such as the town center district where clustered walkable development is desired.

### ***Defining the Issue***

There are four key issues to address regarding small lot parcels:

- Impact of on-site water and wastewater systems, which can present a health and safety issue.
- Impact on surface waters (lakes and streams) - also a health and safety issue.
- A lack of road access presents an increased fire and safety danger to all property owners. This concern affects both small and large lot properties that lack legal road access.
- Meeting the intent to maintain a rural character

### ***Recommendations***

- Encourage the Borough to develop a straightforward, inexpensive and streamlined platting process to expedite combining multiple adjacent lots into a single lot. One option would be to hold a special mass replatting session, arranged by MSB staff explicitly for this purpose, taking place at Big Lake.
- For small lots that have already been developed – the plan recommends implementation of a monitoring program to assure safe drinking water and pollution prevention standards are being maintained. Where feasible, the plan encourages undersized lots to obtain additional land area to come closer to conforming to minimum lot size standards. The need to implement a rigorous monitoring program to assure safe drinking water and prevent pollution can not be overemphasized for these small lots. Standards set by the State drinking water and wastewater standards need to be rigidly enforced. Gray-water systems that discharge directly into water bodies should not be allowed.
- For small lots that have not yet been developed and are not able to increase the lot size – the plan recommends implementation of a permitting program to approve the design and installation of on-site treatment and water supply systems appropriate for the lot size and soil conditions to assure healthy water standards. Several alternative technologies are available for treating wastewater. For example, Advantec systems offer a higher level of treatment than standard septic tanks. Other options include so-called cluster systems that collect and treat effluent at a neighborhood scale.
- In more densely populated areas, explore options to create community and/or neighborhood sewage treatment and water supply systems. Encourage certified neighborhood systems in new higher-density residential or industrial/commercial developments.

### **Strategy 6: Regulation and Enforcement Issues**

No one likes to have their own lives constrained by regulations. One of Alaska's attractions is the absence of annoying rules and regulations common in other parts of the country. At the same time, most people have experienced or seen behaviors that cross the line, that create unnecessary impacts on neighbors, the community or the natural environment. So, as one community member said, what we need is "a few good rules, well enforced".

This section offers general suggestions on finding the right balance between helpful versus unduly constraining regulations and enforcement. More discussion is needed on how to proceed on this topic in Big Lake.

- Land Use Permit – Prior to development, the Borough now requires owners to get a Borough land use permit. This includes a packet with all the information needed for a person to comply with requirements and regulations.
- Survey – Many buildings in Alaska have been constructed with inadequate information about property lines and required setbacks. The results can be serious, for example, when buildings are determined to have been constructed too close to or even crossing a property line. Currently the land use permit process above does not require submission of a survey of the property boundary. In the future the community may wish to encourage or require submittal of a plot plan prepared by a licensed land surveyor showing lot lines, existing and proposed improvements, and relationships to required setbacks.
- Fire code requirements – Currently the only building code requirements that apply to Big Lake are the state fire code regulations. The Horseshoe Lake area is a designated Firewise area; more discussion is needed to determine if the whole community should adopt these standards.
- General Enforcement of Existing Regulations – The State and the Borough both have policies controlling water and wastewater systems, setbacks, and other land use issues. Many of these policies are enforced only loosely; because of limitations in the capacity of State and Borough enforcement staff and because of Alaska’s traditional lack of enthusiasm for government regulation. Big Lake, like many rural communities in Alaska, is continuing to grow. This growth is impacting neighbors and the natural environment. Big Lake needs to determine how actively it wishes to see existing (and new rules) enforced.

“ *It is a small town – not New England style with sidewalks and a town square; it’s different. Snow-machines, bicyclists in summer, skiers on the road, and yet it’s still a community – you get to know those people. Big Lake is very spread out, though; much more than I ever felt in Anchorage or Wasilla.* ”

### **General Background Information**

Big Lake has significant recreational resources, which are important to the area’s quality of life, the local economy, and the community’s identity. The community’s lakes and rivers, fish and wildlife, open space, trails, and mix of opportunities—for both solitude and quiet and for active recreation, and for both summer and winter activities—are a primary reason year-round residents choose to live in the community. Outdoor recreation is also a major draw for recreational users and second-home owners in Big Lake.

Although there are locally abundant recreation and open space resources, there is concern now and into the future about ensuring the quality of recreational experiences and ensuring public access, especially regarding:

#### **Community Concerns – “Recreational Quality”**

- The area lacks recreational facilities sufficient to meet user demands in terms of campgrounds, restrooms, waste disposal, lake access infrastructure (docks and ramps), parking areas, pullouts, trailheads, informational kiosks, etc.;
- The lack of enforcement and posting of existing rules creates conflicts, nuisances and safety hazards that impact the quality of recreation and living; and
- The scenic and natural character of the area is impacted by removal of significant vegetation, especially of mature trees in areas untouched by the fire. Although much of this is on private land, some public land has experienced illegal clearing.

#### **Community Concerns – “Recreational Access”**

- The area lacks logical systems of legal, well-defined, and adequately posted and developed access points for key recreational attractions;
- Long established, traditional winter trails do not have designated easements and could be closed and/or lost due to future development;
- Seasonal closures and lack of year-round maintenance limit access (e.g., fall/winter closures of State facilities on Big Lake);
- In the community core area, there is a need for connecting trails including:
  - The Airport to Burma Road and “South Shore”
  - The “North shore” to the core area
  - The senior center, to the middle and high schools, to the Parks Highway

- Hollywood Road to core area, parks to core area and to elementary school.

### **Previous Planning Effort**

In 1996, the previous Big Lake Comprehensive Plan covered many recreation and open space issues and made recommendations. Although there are a few markers of significant progress such as completion of the Big Lake Management Plan, and transfer of acreage from the State of Alaska’s Willow Sub-Basin Area to serve community recreational purposes, most issues and needs identified remain to be addressed. These break into the following broad community concerns and issue areas:

- **Character and Identity:** The 1996 plan expressed a strong desire to develop the area to its fuller potential as a “year-round, highly diversified recreational and residential community”, with significant upgrades to parks, new scenic pullouts and waysides, and enhancement and permanent legal preservation of recreational trails and scenic attractions (25% of the entire area, along with an interconnected system of trail routes). Of these desires, very few beyond the pullout at approximately MP 8.3 of South Big Lake Road have been addressed.
- **Recreational Inventory and Access:** The 1996 plan identified the need to do a “thorough analysis of recreational needs – activities as well as facilities”, including an inventory of neighborhood, community, and regional parks; major attractions; recreation corridors; and public access points. Although broad scale regional planning in this area has occurred (e.g. Matanuska-Susitna Borough Parks, Recreation, and Open Space Plan 2001), there is a strong sense that an easy-to-understand, easy-to-implement “inventory and access plan” is badly needed. For example, the recent mapping of legal access for Big Lake is helpful, but is not easy for landowners to understand (let alone a visiting recreational user), and does not provide direction for how to proceed in working with landowners to purchase needed easements, or enforcing existing blocked access points.
- **Governance and Management:** Plans and rules are not productive if there is no implementation and/or enforcement. A significant issue raised in the 1996 plan is the need for action on the part of the Mat-Su Borough, and the State of Alaska in partnership with the local community to implement plans, enforce rules and adequately manage recreational resources. This remains an important issue, especially in high-demand areas where pressures are impacting and degrading the quality of recreation and quality of life for residents.

### **PARKS, RECREATION & OPEN SPACE PRIORITY GOALS**

Building from the 1996 Comprehensive Plan, community members involved in this planning effort decided to prioritize and focus on four very specific goal areas:

1. Identify and reserve a regional trail system for public use.
2. Identify and reserve lake access points.
3. Support and strengthen State Parks’ role locally.
4. Create a recreation inventory and facility plan.

## **GOAL 1: Identify and Reserve a Regional Trail System**

Area residents participating in the planning effort and attending public meetings expressed alarm that Big Lake's traditional trails could be lost if no action was taken to legally designate routes. Following are specific concerns and strategies to address this goal of documenting and reserving trails for public use:

- The trail system is extensive but most of the trails are not surveyed, mapped or secured, especially winter trails that cross wetlands and lakes. Many cross private lands.
- Most of the traditional winter trails residents regularly use are NOT documented for public use and recognized by the Mat-Su Borough in their 2003 Trail Guide (see figure xx).
- There are not enough trailheads, markers, appropriate parking, and no handicapped accessible routes and maps to help guide users.
- The trails need to be identified by types of traffic, usage, and special maintenance requirements. Examples include: winter, summer, motorized, walking, biking and dog teams.
- Railroad and highway development could block or partition trails.
- Public safety of bike trails (pedestrian vs. motorized) is a concern including:
  - The north and south sides of Big Lake
  - Beaver Lake area, connecting into Burma Road for summer trails and extending to Hollywood, Vine and KGB.
- Ice road access points need to be identified both for recreation, but more importantly as a critical element of private property access and transportation.

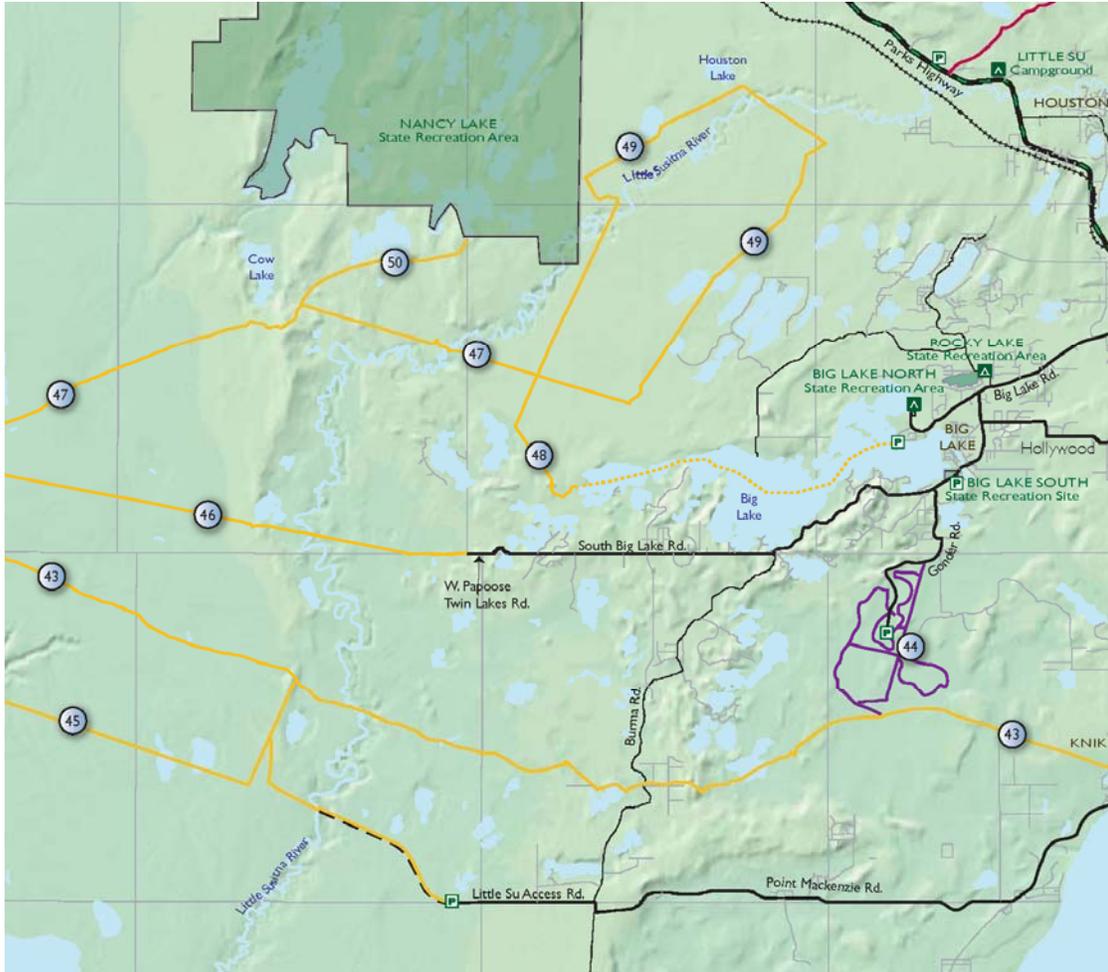
### **Strategy 1: The Big Lake Trails Work Group**

Recognizing the importance of recreational trails to the Big Lake community, several Big Lake Planning Team Members volunteered to work together to identify trails in the Big Lake area and to study what reports, surveys, and easements exist for these trails. The group worked to identify the highest priority trails within Big Lake's vast network of historical and recreational trails, and to nominate them for inclusion in the Mat-Su Borough Recreational Trails Plan. This group has worked hard and has completed the inventory of regionally significant trails in the Big Lake area. Fifteen trails have been identified and are currently being nominated to the Borough for designation as regionally significant trails (see figure xx and Appendix A trail nomination forms). The ultimate legal standing of these are essential to, and consistent with, the community vision and core values of the Big Lake Community.

#### **Actions:**

- Continue the Trails Committee as a standing committee of the Big Lake Community Council
- Work with willing landowners to dedicate trails easements
- Certify the Trails Committee as a 501 c(3) nonprofit and seek grants for trails

**Map 8. Trail Guide**



**LEGEND**

- WINTER**
- Multi-Use Trails (Solid Yellow)
  - Traditional Routes (Dashed Yellow)
  - Non-Motorized Trails (Purple)
- YEAR-ROUND**
- Multi-Use Trails (Solid Burgundy)
  - Multi-Use Non-Motorized Trails (Dashed Burgundy)
  - Primitive Route (Long Dashed Burgundy)
  - Water Route (Dashed Blue)
- Parking/Trailhead
  - Campground
  - Highway
  - Secondary Roads
  - Roads Not Maintained in Winter
  - Railroad

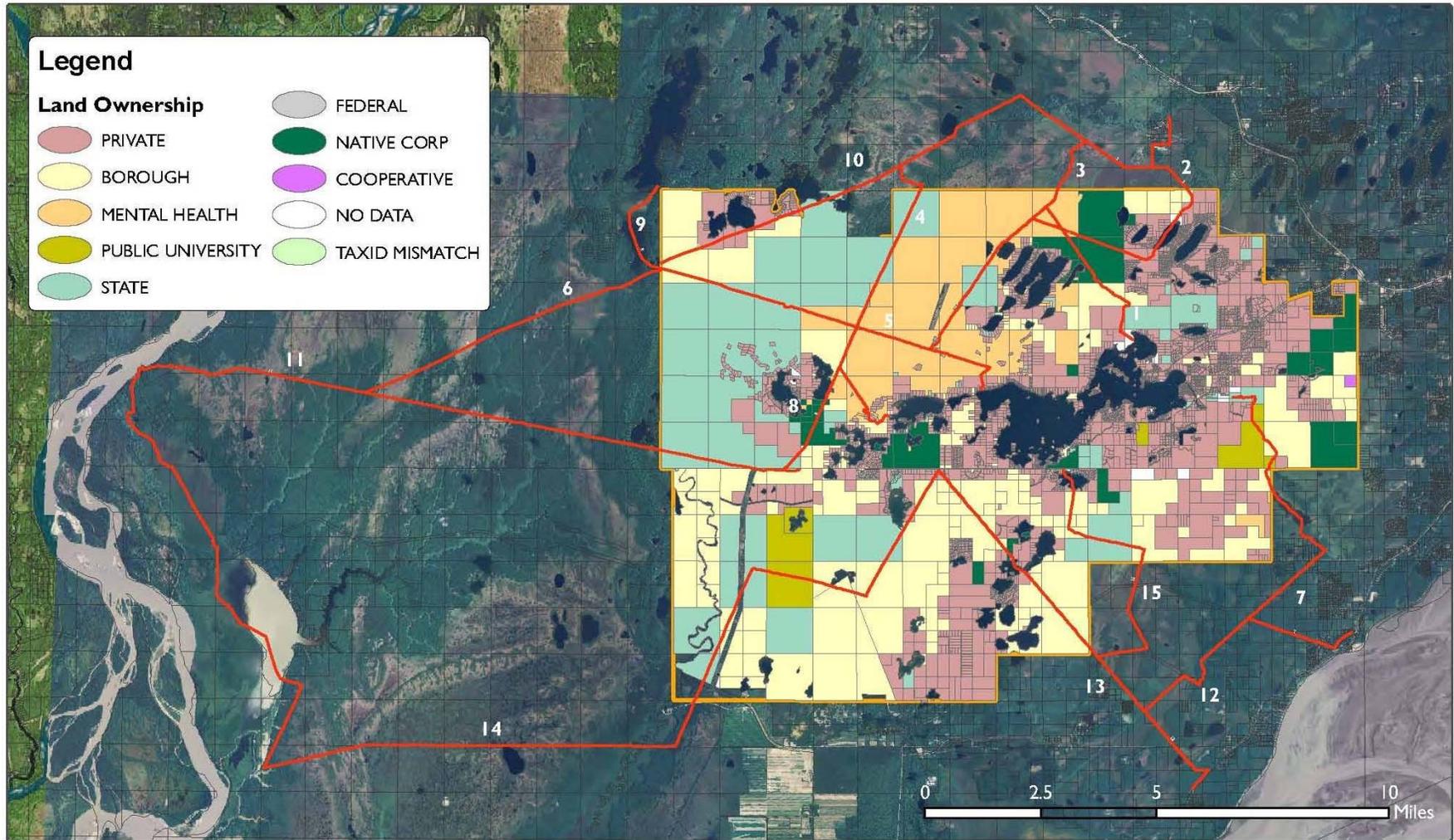
**TRAIL Guide**  
**MATANUSKA SUSITNA BOROUGH**  
**Big Lake Area Trails**  
**Documented for Public Use**

- 43 Iditarod (Historic)
- 43s Iditarod (Race Route)
- 44 Aurora Sled Dog System
- 45 Flathorn
- 46 Crooked Lake
- 47 Iron Dog
- 48 Flat Lake Connector
- 49 Houston Lake Loop
- 50 Butterfly Lake

The purpose of this map is to provide a basic guide to recreational trail opportunities available in the Matanuska-Susitna Borough (MSB). This map depicts a small percentage of trails that are actually in existence within the Borough boundary. Many trails that exist on the ground, and that are being used today for recreation, have no legal public right-of-way, or the public's right to use the trail is sketchy. In order to establish the public's right to use trails, the Borough is systematically mapping, documenting, surveying, researching land ownership, and researching easement and right-of-way status. The information gained from this research is then used to obtain easements on existing trails, or re-route them when necessary. The Borough also works closely with trail users and communities to set priorities and plan for future trails and trail facilities. The Matanuska-Susitna Borough Trail Guide is a living document and the MSB intends to update it periodically as additional public trail right-of-way is confirmed, documented and/or established. ©Matanuska-Susitna Borough.



# Big Lake - Trails



Alaska State Plane, Zone 4, NAD 1983  
 File: Big\_Lake\_trails.mxd, 10/16/08  
 1:197,264



All data courtesy of Matanuska-Susitna Borough and Big Lake Trails Committee.  
 This map was compiled for the community of Big Lake and the Big Lake Trails Committee, with assistance from Agnew::Beck.



## **Strategy 2: Multi-Purpose/Multi-User Trail System Planning**

Based on the results of the working group planning outlined above, identify an extended system to include skiing, biking, dog-mushing, snowmobiling and hiking opportunities.

**Actions:** Work on addressing the following specific, identified needs.

- Work toward having some lighted loops
- Resolve the issue of who would own and manage trails that now cross private land, but could be dedicated for public use
- Develop a trail south of Big Lake, connecting the “town square”/ East Lake Mall area to the western boundary of the community council area. To the east, establish a bike trail to connect with Hollywood, Vine and KGB roads. There is a bike trail established on the far side of Hollywood Road where the new school has been built.
- Start with dedicating trails where they cross public land to gain more leverage for getting private landowners to consider trails in any land sales, dedications, etc.
- Map and mark trails, include Big Lake Trails System in published Borough Trails Map. Look for a vehicle for local distribution.
- Improve trail management to include brush trails, grooming and trail education.
- Build more trailheads with ample parking areas to include handicapped and disability areas.

## **GOAL 2: Identify and reserve lake access points**

Another important goal is to reserve public access sites on key water bodies that serve local and visiting recreational users, and also provide property access, including to a number of recreational cabins and homes. In the summer, water access serves many types of traffic: motor boats, houseboats, sailboats and sailboards, canoes jet-skis, float planes, etc. In the winter, snowmobiles and individual vehicles use ice roads both for recreation and transportation. Following are specific concerns and strategies to address this goal:

- Theoretically, Big Lake has 160 legal access points, but many are blocked, overgrown, undeveloped, and/or not signed. As one resident described: “Most are blocked off by individuals, not maintained, or they’re inaccessible.”
- There is a need to systematically identify, mark and map public versus privately access points, and blockages.
- Further study needs to be made to identify, mark and map properties not on the road system that have to drive across private property to access the lake and/or their parcel.
- Not enough boat ramps exist, and there are no boat ramp docks to accommodate persons with physical disabilities
- There is a need to update all lake facilities, landings, public parks, etc., to accommodate persons with disabilities.

### **Strategy 1: Systematic Lake Access Needs Analysis**

There is clearly a need to systematically review each of the legal access points, and consider how well or poorly they can serve public needs. Some points are critical for providing residents access to recreational and residential properties, and for providing emergency fire and ambulance service access. Other points have only a very narrow easement and/or site features such as steep slopes that make them impractical public access points. A working group has begun this effort using data from the 2007 Big Lake Public Access Documentation Project.

**Actions:** Conduct further analysis and address the following issues.

- The effects of lake access on adjoining private land owners.
- In-depth needs assessments of all lake access user groups to clarify requirements associated with each purpose (e.g., boat launching, picnic areas, swimming areas, canoe launch, winter trails)
- Area by area review of existing and needed water access points. For example, at west end of Big Lake there is a greater need for access which needs to be looked into more carefully. A major access point on a small peninsula on lake's southwestern shore is private, and has become blocked. Another winter automobile access is needed.
- Survey of existing public parks, campgrounds, RV parks and amenities, including changes that have occurred in the last few years, and current projects in the planning stages with attached monies that can improve access.
- Look at how MSB and State lands can be used to provide public access.

### **Strategy 2: Priority Public Lake Access Sites**

As the analysis above provides greater clarity, "Priority Public Lake Access Sites" should be designated on Big Lake and other larger water bodies where legal easements are both physically suitable for public use and where they meet a public need (DRAFT sites are identified in figure xx). These priority sites should have standardized signs installed and investment in needed infrastructure. An important consideration is whether or not anticipated uses and facilities can realistically fit within the legal easements (e.g, for a boat dock, the easement should be wide enough to accommodate boat access, turn-around, queuing, and temporary parking).

#### **Actions:**

Implementation of this strategy will require that the local community work with the Borough, the State of Alaska's Division of Parks and Outdoor, and the State of Alaska's Department of Natural Resources in a partnership approach to specifically to respond to and address a range of needed actions and issues:



- Expand the current lake access point inventory to include all lakes in the BLCC area; widely distribute the expanded inventory for community feedback.
- Seek funding/grants for Phase II Lake Access study and place Big Lake Public Access Documentation Project findings online through a link from the MSB GIS.
- Ensure that priority access points are never vacated.<sup>1</sup>
- Adopt a standardized approach to developing basic infrastructure to respond to public and user groups' needs. This may include a system-wide approach to signage, designs for picnic tables that volunteers can build with local timber, special consideration for ADA access, etc. For most lake access sites, the minimum infrastructure may include signage, a boat ramp/launch, signage, and "Kids Don't Float" life jacket station.
- Create and distribute public information on access points, including preparation of a map for the general public. This may use the 2007 Big Lake Public Access Documentation Project map as a starting point, but it needs to be easy to understand for both residents and visitors.
- Create a workable approach for managing and maintaining these sites that leverages state, borough and local knowledge, roles, and resources.
- Generate an organized strategy to obtain needed capital and maintenance funds. Options could include: regular application to the Borough for a share of annual bed tax dollars and/or to the state for legislative appropriations; formation of a local group of volunteers to upgrade facilities and to provide an in-kind contribution of labor to increase the odds of receiving funds; mechanism to raise funds through fees (e.g., parking or boat launch fees) that could be used for ongoing maintenance, etc.
- Community-wide, help landowners identify and understand where public access points are located and their rights and obligations associated with these legal right-of-ways and easements. For example, during annual tax assessments and land use permitting process, notify owners of any public access points, rights-of-way or easements that exist within 1 mile of their property. Finally, work with adjacent landowners near public access points to ensure they are used in a legal manner, and to help protect their private property rights. This may include construction on the easement boundary of standardized fencing, bollards, visual barriers or other site-specific solutions that make public uses more palatable and respectful of adjacent neighbors.

### **GOAL 3: Support & Strengthen State Park's Role**

The State of Alaska has three recreation areas with facilities in the area, including boat launches and camp sites managed under the Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation. These sites are an important resource to the community and the visiting public which the community wants to

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<sup>1</sup> A legal process, including public input, is required to vacate a public easement under State of Alaska Law. For more information, see 11 Alaska Administrative Code 51.065(e) and read the state DNR Fact Sheet at: <http://www.dnr.state.ak.us/mlw/factsht/vacate.pdf>

see supported, strengthened and expanded to accommodate year-round recreation opportunities. Moreover, beyond these specific recreation sites, the State of Alaska also plays a critical role in the management of navigable waters and common property used by the public but owned by no one (e.g., section line easements for public access). The local community clearly appreciates that to maintain the quality recreation opportunities and access they desire, and that are needed to support visitors, State Parks, DNR and other state agencies will need to be partners at the local level.

#### **Strategy 1: Keep Parks Open Year-Round**

- Keeping all three state recreation sites open year round (especially the Big Lake South State Recreation Site) would help meet the year-round recreational interest in demand, and provide better ice road access options.

#### **Action:**

- Determine how to obtain a dedicated area-wide ranger, year round to provide some of the leadership and police powers and enforcement that are needed to ensure the quality of recreation for residents and visitors year-round. A part-time park ranger/trooper such as used in the Alaska Fish and Game Department might be a useful approach.

#### **Strategy 2: Upgrade Facilities**

- Upgraded physical facilities and maintenance are desired to focus the large number of visitors using these state access points (Rocky Lake, Big Lake North, and Big Lake South).

#### **Actions:**

- Boat docks need to be built to include ramps for persons with physical disabilities and upgrade those already in service.
- Improved maintenance of existing boat ramps is needed
- Enhance existing facilities to more fully accommodate waste infrastructure (dump station, toilets) and also to increase the year-found usability by providing additional interpretive and visitor amenities. It is expected that these areas would require fees in order to support their operation.
- Research a phased program (including feasibility and cost-benefit analysis for each phase) for recreational facilities that incorporates both local and visitor needs and population growth.

### **GOAL 4: Create a Recreation Inventory and Facility Plan**

The final goal is to systematically inventory Big Lake recreation attractions, determine what the town has, what it needs, and who is responsible for managing and developing facilities, and create an action plan that can be implemented in a partnership approach over time.

- Viewpoints – People want more places to look out over the lake, places offering good views of distant mountains (there are not many today)
- Big Lake attracts many visitors who want to stay overnight, but the number of campgrounds is limited. Campgrounds are needed with services and management.
- A new central greenspace is needed that is large enough to host community events and help develop a sense of having a “town center”
- A lot of lakes (Tahoe, California, etc) have floating bathrooms with dump stations out on the lake for boat-homes. If the number of “house boats” increases on the lake, are their water quality and public safety issues that need to be addressed
- The area needs an RV dump station, perhaps included in plan for a garbage transfer station
- Big Lake needs to reach out to its young people and involve them in creating spaces and activities that meet their needs – maybe a skateboard park, BMX, Frisbee golf.
- Work to partnership with our elementary school to reopen basketball courts, ice rink, ball fields.
- Local B&B and motels are very limited, need for expansion and airport services.

### **Strategy 1: Inventory Recreational Sites and Facilities**

Work with the Borough’s GIS Department and Land Management Department to create an integrated inventory and map, with detailed information on current conditions that can be updated over time to help plan for capital and maintenance priorities.

#### **Actions:**

- Include info from the 1996 Comp Plan, the 2001 MSB Recreation and Open Space Plan, and MSB Trail Map to develop a more complete, up-to-date listing and mapping of area recreational resources. Inventory and prioritize specific community needs, including:
  - Public toilets
  - RV dump sites
  - Private camp sites
  - More overnight campsites
  - A open dialogue between airport, local B&B and motels
  - Sports fields, facilities for organized outdoor events
  - More parking
  - Centralized parking to utilize trails and bike paths to include those with disabilities
  - More boat ramps and launch facilities that would also include those with disabilities
  - Options to improve “Mud bog” area (volleyball, sledding, community events)
  - Options for town center parks, trails, gathering areas
  - Possible golf course? (suggestion for a golf course on State land near Rocky Lake and Old Fish Hatchery)
  - Develop a bike/walking system that would connect Hollywood and KGB to Big Lake system

- Develop the South Big Lake extension of the bike/walking system from Fish Creek up to and through Burma road in residential areas, not along projected 4 lane highway system.
- Add extension of Big Lake Road bike trails into Beaver Lake area and North Shore bringing foot traffic into town Center from State Park areas.
- Extend Bike/Walking Trail from Parks Hwy up Hawk Lane to the Houston Middle and Houston High School, adding an extension at Kenlar for the Senior Center
- Involve the Chamber of Commerce, and private recreation facility providers in assessing what exists, and what is needed so that there is a good balance of public and private options.
- Include Big Lake Trails nominated trails system into MSB Trail Map (petition Assembly to include), and work with the official Big Lake Trails Work Group on additional traditional trail route mapping and nominations.

### **Strategy 2: Create Facility Action and Management Plans**

In order to create a regularly updated list of priority action items, find resources (human and capital), and ensure that facilities are both constructed and managed, ongoing coordination effort will be required needed. This will require local Big Lake leadership, and a strengthening of cooperative roles and relationships with the State of Alaska, the borough, and other entities, including.

#### **Actions:**

- Work closely with existing agencies. This includes defining and make clear how the State of Alaska and borough manage the public spaces under their care. For example, better communication with the State of Alaska about progress and current steps toward implementing the Big Lake Management Plan would be helpful. Also, work with the State department that awards private contracts and identify how the community can provide comments and suggestions on design and maintenance approaches that will work best locally. Finally, encourage the State and MSB to make presentations to the community regarding their maintenance plans, especially during critical seasonal transitions (i.e. trail and ice road during freeze up and break-up).
- Procure a borough and state shared park ranger/part-time police officer such as the Alaska Department of Fish & Game to manage state parks and be available for issues related to borough parks. There are 2 state parks and 6 borough parks with the addition of Jordon Lake.
- Work with the community to develop a “Friends of Parks” organization and complete projects and improvements for more visibility and active use. This also would help deter vandalism.
- Address lake management plan issues, e.g. noise on lake, limits on boat traffic (see the Big Lake Management Plan) and figure out how to realistically provide ongoing enforcement.

- Develop and implement educational programs for recreational lake users, e.g., sticker that indicates boat owner has received education info packet – work with concessionaires. These should also be available at kiosks at parks, launches, trailheads etc.
- Work with the local schools, youth groups, youth, and parents to develop priorities and ideas for better meeting young residents’ recreational needs.
- Work with MSB to consider programs that include grant funds, or designation as visitor attractions. One option is a National Heritage Areas (NHA) in Big Lake or the Mat-Su Borough as a whole. National Heritage Areas are designated by Congress, to help celebrate, interpret and preserve unique cultural resources, including evidence of mining, industrial development, transportation development. MSB staff is investigating the option to designate the entire Mat-Su Borough as a National Heritage Area, which could create more reasons for visitors to travel to the area, and bring funds for a range of recreational and cultural heritage projects.

**General Background Information**

A community's transportation system influences both the way in which it functions and the way in which it is perceived. The combination of land use and transportation affect many elements of a community – most importantly livability, aesthetics, and the efficiency of movement to and from as well as around the place. So it is important for a community to define what kind of roads, bike and pedestrian facilities it needs to grow successfully, and to locate them relative to how land is used now and will be used in the future.

Big Lake's transportation system includes roads, paths and facilities that allow the movement of vehicles and planes, as well as an extensive formal and informal trail system. Today this system includes Big Lake Road, a minor arterial; major collectors – Susitna Parkway and Hollywood Road; a number of minor collectors; and many residential subdivision roads, some of which are beginning to function as local collectors. Also present are the Big Lake Airport, and roadside trails as well as an extensive dog mushing and snowmachining trail system. Water transportation and ice roads are provided by private residents.

Big Lake has transitioned from a recreational center to a community with a balance of year-round residents and second homes. Two relatively recent projects are likely to impact Big Lake's location at the "end" of Big Lake Road. The connection of Big Lake Road and the Susitna Parkway with the Point MacKenzie Road via an upgraded Burma Road will likely draw through traffic to the community for the first time. The routing of Big Lake Road in the more populated parts of the community will be key to defining the extent of the possible impacts. Also, the Mat-Su Borough and Alaska Railroad are exploring the extension of a rail spur from the existing main line to Port MacKenzie. Three of the prospective routes would pass through the Big Lake Community Council area, two on the west side and one on the south and east. The potential impacts of these projects are sufficiently large that it is important for the community to include these projects in this comprehensive plan. See Map 10 for a detailed map of current and planned transportation routes and projects in Big Lake.

**TRANSPORTATION PRIORITY GOALS**

1. Improve Big Lake area roads: develop a safe and efficient road system that provides connection to the Parks Highway and access to land in the Big Lake area.
2. Improve the Big Lake Airport: ensure and enhance the future of air transportation in the Big Lake area by protecting and improving the existing airport.
3. Support regional development through improvements in Borough transportation infrastructure.
4. Expand existing road system to provide access to residents currently without access ensuring public safety needs are met.



## **GOAL 1: Develop a safe and efficient road system that provides connection to the Parks Highway and access to land in the Big Lake area.**

Many Big Lake Area roads are in need of improvement – the key links to the community as well as the neighborhood routes. Many roads are narrow, curvy, substandard and dangerous, with little in the way of room for bicycle or pedestrian use.

As DOT&PF begins a project to improve a State route like South Big Lake Road, it will do a study of the route options and the possible environmental impacts. The Department will involve the community in the development of the project. This plan will provide a clear statement of community views on the future role of the road and key alignment issues. The Borough will have a voice in the road improvement projects and will base its positions on the adopted comprehensive and transportation plans that cover the area in question.

### **Strategies for Specific Big Lake Roads:**

**Strategy 1: South Big Lake Road** – Re-alignment and Improvement of South Big Lake Road remains the Number 1 priority in the Big Lake Community. This project will improve safety and reduce travel time, and should be completed before the Burma Road reconstruction is finished. Additionally, this road will direct commercial traffic, especially large trucks coming from Point MacKenzie, away from the community center. The Alaska DOT&PF has located a preliminary alignment although a firm construction date is unknown at this time. The community will need to work with the Department closely on this project during design and construction to clearly communicate what it would like to have included in the project, such as a restricted access, pathways and shoulders. While a right-of-way has been preserved for this realignment, the route chosen crosses very uneven terrain, and will likely require substantial cut and fill. DOT&PF should consider slight variations in this route to create a realigned road that is both safe and fits with community character. This improvement is in the Mat-Su Borough Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP), as well as the Borough Official Streets and Highways Plan (OS&HP).

**Strategy 2: Burma Road** – Burma Road is at present little better than a dirt track through the woods. Improvement has been planned for many years, but will need to take into account truck traffic from Port MacKenzie. This road will be significantly improved and will likely be the primary route for truck traffic from Port Mackenzie to the Parks Highway for freight moving north on the Parks. It is also a road that residents will use to commute to jobs at the new prison, and further south to the ferry to Anchorage. The community will need to work with the Borough and the DOT&PF to make sure that the design and eventual construction of the road is in concert with future plans of the community. This upgrade is also in the Borough LRTP and OS&HP.

**Strategy 3: Big Lake Downtown Bypass** – This project would give the Big Lake Community a bypass around the downtown core and would relieve some of the traffic in the area as Big Lake grows. The alignment would be located east of the downtown. Map 10 shows two options for this road. The route that extends around to the south and east of Homestead and Echo Lakes, and continues on an alignment east of the towncenter is the preferred route because it best separates through and local traffic. The community should work with the Borough to address the retaining of right of way along section lines, and with

future developers to make sure this happens. The bypass will be important to reducing impacts of future truck traffic on the center of the community, improving both safety and aesthetics. The improvement, but not a specific alignment, is also in the OS&HP.

**Strategy 4: North and South Connection** – This route would pass around the west end of Big Lake and serve as a connection for the parts of the community north and south of the Lake. This road would connect West Lakes Boulevard to Puritan Parkway via a bridge across the Mud/Flat Lakes area, then onto Susitna Parkway and Burma Road. Importantly, this improvement would give the residents in the area north of the lake an alternate route in case of major emergencies. The link would also open this area for future development. The community should work with the Mat-Su Borough to keep the existing section lines clear and to acquire the right of ways along this corridor. Correspondingly, development in the area should construct appropriate road segments to Borough collector standards.

**Strategy 5: West Susitna Pkwy Extension** – The Borough would like to see the area west of the Little Susitna River opened to future development by extending the road across the Little Susitna River. This project would also likely encourage growth in the Big Lake area as well.

**Strategy 6: Hollywood Road** – This route is used by residents living along this roadway and by commuters to Wasilla and Anchorage. It needs to be improved to accommodate higher traffic levels that will come with future growth. The road should be improved to four lanes with shoulders and bike lanes, and feature curve and grade reduction.

### **Other Strategies for Big Lake Road System:**

**Strategy 7: Big Lake's street system should operate at acceptable levels of service, delay and congestion.**

Since it is unlikely that the community will want to expand Big Lake Road to four lanes, serving the growing community adequately will require simultaneous development of supporting measures:

- The Big Lake community should consider forming a road improvement district. This would allow the community to raise money locally, which could be used as matching funds for state and borough projects, as well as a way to raise funds for local priorities. It will be important to develop creative approaches to financing improvement of residential road improvements. Creation of a road service area/improvement district with the goal of raising local match for road improvements would help raise their priority with the Borough and State.
- Development of a more complete street network. Collector routes that are shown in the MSB Official Streets and Highways Plan but have not been built should be completed in order to connect neighborhoods to the main roads, and to connect Big Lake to Knik and other nearby areas. A street network including collector connections will support community growth without the problem of local streets becoming de-facto collector routes with the accompanying safety problems.

- Development of a pedestrian/bicyclist friendly street network. In a residential and recreational community like Big Lake, it is reasonable to expect substantial non-motorized travel if the trails and sidewalks are in place to support the walkers and bikers.
- Although transit service is not currently provided, the transportation system should be developed with the expansion of transit in mind. A site for a transit hub should be reserved in downtown Big Lake, road designs should take future transit operation into account through inclusion of pedestrian routes and appropriately located bus pullouts. Developers should be encouraged to consider transit in their subdivision designs, primarily by ensuring pedestrian routes and easements connecting homes with the main roads.

**Strategy 8: Ensure that in addition to the arterial and local streets, collector-level streets are planned, designed and constructed.**

The principal route in Big Lake, Big Lake Road, is the responsibility of the State. The primary job of arterial streets like Big Lake Road is to move traffic from one place to another, rather than to provide access to adjoining property.

Local streets and roads are built as part of residential development. Their primary purpose is to provide access to adjacent land. Local streets provide the lowest level of traffic mobility and serve relatively short trip distances. Local streets provide individual residences access to the community street network via providing a connection to collector-level roads. Through traffic movement is discouraged.

A key element of a community's street network, collector streets, move traffic from one neighborhood to another, from local streets to arterials, or from one neighborhood to other areas of the community. Predominant travel distances are shorter than on arterial routes and consequently, more moderate speeds are typical. Collectors may provide access to adjacent properties but mobility is typically a more important function.

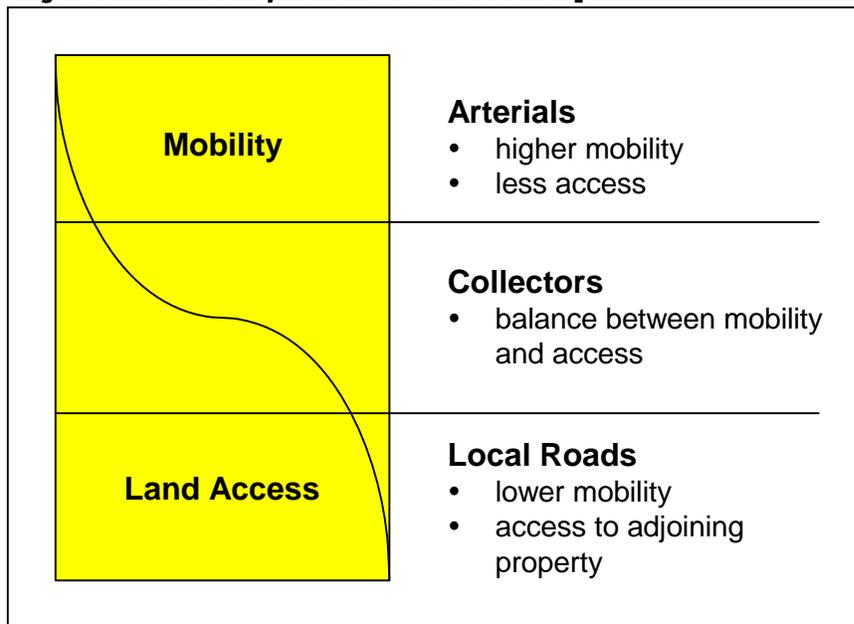
While arterials are the responsibility of the State, and local streets are built as property is developed, collectors are typically the responsibility of the local government. As Alaska communities have been slow to adopt road powers and actively contribute to the development of their street systems, the importance of collector street development has often come too late to inexpensively locate and construct these streets. The identification of future collector street locations is important for a number of reasons.

*Early location of collector and arterial roads reduces the chance that too much traffic will use residential streets.* If subdivisions are developed with minimal land-use controls, one of the negative results is what could be called "creeping collectors". For example, an early subdivision is located close to the main road. The streets built for the subdivision are all local streets with driveways opening directly onto the streets, appropriate for serving a single subdivision. Later, a second subdivision is built behind the first. The streets built for the second subdivision are connected to the first subdivision's streets. As houses are built in the second subdivision, traffic slowly increases on the first subdivision's streets, and in particular on the streets providing the most direct link to the main road. If the process is allowed to continue

with no thought to the location and construction of collector streets, traffic volumes, fair distribution of road maintenance costs, safety and other issues arise. It is also much more expensive to establish collector-level streets in a developed area with higher land costs and limited location choices.

*Early location of collector and arterial roads minimizes the cost of right-of-way.* Establishment of future collector routes to serve rural development allows Big Lake to plan for, reserve, and over time acquire right-of-way for the street, so that by the time it is needed, it can be designed and built cost-effectively. It is appropriate for developers of larger subdivisions to build portions of collectors that border and serve the subdivision.

**Figure 8. The Mobility-Land Access Relationship**



Source: Safety Effectiveness of Highway Design Features, Vol. 1 FHWA, 1992

*Early road location minimizes hard feelings.* Without location and designation of future collector roads, subdivisions are built and lots occupied before residents know where future main roads will be located. It is far preferable for those who buy land in a development to know, for example, that the western boundary of the development will, at some time in the future, have a collector route built along it than for the property buyers to expect (unrealistically, but we’ve all seen it) that the natural area “behind the house” will stay the way it is indefinitely.

**Strategy 9: Establish a corridor preservation program.**

The Big Lake Road system consists of residential streets developed piecemeal and connected with Big Lake Road. Needed collector routes should be completed to connect neighborhoods to the main roads and to keep residential streets from becoming de-facto collectors. Road access that completes a loop around Big Lake is needed, providing more

than one access/escape and to provide access to lots currently not connected to the road system.

In the 1996 Comprehensive Plan for the Big Lake Community there were a number of subdivisions and roadways that needed to be updated to standard roads. Some of these roads were prioritized in categories such as safety projects, high maintenance roads, collector roads and residential roads. It is important that Big Lake ensure its prospective street system includes collector connections as well as main routes and residential streets. Without the designation of general route locations it will be expensive to impossible to build the streets after an area is developed. Important needs include identifying the location of future roads and to developing a corridor preservation program, so that when a collector-level road is needed to connect subdivisions with highways or other arterials, the right-of-way is in hand or readily available. Without such a program, the cost of acquiring right-of-way can be high for not only the Borough, but for the residents whose homes and businesses must be relocated or impinged upon. The latest Borough Long Range Transportation Plan locates future collectors east of Big Lake. It does not, however, consider collectors west of the community. The collector routes north and west of Big Lake identified in this plan should be included in the Borough's Official Streets and Highways Plan.

Corridor preservation is a pro-active strategy that will help the community address its future transportation needs. A successful program typically includes a variety of tools that can be mixed and matched to fit the circumstances. The most common methods are fee simple purchase of land for right-of-way and requiring building setbacks from road rights-of-way. Many road-building agencies also attempt to obtain voluntary dedications or donations of right-of-way on a case-by case basis during the land development process. Other available tools include options to purchase, interim use agreements, land banking, purchase of access rights and density credits. The key is to have a number of methods available to the Borough and the community so that the most appropriate approaches can be used for a specific roadway.

Once a set of needed future corridors are finalized, the Borough will need to reserve as much of the land in the corridors as possible. In order to implement the corridor program, the following measures should be considered as a basket of tools to be developed and in some cases codified as Borough ordinances<sup>1</sup>:

- Restrictions on building in the right-of-way of a mapped but un-built road;
- Requiring subdividers to contribute funds toward upgrades on roads that will be more heavily used as a result of their subdivisions; denying requests for waivers by subdividers who prefer to not improve roads to Borough standards;
- Allowances for some interim use of transportation right-of-way for uses having low structural impact through an agreement that requires the property owner to relocate or discontinue the use at their expense when the land is ultimately needed for the transportation facility;

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from *Managing Corridor Development: A Municipal Handbook*, Center for Urban Transportation Research, 1996.

- Criteria for right-of-way exactions and a process for determining the amount of right-of-way dedication that is roughly proportionate to the impact of the proposed development;
- A reduction or reprieve from property taxes on property subject to corridor preservation restrictions. Examples are removing property from the tax roll, lowering the tax rate for preserved land, or providing a tax credit;
- An option for clustering developments by reducing setbacks or other site design requirements to avoid encroachment into the right-of-way;
- Procedures for intergovernmental coordination between the Borough and Alaska DOT&PF.

**GOAL 2: Ensure and enhance the future of air transportation in the Big Lake area by protecting and improving the existing airport.**

The Big Lake Airport is a public airport owned and maintained by the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities. The airport is located east of South Big Lake Road and northeast of Fish Creek in the Big Lake core area. The total area of the airport is approximately 230 acres which includes a 2435 ft. by 70 ft. gravel airstrip and nine lease lots. The airport does not have a control tower but does have a runway lighting system via pilot control along with a weather data source which is via weather broadcast. There is no designated runway for planes equipped with skis in the winter time although a snow pack is maintained when possible to allow for planes on skis. Big Lake is not a recognized float plane base but the lake is used regularly by airplanes in both summer and winter. Big Lake Airport has an average of approximately 55 aircraft operations per day.

**Strategy 1:** Protect the existing Big Lake Airport by maintaining the approach zones in accordance with Federal Aviation Administration guidelines. This can be accomplished by having the Borough acquire right of way at the east end of the runway for future expansion.

**Strategy 2:** Control the placement and height of buildings within the approach zones of the airport.

**Strategy 3:** Improve the airport by providing water and sewage systems when systems are available in the Big Lake area.

**Strategy 4:** Expand the lease area at the Big Lake Airport to allow for further development.

**Strategy 5:** Encourage the Alaska DOT&PF to clean up the existing "junk" aircraft and mow weeds so that additional auto parking is available.

**Strategy 6:** Encourage community support of the continued permitting process for a float plane and emergency service access in Fish Creek Park which provides access for float planes from Big Lake to the Big Lake Airport.

**GOAL 3: Port MacKenzie Rail Spur: support regional development through improvements in Borough transportation infrastructure.**

The alternatives developed by the Alaska Railroad for the extension of the line to Port MacKenzie will pass near or through the Big Lake Community Council area. Big Lake's preference is for the new rail line to be built west of the Big Lake area, rather than to pass through the community. In any case, the route needs to be designed carefully to minimize impacts to residential areas, trails and sensitive environmental areas, but still be an efficient route for the railroad. The preferable corridor from the community's perspective is the Willow to Port MacKenzie Corridor. In any case, when the line is built, it will be critical that accommodation be made for trail and future road crossings, along with routing that minimizes visual and noise impacts on residents.

**GOAL 4: Expand existing road system to provide access to residents currently without access ensuring public safety needs are met.**

**Strategy 1:** Recommend to Mat-Su Borough that all new roads be built to Borough standards and be accepted by the local RSA for maintenance and paving.

**Strategy 2:** Work with Mat-Su Borough to highlight new routes that will most efficiently and effectively extend the road network to residents without access.

**Strategy 3:** Develop innovative funding mechanisms to allow the new routes to be built without undue burden to either the residents or the Borough. Develop a new road projects list based on the results of the study.

“ Growing up in Big Lake, school was the center of our identity. ”

## General Background Information

As an unincorporated area, Big Lake relies on Mat-Su Borough and partnerships with adjoining communities for the services and facilities it requires. In many areas, community services and facilities are generally acceptable but there is a desire for further improvements. There is an overall desire for specific improvements (e.g. Big Lake Elementary School improvements) and for new facilities (e.g. Big Lake Community Center) and services (expanded fire district). Goals and strategies for addressing Big Lake’s facilities and services needs are identified below. Each strategy addresses specific areas of concern for the community and includes a brief history of the overall issues, as well as some specific steps for implementing each strategy.



## PUBLIC FACILITIES & SERVICES PRIORITY GOALS

1. Improve community facilities and services.
2. Improve public safety.
3. Improve water, sewer systems & other utilities.

### GOAL 1: Improve Community Facilities and Services

#### Strategy 1: Advocate for Big Lake Elementary School improvements

In the past and today, Big Lake Elementary School has served as a community anchor for Big Lake. Lifetime residents talk about growing up in Big Lake and how the school was a person’s identity. Telling someone you were a Big Lake Grizzly meant something. Today, the elementary school continues to serve as a key community facility; community members are proud of the school’s administration and staff teachers. Overall they are happy with the quality of the education provided and experience their children have at the school. That being said, the school struggles with inadequate facilities and security issues. Over the past year, the school has had issues with vandals breaking into the school building and destruction of school property. Additionally, recognizing the value of the current facility and in the interest of making the best use of the school’s generous gym and outdoor recreational facilities, the community is examining the possibility of selecting a community center site that is close to the school.

Working together, community members have started to brainstorm specific actions that will help improve current facilities and work toward the construction of a new facility. They are as follows:

- Assess current and potential use of Big Lake Elementary – Do we really need a community center or can the school serve this purpose?
  - Meet with school principal to assess what improvements have been made and are still needed at school (e.g. roofing? siding?) and to talk about potential fees
  - Lobby borough assembly and joint school boards for use of elementary school
  - Create fund that will cover potential costs of using school that will satisfy assembly and joint school boards
- Reestablish the school as center of community identity – work from model set by rural Alaskan communities and their use of school for community activities
  - Talk with school principal about community access – when can the community gain entrance to the school? How?
- Conduct assessment of school playground equipment; pair with copy of Consumer Product Safety Commission Guidelines and present to Mat-Borough assembly as case for purchasing better equipment
  - Support Parent Teacher Association with current project of raising funds to replace playground equipment and other future endeavors
- Conduct needs assessment of youth through workshops at schools
  - First assessment conducted at Houston Middle School in September 2008 (See Parks, Recreation and Open Space for survey results)
- Associated fees with using school – schools must charge a fee to cover the cost of electricity, heating and insurance for after school activities.

### **Strategy 2: Build a community center**

Aside from the elementary school, there is a lack of public use space in Big Lake. There is currently no place for large community gatherings, meetings, events and performances; nor is there a designated space for conducting youth activities. For example, Big Lake Community Council and Chamber of Commerce are very limited on options for meeting space. The community has identified several key issues related to the development of a Big Lake Community Center. They are as follows:



- Access & Land Status – Community center should be within walking distance from school and/or library. Potential sites should be inventoried to determine accessibility and ownership status.
- Big Lake Youth – The community center should include a youth center (with gym, study area and youth recreational facility). In a survey of 112 middle school students conducted in September of 2008, students expressed their desire for the following facilities/programs:

- Dedicated motorcycle/four-wheeler course
- Maintained ice skating rink
- Dedicated BMX course
- Skateboard park
- After-school computer use

The community has started the process of researching community school programs and other youth programs that will support Big Lake youth in exploring educational and recreational learning opportunities.

- Big Lake Children – The community center should also include a day care/early learning center.
  - Research methods for starting, operating and maintaining early learning, Head Start and other youth programs.
- Big Lake Workers and Adult Learners – The community center should include space for a training center and at the very least an office to house Job Corps representative and computer stations for resume development and job searches.
- Big Lake Seniors – The community center should incorporate activities with the Mid-Valley Senior Center. This will increase interactions between community residents of different ages.
- Arts – The community center should include an art studio/gallery/performance venue (including space for a music recording studio). This desire fits well with the community’s economic development goal to better market Big Lake through an art fair or open market in the town center.
- Community center will be expensive and may be more cost prohibitive than renovating school for same purpose



Proposed actions for addressing these concerns regarding the Big Lake community center include:

- Identify function(s) community center would serve
  - If expanding and improving the school does not fulfill needs, what activities would the community center offer?
- Identify site for community center – Four potential sites were identified by planning team members during the May community workshop (see map on page 6)
  - Community desires something similar to Anchorage’s Spenard Recreation Center that serves both adults and youth that includes a culture center and ice rink. The community has toured the Spenard Recreation Center and the Girdwood Community Center to begin to inventory those qualities most desired for the future Big Lake Community Center.

**Strategy 3: Build a multi-purpose community office complex at the center of town. This facility could serve as a center for community services including the following:**

- Community/city administrator
- Alaska State Trooper/police department
- Visitor center

The community of Big Lake currently relies on the Mat-Su Borough for a host of services including fire protection, solid waste management disposal, emergency medical services and schools as the area’s planning authority. Other service providers include electric and telephone utilities and the state for public safety services. All homes are on septic systems and wells. A limited number of homes have outhouses and many people haul water from a local water source. The remaining goals and strategies outlined below represent the priorities for the community of Big Lake for each of these services.

## **GOAL 2: Improve public safety**

### **Strategy 1: Increase fire protection awareness and services**

- Promote Firewise Communities/Program for all neighborhoods in Big Lake area.
  - Horseshoe Lake developed their plan in 2007 and will serve as a good model for other Big Lake neighborhoods
- Support expansion of the fire district – The Mat-Su Borough and the communities of Big Lake and Meadow Lakes recently voted to consolidate fire services currently provided through separate community volunteer fire departments. When the merge is finalized, the joint department will be in a better position to recruit more volunteers and to provide better funded, hence expanded and improved fire protection services. Additionally, there would be an economic development benefit to individual home owners with decreased insurance rates, as the merge would constitute coverage to a less risky area.

### **Strategy 2: Improve police services**

- Increase law enforcement throughout community, especially in town center and heavily trafficked areas

- Promote neighborhood watch programs
- Lobby for park rangers (*see more on this topic in the Parks, Recreation & Open Space Chapter*)



### **GOAL 3: Improve water, sewer systems and other utilities**

#### **Strategy 1: Improve solid waste management**

Funding for Big Lake Transfer Station upgrade and expansion has received approval from the MSB assembly; the Big Lake site is the only site in borough that breaks even. However, the community is still plagued with poor solid waste management. Although there is a transfer station (operated and maintained by the Mat-Su Borough), there is still a problem with the dumping of garbage in the community's many isolated open spaces. Additionally, there are also tremendous opportunities for recycling and composting in the community. Aside from those improvements, the community has identified other actions that will contribute to improving solid waste management in the Big Lake area. These include:

- Within key recreational areas and in highly trafficked areas of the town center, erect units for recycling plastics, glass, paper and cardboard.
- Build new community composting facility alongside transfer facility that allows composting of green and brown plant matter including grass clippings, animal manures (not dog or cat) and wood chipping (a potential source of revenue for the community (as an incorporated city) or borough).

**Strategy 2: Research and identify different options for addressing Big Lake's increased need for community and/or public water and sewer systems. As the community grows, there is a need for a community sewer and water plan in the core area. This will increase the community's ability to address the issue of high density lakefront lot development, thereby maintaining excellent water quality. Please refer to the Land Use & Environment chapter for more details on how the community would like to proceed on this issue.**

**Strategy 3: Improve access to services including natural gas, electric, and telephone for residents through community council area**

Current and future public facilities and services issues and needs are listed in the Public Facilities & Services Matrix that follows. This matrix is the product of initial and continued dialogue between the planning team and work group members.



Map 11. Potential Community Center Sites

### Potential Sites for New Community Center



**Table 10. Public Facilities & Services Matrix**

FACILITY	RESPONSIBLE ENTITY	CURRENT FACILITIES	ISSUES / NOTES / NEEDS
<b>Public Administration</b>			
<b>Community Center</b>	Anyone we can get	None	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High priority</li> <li>• Art fair/open market?</li> <li>• Possibly expand library with community center?</li> <li>• Better to have a separate facility next to but not attached to the library (library doesn't want to maintain or bicker about who pays for what)</li> <li>• We have identified several sites that might be suitable.</li> <li>• Ideally, we would like a partnership between school and community center (campus style) to allow for more varied use of facility.</li> </ul>
<b>Big Lake Fish Hatchery</b>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Idea to turn it into a golf course</li> <li>• This may become a public park through State transfer of land.</li> <li>• The hatchery is also suspected of being an environmental liability and may burden new ownership to clean up.</li> </ul>
<b>Post Office</b>		Leased from private owner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lucky to have a Big Lake address</li> <li>• In order to have delivered mail we must have a Wasilla address. Also very hard to deal with contracted employees as opposed to federal employees.</li> </ul>
<b>Cultural Facilities</b>			
<b>Library</b>		Built 2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wonderful &amp; well incorporated with Jordan Lake Nature Area – does not include the amount of community dedicated space originally planned that is now needed.</li> <li>• Possibly expand library with community center?</li> </ul>
<b>Historic &amp; Cultural Sites</b>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cultural center probably would have to be the same as the community center</li> <li>• Buffers along waterways/greenways best protection, especially areas where rivers come into the lake (Fish Creek in particular)</li> <li>• Interpretive signs</li> <li>• Not clear where historical (Alaska Native) sites are located.</li> </ul>
<b>Cemetery</b>		None	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do we need a cemetery?</li> <li>• Would have to be on MSB or state land</li> <li>• Many residents prefer to scatter ashes</li> </ul>
<b>Public Safety</b>			
<b>Water Safety</b>	US Coast Guard and State Troopers		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not so much an issue of making more rules, but enforcing Fed rules that already exist</li> <li>• Don't need a facility. Good as is.</li> </ul>
<b>Police</b>		AK State Troopers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No trooper station in Big Lake (moved to Pittman by the Three Bears)</li> <li>• Possible new station downtown</li> <li>• Petition borough to include a ranger station at one of our parks. This ranger could serve as aid to water safety and overall safety.</li> </ul>

<b>Fire</b>	Every area is a fire service area; many of them within Big Lake community council. Some people don't have fire service (don't pay tax, but don't get service)	Volunteer with scattered around Big Lake	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some areas not served</li> <li>• Just passed a bill that gives municipalities power to annex areas as long as they use any portion of other roads in service areas to get access for fire</li> <li>• If people have a road they should be able to get fire service – have to get signatures</li> <li>• Dry hydrant at Jay's house</li> <li>• Hope to get fire protection throughout borough wherever possible</li> <li>• Make Big Lake a firewise community</li> <li>• We have just voted to combine the Meadow Lakes and Big Lake Fire departments. This will expand our services and allow for a better equipped and better funded department.</li> </ul>
<b>Emergency Medical Services</b>	Coupled with Fire dept. right now	Coupled with Fire dept. right now	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• See "Health Services" and "Fire"</li> </ul>
<b>Health Services</b>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clinic or extension of hospital</li> <li>• Best near airport for easy medical evacuation</li> </ul>
<b>Education</b>			
<b>Schools</b>	Title 1 - MSSD	PTA at school is trying to get more playground equipment and turn it into more of a community play area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Huge immediate need for structural improvement</li> <li>• Would like land for expansion &amp; repair</li> <li>• See, Community Center.</li> </ul>
<b>Daycare / boys club</b>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Suggested during discussion</li> </ul>
<b>Utilities</b>			
<b>Water &amp; Sewer</b>	Private/public creation	Public water & sewer to be encouraged where feasible – possible infrastructure could be created via transitional private/community systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Question of feasibility in time frame – possible on site systems as required by DEC</li> <li>• Want to explore possibility of securing ROW in short term</li> <li>• Possibility of small scale local sewage for lake front neighborhoods</li> </ul>
<b>Electricity</b>	MEA	More access?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• would like to have as widely as possible eventually</li> </ul>
<b>Telephone</b>	MTA		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• would like to have as widely as possible eventually</li> </ul>
<b>Internet</b>	MTA		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• would like to have as widely as possible eventually</li> </ul>

<b>Solid Waste Disposal</b>		Transfer station on Hollywood	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Definitely need to address dumping in open space areas, especially of large items that people don't want to have to pay to have hauled</li> <li>• Need an RV dump station (Tesoro station has a good open area, used to be one next to Montie's but shut down); best to put one near one of the parks/campground on north shore</li> <li>• Need community composting facility alongside transfer facility</li> </ul>
<b>Natural Gas</b>		More access?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Want natural gas as widely distributed as possible</li> </ul>

*“We have potential to attract a lot of visitors, and more residents, but we’re not making the best use of what we’ve got here. There is a great opportunity in Big Lake for people to form businesses and make a success of themselves because of the community.”*

### **General Background Information**

In times past, Big Lake was mostly known as a weekend escape destination for Anchorage and other Southcentral Alaskan communities. Depending on the season, boats, jet skis, water skis and snow machines sprinkled the landscape. The economic center of the community was once local hotels and bars that catered to these visitors’ needs. Today, Big Lake is home to more retirees and year round residents. Many of the once-thriving lake front businesses have closed, and both summer and winter recreation use of the lake has diminished. Some traditional access points have been closed, many new houses built, and recreation use has shifted to less developed, more outlying areas of the Borough.

In addition to changes in recreation use, the number and character of people living and working in Big Lake has continued to evolve. Today, there is a more diverse and stable population of year round Big Lake residents. People who were once Big Lake weekenders have turned into year-round residents, as older homeowners retire and settle down into houses that were once only used occasionally. More people are living in Big Lake year round, and commuting to jobs in the surrounding area and Anchorage.

There are a number of different options for the next chapter in Big Lake’s future. Options range from a quiet retirement community, to a rapidly growing residential, commercial, recreational and visitor center. Likewise the foundation for the future economic vitality of Big Lake is currently unknown. There are many economic development opportunities facing Big Lake and other Mat-Su communities. One major category is tied to large state-initiated transportation projects. These include a proposed rail corridor connecting Mat-Su communities with Point MacKenzie, the Knik Arm Bridge and Road corridor project, the West Mat-Su Access project, and proposed expansion of the Parks Highway. These projects, coupled with large blocks of developable land and key recreation sources, put Big Lake in a unique position – the community has many options, and if it chooses, can greatly affect its future.

To set the stage for the future, one must first grasp the current economic climate in Big Lake. As indicated in Table 11, although businesses have decreased in number, the community still has a range of established local businesses that support year round local residents, weekend recreational users and recreationists passing by and through Big Lake on the Parks Highway.

Consideration of all of these factors, past and present, puts the community in the position of discussing new options for who they are and what they want to be. The community is asking itself critical questions that will help shape economic development policy, and in turn, guide decisions on land use, roads, trails, and other public infrastructure.

Considering the community's strengths, weaknesses and opportunities, is Big Lake:

- A sleepy retirement and second home community?
- A bedroom community, with few local jobs, but good access to jobs in other communities?
- An economic development hub, a new "gateway to Alaska," with road and rail access from Port MacKenzie, and a growing base of commercial and industrial activity, supporting new jobs and a growing population?
- An intense, 4 season Alaskan recreation playground? Or even a destination for a growing number of out-of-state visitors?

Decisions on a general direction for economic development affect many other components of this plan. For example, if the community wants to focus on attracting more recreationists, this translates into a need for an active effort to improve trails, lakefront parks, and other recreational resources. This also might imply that the community would put more effort into keeping the community visually attractive, for example, developing guidelines for signage or for the retention of vegetation along Big Lake Road.

The next section of this chapter presents economic development goals and objectives that build from the '96 plan but that also take into consideration the ideas of Big Lake community members that have contributed to this update. As has become evident in the planning process, decisions that shape economic development goals are central to the overall direction and value of the comprehensive plan. Decisions on economic development goals and strategies speak to issues at the heart of the community, its identity and future.

In the 1996 Big Lake Comprehensive Plan, the economic development goal and all associated recommendations were tourism related. More specifically, the community was focused on recognizing and taking advantage of Big Lake's range of year round economic development activities and opportunities. To date, there has been some progress on goals and recommendations outlined in the '96 plan. They include the following:

- Working with the State and Borough to maintain and upgrade existing regional parks within the Big Lake Community Council boundaries.
- A Mat-Su Borough-operated day parking area has been established on the shoreline of Big Lake adjacent to the Sailing Club at MP 9.5 on South Big Lake Road.

The Big Lake Planning Team has recognized the importance of the implementation of these recommendations as well as those recommendations for which there has been little or no progress to date. All are still important to the overall economic vitality of Big Lake.

Most economic development goals and recommendations represented in this chapter are linked to other issues addressed in other chapters of this report. For example, recommendations regarding the natural environment are included here and in the land use chapter. This chapter represents the consolidation of all desired planning policies that tie into the economic vitality of Big Lake.

**Table 11. Big Lake Businesses Matrix**

TYPE OF BUSINESS	NAME OF BUSINESS	ISSUES/NOTES/NEEDS
<b>Accommodations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Alaska Echo Lake Bed &amp; Breakfast</li> <li>• Big Lake Motel/The Hanger</li> <li>• Sunset View Resort</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hanger – Located on South Big Lake Road near airport</li> <li>• Sunset – Located on Big Lake, hosts many weddings &amp; events</li> </ul>
<b>Aviation Businesses</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• AMTS</li> <li>• J &amp; M</li> <li>• Northern Pioneer Helicopters</li> <li>• Bedrock Aviation</li> <li>• Water’s Aviation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Full service airplane rebuilding</li> <li>• Aircraft repair service</li> <li>• Helicopter service</li> <li>• Aircraft Aviation &amp; Painting</li> <li>• Aircraft rebuilding</li> </ul>
<b>Banks</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Matanuska Valley Credit Union</li> </ul>	
<b>Barber Shops + Hairdressers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Big Lake Barbers</li> <li>• Clip &amp; Curl</li> <li>• Nell’s Salon</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clip &amp; Curl-East Lake Mall,</li> <li>• Nell’s South Big Lake Rd</li> </ul>
<b>Boat/Motor Sports Sales</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Big Lake Cat House</li> <li>• Big Lake Power Sports + Marine</li> <li>• Xtreme Marine + Sports</li> </ul>	
<b>Building Supplies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spenard Builders Supply</li> </ul>	
<b>Construction &amp; Snowplowing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• AtoZ Construction</li> <li>• Beech Construction</li> <li>• Jolt Construction</li> <li>• McGhan Construction + Storage</li> <li>• Woody Works</li> <li>• Ironfree Water of Alaska</li> <li>• Finsihed Works</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Many small companies</li> </ul>
<b>Electrical Contractor</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Electric Doctor</li> </ul>	
<b>Entertainment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• R &amp; R Productions</li> </ul>	
<b>Fitness + Health</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Curves</li> <li>• Sheshindo Martial Arts</li> </ul>	
<b>Fuel Facilities + Delivery</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Big Lake Super Store (Tesoro)</li> <li>• Fisher’s Fuel</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gas, some groceries</li> </ul>
<b>Gifts (Bridal)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Donna’s Corner</li> </ul>	

<b>Gravel Sales</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hollywood Sand + Gravel</li> </ul>	
<b>Greenhouses</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lakesway Greenhouse</li> <li>• McGuire's Greenhouse</li> </ul>	
<b>Grocery + General Supplies Stores</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Steve's Food Boy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anchor store of East Lake Mall – full service grocery, meat, produce, bakery, floral</li> </ul>
<b>Helicopter Services</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Northern Pioneer Helicopters</li> </ul>	
<b>Insurance</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Integra Insurance Services</li> </ul>	
<b>Laundromats</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Doc Rockers</li> <li>• Bob's Mini Mart</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Doc Rocker's-built in 2007</li> <li>• Bob's-Laundry and some groceries</li> </ul>
<b>Liquor Stores</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Big Lake Liquor</li> <li>• Big Lake Moonshine Shop</li> </ul>	
<b>Lodging Association</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Alaska's Mat-Su B &amp; B Association</li> </ul>	
<b>Original Art</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trail Doc in Alaska</li> </ul>	
<b>Outdoor Safety</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• North American Outdoor Institute</li> </ul>	
<b>Phone Advertising</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PDC – Phone Directories Company</li> </ul>	
<b>Plastering</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Northwest Plastering &amp; Stone</li> </ul>	
<b>Radio Stations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• KMBQ Radio Broadcast Company</li> </ul>	
<b>Railroad</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Alaska Railroad Corporation</li> </ul>	
<b>Realtors</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Apollo, Inc.</li> <li>• Century 21 North Homes Big Lake</li> </ul>	

<b>Restaurants &amp; Bars</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kathy's Restaurant</li> <li>• Hanger Lounge</li> <li>• Islander Lounge</li> <li>• R &amp; R</li> <li>• Robin Jeffery</li> <li>• Kathy Connaker</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kathy's – Full restaurant, banquet/meeting room</li> <li>• Hanger-full bar, restaurant, banquet/meeting rooms</li> <li>• R&amp;R-cafe</li> <li>• Robin's – bar</li> <li>• Islander – Located on Long Island in Big Lake is seasonal</li> </ul>
<b>Marinas</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Burkshore Marina</li> <li>• Dave's Marina</li> <li>• Southport Marina</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All on Big Lake</li> </ul>
<b>Safety/Security</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guardian Security System</li> <li>• Valley Protection &amp; Investigation</li> </ul>	
<b>Screen Printing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Imprinting Professional Products</li> </ul>	
<b>Self Storage</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Big Lake Self Storage</li> </ul>	
<b>Tavern</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Robin's Landing</li> </ul>	
<b>Video Rentals</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Neighborhood Video</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eastlake Mall</li> </ul>
<b>Water Wells</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ace Water Well Drilling</li> <li>• Gielarowski Pump &amp; Well Service</li> </ul>	
<b>Web Design</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Alaska Web Design</li> <li>• Dream Weavers World Technologies</li> </ul>	

## **ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PRIORITY GOALS**

1. Keep the natural environment clean and green.
2. Improve access to area lakes.
3. Advocate for improved public facilities and services that support tourism and economic development activities.
4. Market Big Lake – Attract visitors to our community.
5. Create an attractive town center.
6. Capitalize on airport as center for economic activity.
7. Develop commercial lands around certain business/industry types.
8. Support economic growth and decrease overall dependence on outside funding.
9. Build Local Capacity.

### **GOAL 1: Keep the Natural Environment Clean and Green**

It is arguable that Big Lake’s most important economic resource is its natural setting – its lakes, streams, views and open space. These are the features that attract and hold many year round and seasonal residents, as well as short term visitors. The community has identified several strategies that will both maintain the natural character of the Big Lake region while enhancing the economic vitality of the community. These include the following:

#### **Strategy 1: Establish a Big Lake Volunteer Committee**

#### **Strategy 2: Organize cleanup efforts, organizations and groups**

- Increase opportunities for clean-up efforts (once or twice a year)

#### **Strategy 3: Obtain more trash receptacles for high use areas**

- Work with local park manager to erect more signs at lake access areas that clearly state fines for littering at recreational sites

#### **Strategy 4: Create and/or enforce existing laws preventing dumping of sewage, trash, liquids and pollutants**

#### **Strategy 5: Create new business ventures that address environmental issues**

*See more on this topic in the Land Use Chapter*

### **GOAL 2: Improve Access to Area Lakes**

Improved lake access is one key part of the effort to expand recreational use of the Big Lake area, and in turn, to increase spending by out of town visitors at local businesses. The Parks, Recreation & Open Space chapter provides detailed information on important issues and potential strategies for improving access to area lakes. In this chapter, the community has identified several strategies for enhancing the visibility, operations and use of recreational sites in the area as a means for drawing more local and out of town visitors to local businesses.

**Strategy 1:** Keep parks open year round, find ways to maintain (volunteers) if needed

**Strategy 2:** Enforce right-of-way and easements to fully utilize existing access points

**Strategy 3:** Create an online map with lake access points

**Strategy 4:** Develop clear options for motorized and non-motorized activities from Big Lake to other lakes in the area

**Strategy 5:** Utilize the Big Lake trail system map

- Post different activity/trail options to the Big Lake Chamber of Commerce website



**GOAL 3: Advocate for Improved Public Facilities and Services that Support Tourism and Economic Development Activities.**

In addition to goals and strategies outlined in Chapter IV for improving public facilities and services for Big Lake, the community recommends the following strategies that will not only improve the quality of the area's recreational opportunities for visitors and local residents, but will also support an infrastructure for current and future tourism development in the community.

**Strategy 1: Build a Big Lake Community Center**

- Research and choose site
- Review community facilities inventory for potential use of existing structure
- Establish Community Center Committee
- Develop business plan for community center project

**Strategy 2:** The State and Borough, with input from Big Lake community, should plan and implement a comprehensive interpretive and directional recreational signage program

for the Big Lake area. This program should include signs for all public facilities in and around the community (i.e. different access points/recreational sites).

**Strategy 3: Improve recreational sites**

- Develop local government and law-enforcement body (e.g. security contract or park rangers)
- Create an RV dump site
- Add value to existing sites by adding plug-ins

*See more on this topic in the Land Use Chapter and Public Facilities Chapter*

**GOAL 4: Market Big Lake – Attract Visitors to Our Community**

One of the challenges for Big Lake residents has been defining what currently attracts visitors to Big Lake and what will increase visitor activity and add to the experience of recreating and exploring the Big Lake area. In other words, what does Big Lake have to offer visitors that other Alaskan communities do not have?

Overall, the community is in agreement that Big Lake has a lot to offer visitors in the form of recreational activities that take advantage of the area’s natural landscape. Additionally, it is clear that the area is a recreating and visiting place for many Southcentral Alaskans and weekend visitors. To this end, the community recognizes the need for a multi-entity approach to marketing an improved image of Big Lake. At the same time, community members want to respect the desire of some community members to maintain the privacy and quiet some residents have sought and found in Big Lake.

Recommended approaches for improving the community’s image, maintaining resident desires for privacy and quiet, increasing visitor activity and thereby increasing job opportunities and the economic health of Big Lake include:

**Strategy 1: Big Lake Community Council, Chamber of Commerce and other community members should identify what they want to market (i.e. those things that make Big Lake special) in preparation for the development of a regional marketing effort.**

**Strategy 2: Big Lake Community Council and Big Lake Chamber of Commerce should work with the Mat-Su Convention and Visitors Bureau to develop a tourism plan for Big Lake and for assistance in marketing Big Lake’s recreational attractions. Two particular goals are to better define the visitor market (who they are, what they want) and then to identify what changes or improvements are needed to attract this target market.**

Other strategies that should happen independently at the local chamber level and in collaboration with the Mat-Su Convention and Visitors Bureau include:

**Strategy 3: Improve Big Lake Chamber of Commerce outreach and collaboration with other groups**

**Strategy 4: Improve presence, visibility and use of Big Lake Chamber**

**Strategy 5:** Identify all businesses and business owners in the community; develop business matrix (see Table 11 for draft matrix)

**Strategy 6:** Develop an advertising theme and “brand” for Big Lake

**Strategy 7:** Big Lake businesses should research new markets and merchants should consolidate advertizing efforts in multiple mass media markets

**Strategy 8:** Develop list of business marketing tools (i.e. printed collateral, television, radio, directories)

- Milepost
- ATIA Directory
- AMBIT e-commerce
- Sponsor leagues and sport teams to represent Big Lake
- Research possibility of Big Lake as retreat community
- Share event calendar with other chambers of commerce and community organizations

**Strategy 9:** Organize and better promote current and future community (Big-Lake branded) events (e.g. Chili Cook-Off, Garden Club)

**Strategy 10:** Improve signage on entrance to Big Lake off of the Parks Highway. Currently, there is a DOT sign on the Parks Highway, but there is no additional signage that interests/welcomes visitors. There should be better signage on the highway and at the beginning of the community (Mile X on Big Lake Road).



**Strategy 11:** Increase visibility and accessibility to lake system for general visitor base

#### **GOAL 5: Create an Attractive Town Center**

Overall, the community of Big Lake hopes to encourage continued operation and success of all businesses in Big Lake. Additionally, the community would like to take actions to encourage development of a more diverse and attractive town center in the current area of “downtown” Big Lake. Ultimately, this area would include a mix of businesses that cater to local residents and visitor-related business. As described in the chapter on land use, the goal for the town center is to create a cluster of shops, restaurants, public facilities and recreation activities in a concentrated, walkable area. This environment would encourage more spending by local residents in Big Lake, and would give visitors more reasons to spend time (and money) in the community. Potential strategies for addressing these desires are outlined in the Land Use chapter. Several additional ideas are added below:

**Strategy 1:** Identify Big Lake’s Town Center (please see Land Use chapter, pg. 11 for proposed town center area)

**Strategy 2:** Define the character of “Downtown Big Lake”

**Strategy 3:** Identify challenges and opportunities for businesses in the town center

**Strategy 4:** Survey community members and visitors to assess market need and potential for new businesses

**Strategy 5:** Develop strategy for attracting investors in local businesses

**Strategy 6:** Develop art fair/open market

**Strategy 7:** Work with local businesses and property owners to follow development standards for the Big Lake Town Center as outlined in the Land Use chapter.

*See more on this topic in the Land Use Chapter*

### **GOAL 6: Capitalize on Airport as Center for Economic Activity**

Currently there are several small businesses at the airport including plane maintenance and restoration businesses. However, the relationship between the community and the airport has never been clearly defined and the relationship has been described as occasionally awkward.

Over the last few years, there has been more development at the Big Lake Airport than any where else in the community. In the Rural Aviation Safety Plan, there is a big push for a dedicated float plane base in the Mat-Su Borough. During the 1996 comprehensive planning process, community members identified the expansion of the Big Lake Airport into the regional airport a priority. Since then, the borough has looked at other facilities and traffic patterns and has determined that Big Lake is not a desirable location for a regional airport. Additionally, community members no longer see themselves as a central regional supply center, therefore the 1996 goal does not mesh with the community’s current goal to diversify its economy.



The development of a float plane base at the lake south of Big Lake and the future of other infrastructure projects in the region will affect the impact of the airport on commerce in the community. Community members feel that the airport as it currently exists should be more directly tied to economic activities in Big Lake.

In addition to development at the airport, individuals in the community are building personal hangars adjacent to their residences throughout Southcentral Alaska. For example, there are some developments where condominiums on lakes are built with float-plan slips. This is

currently not a possibility at Big Lake. Possible strategies for taking advantage of the locality and potential economic benefits of the airport include:

**Strategy 1: Inventory airport businesses, services and key contacts**

- Recruit a business owner, or other representative of the airport to participate in chamber meetings and other gatherings of local businesses

**Strategy 2: Inventory community aviation needs (e.g. residential, small and large-scale commercial, tourism) and compare to local aviation capacity.**

- There is a difference between a 50-foot plane airport and 1500-foot plane airport. With a larger magnitude, more businesses may be willing to locate near airport.

**Strategy 3: Improve airport equipment and management**

**Strategy 4: Lobby for runway improvements**

**Strategy 5: Clean-up airport ground and improve area landscaping; beautify the airport to create a community friendly and attractive site for locals and visitors**

- Erect some kind of greeting/“Welcome to Big Lake Sign”

**Strategy 6: Implement airport shuttle**

**GOAL 7: Develop Commercial Lands around Certain Business/Industry Types**

If the railroad and through highways currently being discussed for Big Lake eventually are built, the Big Lake area could become an attractive destination for expanded commercial and industrial development. In the Land Use and Transportation chapters the community has mapped out proposed land use guidelines and has outlined a set of development standards for each of the land use categories. The guidelines and standards will ensure that current and future businesses, both small and larger scale, are developed in a way that preserves the beauty and character of Big Lake.

*See more on this topic, including specific land use guidelines and development standards, in the Land Use Chapter and Transportation Chapter*



## **GOAL 8: Support Economic Growth and Decrease Overall Dependence on Outside Funding**

The community recognizes the need for more Big Lake public facilities and services that cannot all be supported by outside funding. One route to this goal would be to encourage more local growth and to then find a way to funnel more of the tax revenues from these activities back into community needs. Currently, there are an estimated 150 full-time jobs in Big Lake. These are mostly in the construction, fuel and mechanical sectors. Most year-round residents work in Anchorage, Palmer, Wasilla or on the North Slope. Successful and sustained expansion of the private sector in the community could also set the stage for improvements in Big Lake public services, such as upgrades to the school, improved trails and recreation facilities, and improved road maintenance. Potential strategies for addressing Big Lake’s need for economic diversity and independence follow:

### **Strategy 1: Develop a comprehensive business plan – for business recruitment and to increase job opportunities.**

- Plan for diverse economy that doesn’t have dependence on one sector
  - Telecommuters – IT, engineers, accountants
  - Medical facilities
  - Retreat facilities

### **Strategy 2: Plan for infrastructure that will support different job opportunities**

**Strategy 3: Take advantage of job opportunities that arise from Borough development projects. For example, proposed new prison will have 1,000-2,000 prisoners with no facilities for guards. Big Lake could be home to guards and other prison staff.**

**Strategy 4: Establish local improvement districts, e.g., for trails and parks and/or for roads, so new businesses help to pay for needed public services and facilities**

*See more on this topic in the Implementation Chapter*

## **GOAL 9: Build Local Capacity**

The success of current and future economic development endeavors in Big Lake relies in part on the ability of the community to grow and maintain a trained and dedicated workforce. To do this, Big Lake must invest time and resources in the community and surrounding area schools, libraries and training programs that prepare current and future workers. The community has developed several strategies that will help address these concerns and will better prepare community members for current and future job opportunities. They are as follows:

**Strategy 1: Support efforts to build Community Center** (*See more on this topic in the Public Facilities Chapter*)

**Strategy 2: Work with the Mat-Su Borough, Mat-Su School District and other entities to create after school and after hours education and recreational programs for youth and adults**

**Strategy 3: Support efforts to make capital improvements to Big Lake Elementary School**

**Strategy 4:** Develop strategy, marketing tool, and incentives for recruiting parents to the Parent Teach Association

**Strategy 5:** Work with school leadership to maintain access to school for community events; develop memorandum of agreement between Big Lake Elementary School and Big Lake Community Council that outlines nature of collaborative relationship, details overall goals of collaborative efforts and describes benefits of a partnership to school and community

- Utilize ball fields and unused portions of land at school
- Develop Big Lake Athletic Association (*See more on this topic in the Parks, Recreation & Open Space Chapter*)

**Strategy 6:** Support community efforts to bring full-time representation from Job Corps to the community; this person could potentially be housed at the new community center

**Strategy 7:** Support our library and local fire station and increase volunteerism

**“** *We know we need some rules, but not too many –  
we need a few good rules.* **”**

### **General Background Information**

Community members agree that the 1996 Big Lake Comprehensive Plan included some well intentioned goals and good recommendations for guiding future development of Big Lake. Some of the recommendations were implemented and tasks were accomplished. However, a review of the goals and status-to-date revealed that a large majority of the plan recommendations were never acted upon.

This chapter includes information, goals and strategies for increasing the community’s capacity to control its future and to accomplish comprehensive plan goals and projects. Examples of approaches include gaining a better understanding of funding options and finding new ways to partner with the Borough, the state and other established governing bodies. As the community looks forward, major concerns include the following:

- Maintaining and increasing local control – Big Lake is an unorganized community, located within the Mat-Su Borough boundaries. The Borough provides a range of community services. Property owners pay borough property taxes and are subject to borough codes and ordinances. The Big Lake Community Council (BLCC) works in an advisory capacity to the Borough, advocates for community interests and coordinates community activities.
- Communication between governing bodies and community members – Like all elected bodies, there are times when the BLCC is at odds with some community members. There are also times when the BLCC and community members do not agree with Mat-Su Borough approaches to handling key issues in Big Lake. Community members hope to streamline communications between all governing bodies and to better articulate their needs to the borough assembly, state legislature and congressional delegation.
- Capacity to generate funds for local projects – The community wants to better understand existing streams of revenue and funding cycles that affect community and borough-wide projects. Additionally, if the community wishes to apply for funds directly, it is critical that a body be in place to apply for, accept and manage project funds.
- Capacity to carry out projects – The community wants to ensure the implementation of goals and strategies outlined in the comprehensive plan including more complex projects that require more intense hands-on project management at the local level (e.g. construction of a community center).

## **IMPLEMENTATION PRIORITY GOALS**

1. Explore options for better communication within the community, as well as between the community and outside interests.
2. Explore organizational structures / funding options for creating greater capacity to carry out community goals and projects.
3. Develop an implementation plan that clearly outlines and delegates action items by comp plan issue area.

### **GOAL 1: Explore options for better communications within the community, as well as between the community and outside interests.**

Communities are stronger when it is easy for everyone to be involved and to be aware of important community issues. It is also helpful to set up systems that make it simple for community members to communicate effectively with entities like the Borough and the State Legislature. Small Alaskan communities deal with these issues in a variety of ways; some options are listed below.

**Strategy 1:** Better utilize community website – a place to post meeting announcements, summaries of community council meetings and public notices about projects affecting the area

**Strategy 2:** Podcast community council meeting (e.g. Radio Free Palmer)

**Strategy 3:** Develop a community bulletin board

**Strategy 4:** Develop a better method (legislative sub-committee?) for assessing and communicating community legislative priorities to legislators and to the Mat-Su Borough in a timely manner.

**Strategy 5:** Develop information for people who are considering living or starting a business in Big Lake

### **GOAL 2: Explore organizational structures / funding options for creating greater capacity to carry out community goals and projects.**

Big Lake Community members are interested in exploring different organizational and funding options that would enhance the administrative and financial capacity of the community, both for funding and managing priority projects for the community (e.g. ice roads). Currently, the community of Big Lake relies on the Mat-Su Borough's existing tax structure and organized status for funding community projects and most services (including fire protection, road maintenance, schools, library, recreation and land use). In more specific terms, the Mat-Su Borough collects property taxes from local residents (11.483 mills) and an accommodations tax (5 percent) from visitors to fund a myriad of community needs and services. A discussion of what Big Lake property owners contribute to borough coffers is presented on the following page.

As outlined in the Community Overview (Chapter 2), the most current assessment of Big Lake parcels indicates a low land assessment of zero dollars (outlier parcels that have no value because they sit on existing wetlands or for other reasons) and a high of \$572,000, with an average assessed value of \$37,331. Building assessments for Big Lake also range from a low of zero dollars (indicates no building) to a high of \$5,187,700, with an average assessment of \$49,170. This data does not include buildings or land that are held by the State, Mat-Su Borough or University of Alaska. Over 3,000 parcels of Big Lake's total 5,744 parcels, have no buildings (and therefore are not assessed for any improvements). Of the total property tax revenues for the Borough, over six million dollars are collected from Big Lake property owners. The monies the Borough collects in the form of property taxes go toward providing services to the community including those items listed in Table 12.

**Table 12. Mat-Su Borough Revenue & Expenditures**

Revenues		Expenditures	
Taxes	\$64,487,287	Council/Assembly	\$534,007
Service Charges	\$7,759,953	Admin/Finance	\$6,627,165
Enterprise	\$3,395,577	Planning/Zoning	\$1,406,153
Other Local	\$31,468,978	Other Gov't	\$2,747,818
Federal Operating	\$1,919,269	Fire	\$3,024,689
Other State	\$3,297,709	Ambulance	\$4,535,815
State/Fed Education	\$106,457,763	Other Pub Safety	\$960,691
State/Fed Capital Projects	\$12,213,544	Roads	\$5,250,345
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$231,000,080</b>	Harbor/Dock	\$1,012,871
		Refuse/Landfill	\$2,574,810
		Water/Sewer	\$131,295
		Other Public Works	\$2,245,812
		Library/Museum	\$888,143
		Parks & Rec	\$1,624,235
		Misc Public Services	\$1,689,792
		Education	\$179,673,589
		Debt Retirement	\$13,549,662
		Capital Project	\$19,139,386
		<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$247,616,278</b>

Source: DCCED, Community Database Online, 2005 Data

Expanding community capacity is a large topic and one that can generate strong views. Perhaps the most important point on this subject is that unincorporated communities have a number of options other than incorporation to increase their control over their futures.

Below for discussion is a set of possible strategies for increasing local administrative capacity and for increasing local options for funding that have not or cannot be met through the community's relationship with the borough:

**Strategy 1:** Complete this comprehensive plan – produce a plan that expresses broadly shared community goals and sets out practical strategies to reach these goals. Many funders require communities to have an approved plan as a condition of applying for grants.

**Strategy 2:** Research options for strengthening the local Chamber of Commerce, to promote Big Lake, advocate on behalf of the community, and carry out projects of importance to the local business community.

**Strategy 3:** Research options, benefits, drawbacks of forming a 501(c)(3) organization – this would allow the community to seek and receive grant funding from a variety of government and foundation sources.

**Strategy 4:** Research specific potential grant and partnership opportunities – unincorporated communities have access to a wide range of funding sources, if they are well organized and can demonstrate they have the capacity to manage project funds.

**Strategy 5:** Research user fees and fine options – Are there options for the local community to raise funds for community projects through establishing user fees and/or fines, for example, for parking or other services the community might provide?

**Strategy 6:** Discuss the options, benefits, drawbacks of organizing as an incorporated city - To date the planning team has not suggested this idea and there have been no discussions of this option. This idea is being floated for discussion by the consultants, who recognize that while this subject is controversial, it is nonetheless an option that should at least be discussed. Additionally, the community has invited staff from the State of Alaska Local Boundary Commission to come speak with community members about the incorporation process. Table 13 provides basic information (option, budget, benefits and constraints) on different organizational structures for Big Lake.

**Table 13. Levels of Local Control**

OPTION	BUDGET	BENEFITS & CONSTRAINTS
Community Council (as it exists today)	<p>Approx. annual budget</p> <p>Low - &lt; \$500</p>	<p>Non-governmental organization; Flexible; Driven by community volunteers; Minimal financial requirements</p> <p>No office location or staff positions; Requires very large commitment of capable volunteers for success; Limited budget; Limited financial capacity; Less local control than incorporated city; Borough assembly is the authority over local area (e.g. to administer land use regulations).</p>
<p>Community Council with staff and office</p> <p>Non-profit 501(c)(3) status</p>	<p>Moderate -</p> <p>\$30 - 50,000</p>	<p>Flexible; Still requires community volunteers, but with staff support and an office; Community Council could be much more ambitious.</p> <p>Moderate budget needed; Requires strategies for raising funds (for office and staff resources); More resources = greater capacity; Less local control than incorporated city; Still relies on Borough Assembly over local area.</p>
Incorporation	<p>Not known until level of services could be determined. A small staff (mgr, public works/ planning director, admin) would require \$300,000 - \$400,00 annually.</p>	<p>Governmental organizations; Has the authority to generate local revenues; Greater local control; Greater annual budget required; Requires establishing property tax, sales tax, bed tax, or other means of raising funds. For a small community like the Big Lakes area, many government responsibilities would logically remain with the Borough.</p>

**GOAL 3: Develop an implementation plan that clearly outlines and delegates action items by comp plan issues areas.**

Using the existing structure and leadership of the Big Lake Community, community members will develop an implementation plan that clearly outlines priority action items by topic area, including key persons responsible for accomplishing each action item, resources needed to achieve , and an estimated date of completion.