

# FORCES AND TRENDS REPORT

Written for the Borough-wide  
Comprehensive Plan update,  
January 2024



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# Introduction

In the dynamic landscape of the Matanuska-Susitna Borough, strategic planning plays a pivotal role in shaping the future trajectory of the region. As the Mat-Su continues to be the fastest-growing borough in Alaska, it has become imperative to base land use and economic development decisions on sound data and research, as well as listening to residents' lived experiences. As staff embarks on Phase Two of the Borough-wide Comprehensive Plan update, analyzing the forces and trends currently influencing the borough's economic, social, environmental, and infrastructure needs is required to make sure we have a solid understanding of where

we are now to develop better policies for future outcomes.

This report aims to provide an overview of the prevailing forces and emerging trends, offering readers a nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. By delving into critical indicators such as transportation, demographic shifts, economic drivers, housing, and development patterns, we seek to equip the public, borough staff, and elected officials with the knowledge to help develop forward-thinking policies for the sustainable development of the Mat-Su Borough.



# People



"Mat-Su leads the state in new single-family home construction."

"Mat-Su Borough is the fastest growing region in the nation."

## Consistent Growth

Headlines like these come as no surprise to residents of the Mat-Su. As residents watch development across all 30 communities, it can seem like growth is the only constant that people can count on.

The last comprehensive plan was adopted in 2005. Since then, the Mat-Su has gained approximately 40,000 residents, mainly from Anchorage. During the public workshops in the fall of 2023, residents spoke frequently about the need to protect the existing character of the Valley. Good planning can help with that! As a government, we must recognize the diverse needs of residents across different regions and life stages. Local governments are pivotal to ensuring that all residents can access essential services like education, recreation facilities, and transportation system services. Using the Comprehensive Plan to develop policies that look at residents' current and expected needs, the Mat-Su Borough can think strategically about becoming a more efficient and effective government for everyone.

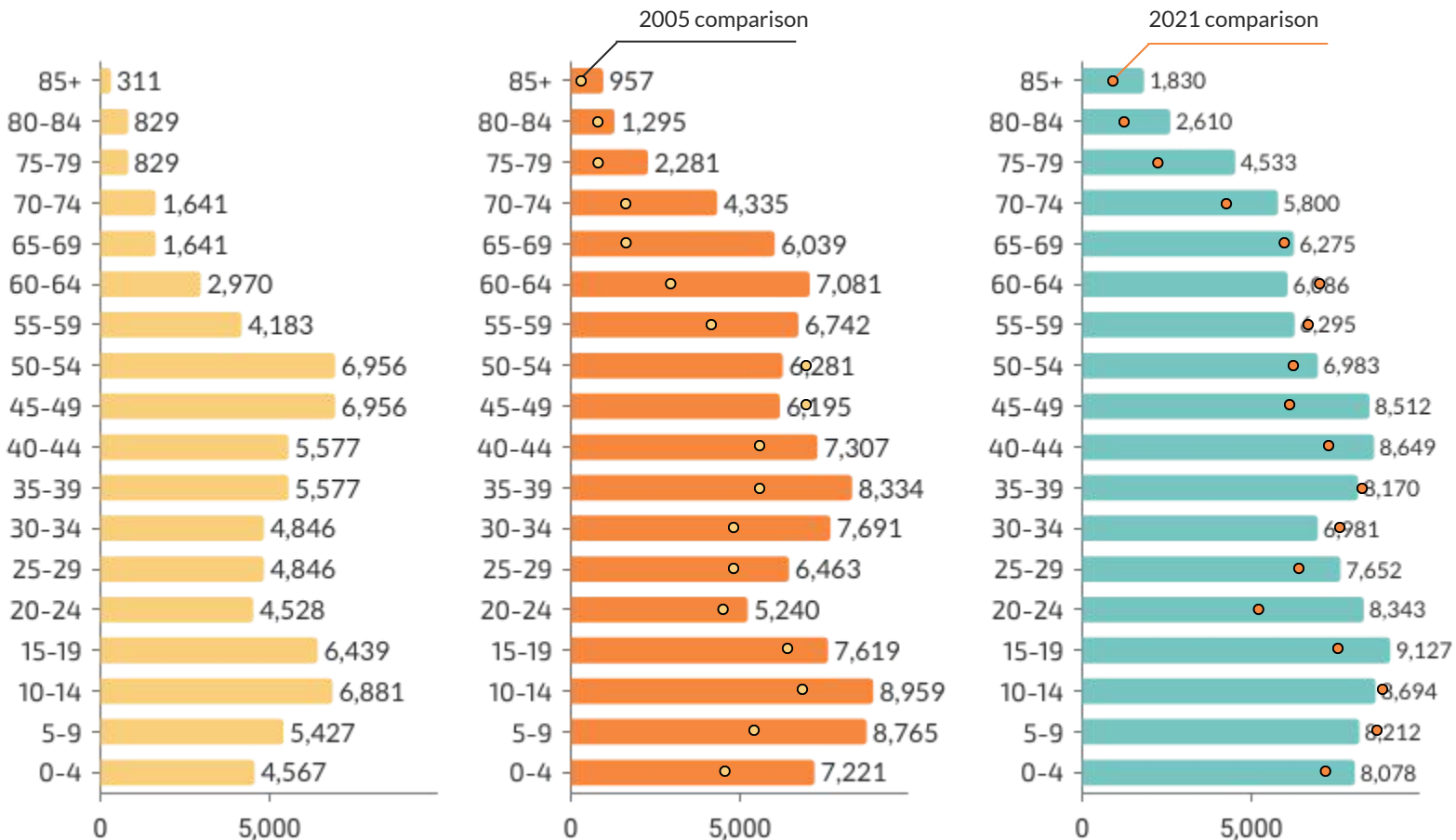
## Population Growth Across Age Groups

Source: 2005 American Community Survey & Alaska Population Projections 2021-2025

2005

2021

2035



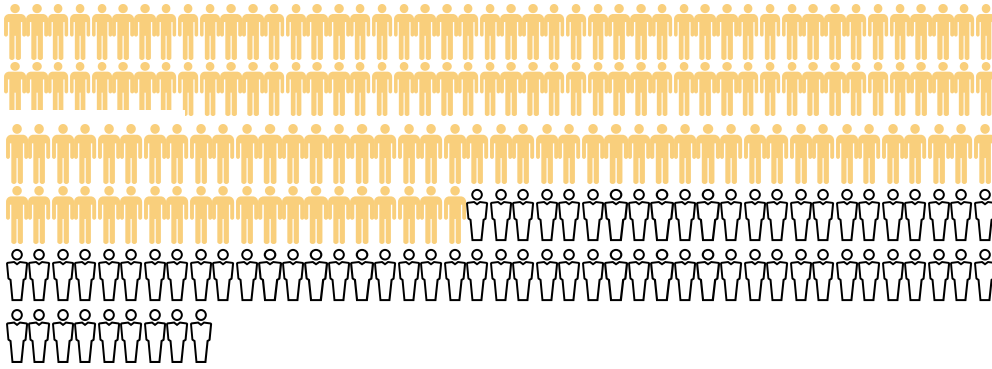


# People



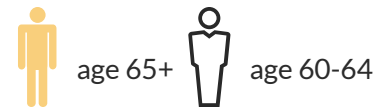
4,700

residents in the year 2000 who were 60+ years old



23,000

current residents who are 60+ years old



## AT A GLANCE: The Mat-Su senior population

In 2000, 3,200 residents were 65+, and 1,500 were 60-64. Today, over 15,500 residents are 65+, and another 7,500 are ages 60-64. As more residents move into retirement age, the Mat-Su Borough needs to consider what that shift means for workforce development, housing options, how we deliver services, and what types of services we provide.

## Movement into the Mat-Su

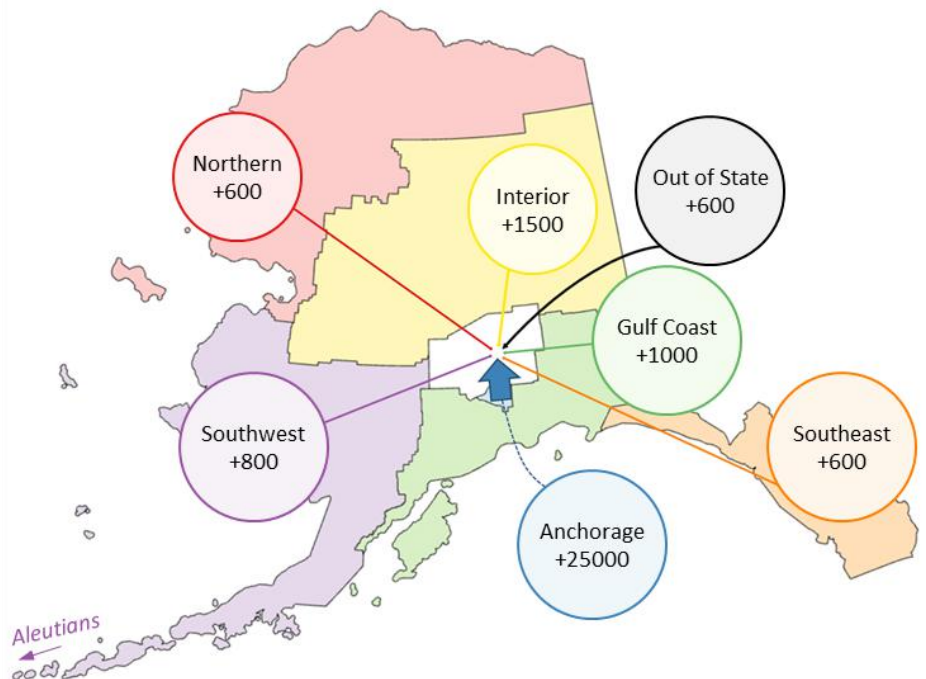
In the 20 years from 2001 to 2021, the Mat-Su Borough population has grown by roughly 47,200 residents.

During that timeframe, the Borough recorded roughly 25,300 births and 10,000 deaths, for a net natural increase of 15,300 residents.

In the same timeframe, the best available records show 116,000 individuals moving into the Borough and 85,900 moving out. That is a net increase of 30,100 residents due to migration.

Most new residents moving into the Borough (25,000 net) had lived in Anchorage for at least one full year immediately prior to moving to the Mat-Su. (Source: Alaska Dept. of Labor and Workforce Development)

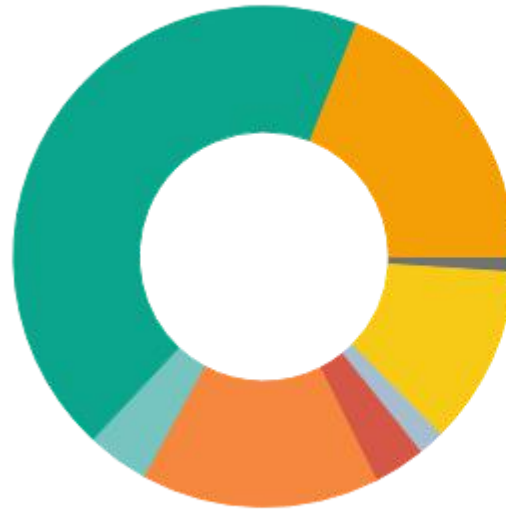
## Net Migration by Region, 2001-2021



# Prosperity

## Economic Drivers

The chart on the right highlights the major job markets in the Mat-Su Valley as of 2022. The Mat-Su has seen a sizeable increase in service industry jobs, primarily in the healthcare sector (4,345 jobs), with the addition of Mat-Su Regional Hospital in 2006. Leisure and hospitality is a close second, with 3,391 jobs reported in 2022.

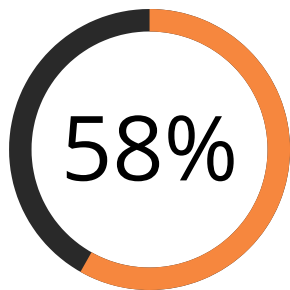


- Natural Resources & Mining 282
- Construction 3,193
- Manufacturing 465
- Finance & Real Estate 923
- Retail 4,253
- Transportation & Utilities 1,108
- Services 12,184
- Government 5,230

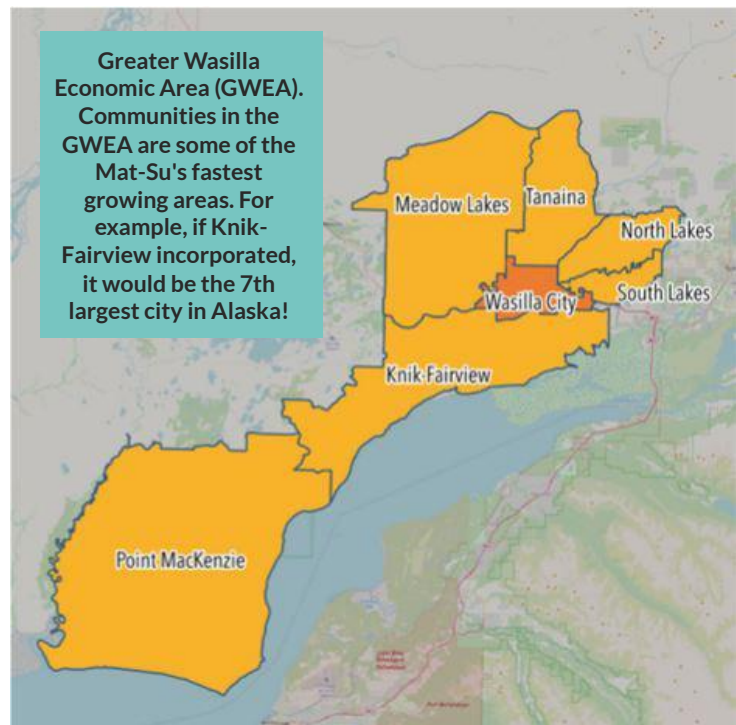
Trade, especially retail trade, is significantly down as an overall portion of the local economy compared to 20 years ago (15% in 2022, compared to 26% in 1999.) Overall, the Mat-Su Borough is gaining jobs. In 1999, there was 1 local job per 4.75 MB residents, compared to 1 local job per 4.06 MSB residents in 2022. (*The Resilient Mat-Su Borough, 2023*)

## Regional economy

In 2022, the City of Wasilla developed a Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy plan (CEDS). During this process, they identified the need to plan at a regional level, understanding that the impact of the CEDS far exceeds the boundary of Wasilla. The goals of the CEDS include improving infrastructure, diversifying the local economy, and improving community connections. The Mat-Su Borough is seen as a partner in implementing this regional plan.



58% of Mat-Su Residents work in the Mat-Su, leaving 28% who commute to Anchorage and 6% who commute to the North Slope. (*Wasilla CEDS, 2023*)



# Prosperity

## Livability

The Alaska Department of Labor consistently ranks home ownership in the Mat-Su, supported by a career in Anchorage, as one of the most affordable lifestyles in Alaska. The common-sense desire to maximize wages and minimize the cost of living drives the amount of commuter traffic to Anchorage and the hot housing market in the Mat-Su.

In 2023, over 600 housing units were built in the MSB, while only 211 were built in the Municipality of Anchorage. Demand is still outpacing supply: last year, the average appraised value of Borough single-family residential homes rose from \$321,000 to \$354,000.

An effective Comprehensive Plan needs to protect livability in the Mat-Su. This includes supporting economic development, which creates high-paying local jobs, and supporting housing solutions.

## Mat-Su Housing Inventory

58%

Single-family homes on private lots larger than 40,000 sq. ft. (0.92 acres)

Key Drivers:

- Consumer preference for personal space
- DEC requirements for septic systems



27%

Single-family homes on private lots smaller than 40,000 sq. ft.

15%

Multi-family / shared lot housing (all lot sizes)

## AT A GLANCE: Affordable Housing in the Mat-Su

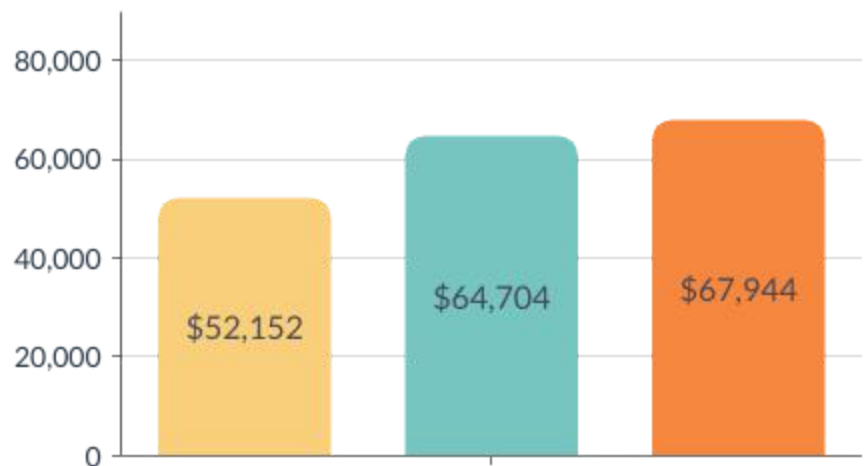
In 1999, the average single-family home in the Mat-Su cost 5x the annual MSB salary or 3.8x the annual Anchorage salary. In 2019, the average home cost is 6.4x the annual MSB salary or 5x the annual Anchorage salary. As the average appraised value continues to increase in the Mat-Su, homeownership will continue to become less affordable for people, especially those working in the Mat-Su.

51%

of all new homes built in Alaska in 2022 were built in the Mat-Su Borough.

*(The Resilient Mat-Su Borough, 2023)*

## Average Annual Wages, 2022



Mat-Su Statewide Anchorage

*(Page Source: Neal Fried, Alaska Trends Magazine, July 2000, July 2019, June 2023)*

# Paths

## Transportation and Development

The increased development in the Mat-Su has profoundly impacted the region's transportation network. As hundreds of new homes are built annually, the MSB faces a growing demand for improved and expanded infrastructure to accommodate the increased population density. This necessitates strategic planning and steady investment in the transportation system.

There is an opportunity to improve the connection between platting actions and required road classification, and the Planning staff is currently

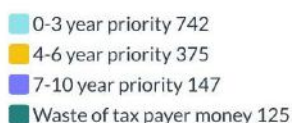
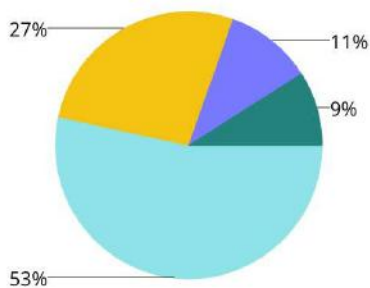
working to develop some initial solutions. The integration of well-designed transportation solutions becomes imperative to address the evolving needs of a growing community while minimizing the potential for traffic bottlenecks and other issues. The Mat-Su Borough can minimize the taxpayer financial burden associated with reactive measures to address congestion or inadequate road systems by aligning development with a comprehensive transportation strategy.

### AT A GLANCE: Bicycle and Pedestrian Planning

In 2023, the Mat-Su Borough Assembly adopted the borough's first Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan (BPP). Hundreds of residents voiced their opinions and ideas, and staff turned that into an implementation list that includes program, policy, and infrastructure projects that, once developed, will create a better-connected, safer transportation network for Mat-Su residents. The BPP projects can now be considered in the Capital Budget and the State Transportation Improvement Program.

#### Diversify and Strengthen Transportation and Food Distribution Networks

Borough-Wide



The Comprehensive Plan Community Survey asked 1,389 respondents about how the MSB should prioritize various resiliency efforts. Over 53% said that diversifying and strengthening the transportation and food distribution network should be a short-term priority.

During the fall of 2023, staff facilitated nine public workshops for the comp plan. **The only topic that was brought up at every workshop** was acknowledgement that the transportation system in the Mat-Su is not keeping up with development and growth.



# Paths

## Transportation Improvements

As of 2023, the MSB maintains 1,163 miles of road, and maintenance costs per mile vary widely from \$4,890 to \$14,030 per mile. Because the MSB does not have road powers, maintenance throughout the Borough relies on Road Service Areas (RSAs) to collect local taxes used for maintenance within a defined boundary. 16 RSAs are responsible for the lion's share of road maintenance in the Mat-Su. The Cities of Palmer and Wasilla and the Alaska Department of Transportation & Public Facilities maintain the pathways and roads that they own.

Throughout the public workshops and stakeholder interviews, residents identified transportation issues such as the need for coordinated maintenance of pathways and roads across jurisdictions, safety features such as lighting and crosswalks, and the lack of safe routes to school. As the borough continues to plan for maintenance and improvements, the Comprehensive Plan can help guide land use policy that promotes safe and connected facilities for all modes of transportation.

### AT A GLANCE: Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO)

Based on the 2020 Census data, a portion of the Core Area of the Mat-Su Borough has been designated as 'urbanized' and is now required to plan for transportation at a regional level with state, city, and tribal partners. The MPO will be responsible for planning for transit, bike, pedestrian, and car travel within its boundary by producing an annual Transportation Improvement Program to be used for funding projects.

## Traffic Volume Increases, 2022 - 2002

**+32%**

Parks Highway  
to Big Lake Rd

**+31%**

Knik Goose Bay Road  
to Settlers Bay

**+23%**

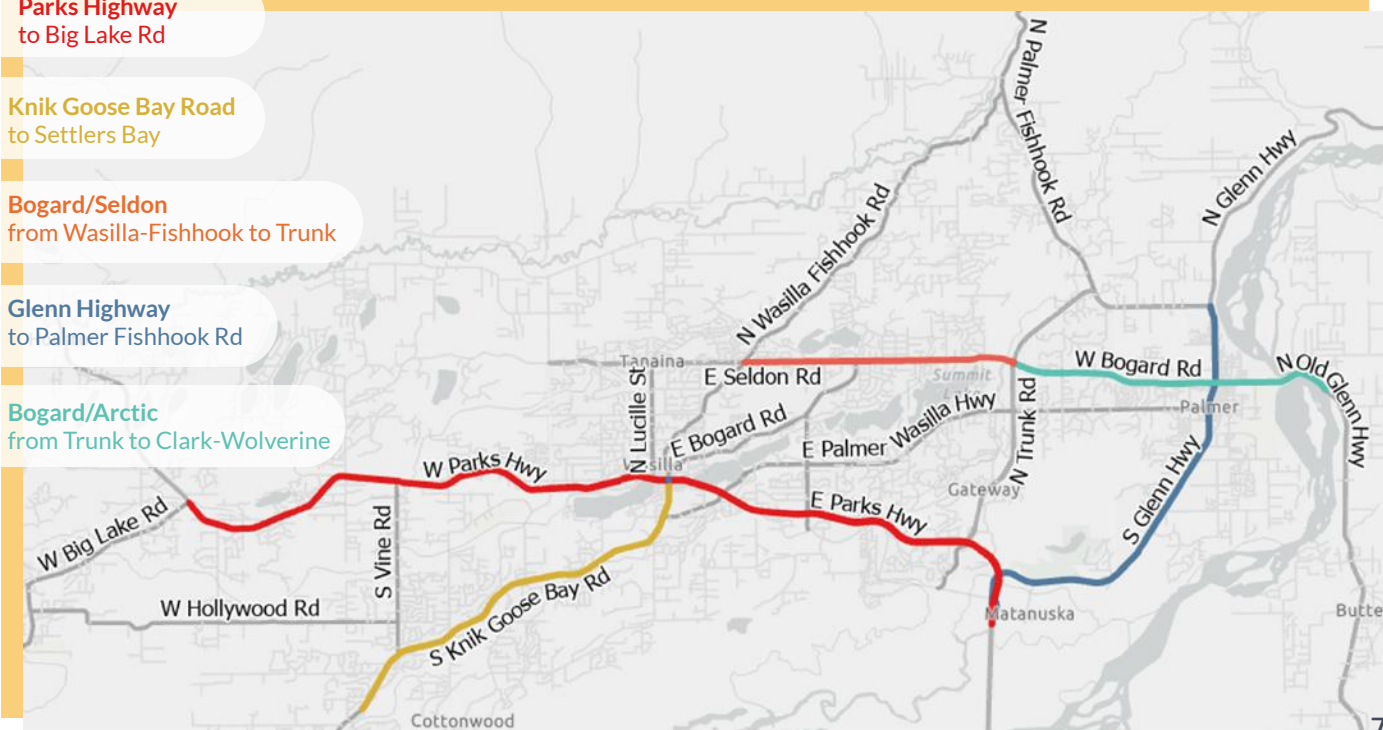
Bogard/Seldon  
from Wasilla-Fishhook to Trunk

**+15%**

Glenn Highway  
to Palmer Fishhook Rd

**+15%**

Bogard/Arctic  
from Trunk to Clark-Wolverine



# Places

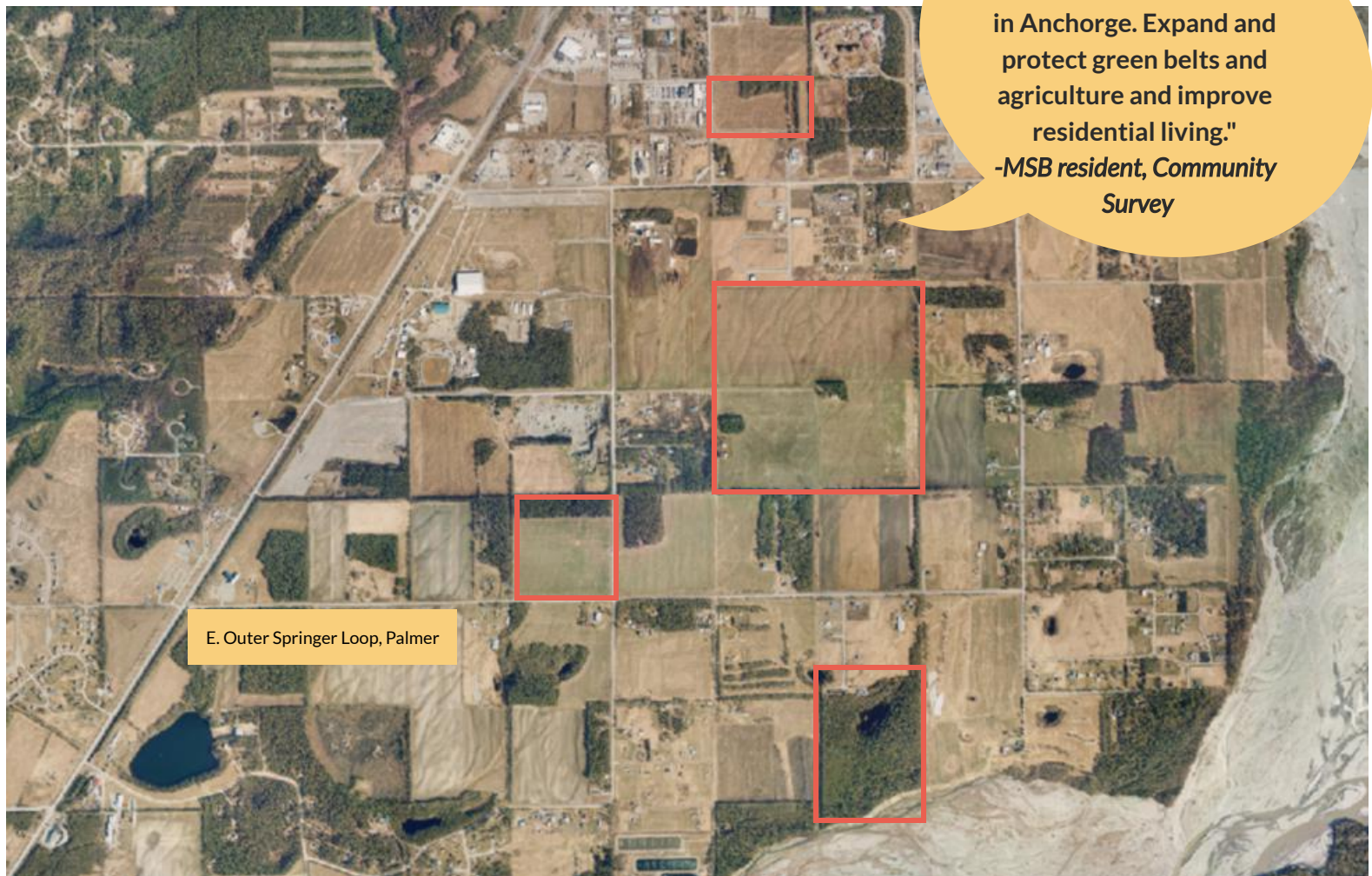
## Changing Landscapes

The MSB's first comprehensive plan was adopted in 1970, 6 years after incorporating as a 2nd class borough. At that time, the MSB used land use districts to begin zoning for special uses. Since 1970, the MSB has continued to rely primarily on special land use districts to implement comprehensive plans and provide land use regulations that guide growth in a desirable way based on a community's vision. As we celebrate the MSB's 60th anniversary this year, we hear from residents, staff, and stakeholders that it might be time to upgrade our tools to tackle the problems of 2024 and beyond. The 2024 Comprehensive Plan Survey received 1389 responses, with clear support for additional government action to

manage land use. Most residents desire freedom for themselves and their neighbors to do as they please on private property. Still, many draw the line at noisy land uses near residential areas, such as aircraft or mining operations.

But One-Size-Fits-All is clearly not what residents want. Requests for more regulation were primarily concentrated in the urbanizing Core Area. In contrast, residents in more rural areas reported far less need for new land use restrictions to help protect their peace and quiet. A successful Comprehensive Plan will pay careful attention to the character and preferences of each community of the Mat-Su.

### From 2000...



"People live in the Valley because we don't want to live in Anchorage. Expand and protect green belts and agriculture and improve residential living."  
-MSB resident, Community Survey

E. Outer Springer Loop, Palmer



# Places

## A Balanced Approach

Many land use conflicts reveal a clear consensus of what residents would prefer. For example, Mat-Su residents are generally united in not desiring gravel pits near residential areas. But sometimes, a conflict forces a choice between two desirable things.

Most Wasilla residents agree that Parks Highway traffic is out of hand but are wary of constructing a new bypass that could turn quiet neighborhoods into highway frontage. Most Palmer residents prize affordable housing but also love the agricultural character of their area. They support the rights of their neighbors to subdivide and sell land but are sad to see the cultivated fields of the Springer Loop system being converted into subdivisions.

The 2024 Comprehensive Plan is an opportunity to rebalance how local government operates to suit today's needs and population densities and to reconsider all of the tools the government has available to accomplish the community's goals.

Some issues may require new regulations, but the Plan may recommend solving other issues with tools such as financial incentives to preserve farmland. It may recommend better communication, such as requiring more information from developers during the platting phase so the Borough government can plan for the number of new homes and how they will impact local traffic. This update is a chance to find more efficient and effective uses of the Borough's existing regulations.

### ... to 2019

In the summer of 2022, the MSB created a comment map for the Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan. There were 12 comments with 150 "likes" rating the Springer Road system as extremely dangerous for bicyclists and pedestrians. There are currently no requirements for developers to provide safe places for all of these residents to walk or bike. As growth continues throughout the Core Area, the MSB should consider updating the Subdivision Construction Manual to include bicycle and pedestrian safety and connectivity.

These 160 acres of farmland became 285 half-acre homes which can house 800 people.

E. Outer Springer Loop, Palmer

# Performance

## Accountable Governance

The Mat-Su Borough Planning Department facilitated a series of regional public workshops with approximately 160 attendees. Residents were asked to identify community issues and provide ideas for solutions that they wanted to see the MSB start prioritizing. Residents identified 203 issues and 150 solutions. **A common thread in the 'issues' category throughout each region was the lack of accountability to implement existing plans.**

"Quit making plans that just sit and finally go away... they all look good on paper but nothing is ever implemented."  
**-MSB resident. Community Survey Comment**

By offering a menu of options for implementation, the Comprehensive Plan will help build accountability for acting on resident priorities while providing options to MSB leadership that can be prioritized and acted upon during the plan's lifespan. The options below represent solutions to some of the issues MSB residents identified in the public workshops. They are primarily code and policy changes based on public input and staff expertise. **This is not a comprehensive list; rather, it is meant to highlight possible options for government action towards the issues discussed in this report.** The final Comprehensive Plan will include a similar format for discussing the action items that implement the plan.

### Land Use

### Economic Development

### Government Services

existing zoning code diagnosis

standardize the implementation and evaluation of plans

invest in sewer & water

designate key-intersections mixed use

road, police, and public health powers

diversify revenue streams

develop a mandatory land use permit

designate residential areas residential

designate industrial districts

update port master plan

increase code enforcement

coordinate LOS for road and path maintenance

limit development in high hazard areas

write SpUDs for community comprehensive plans

create economic development department

designate commercial districts

invest in rural emergency facilities

invest in transportation services

require new subdivisions to provide safe routes to schools

consider food security in future land use

develop borough-owned resources

update economic development incentives in code

standardize roadway and pathway design

areawide landfill services

grade and fill permit

develop townsite planning studies

develop regional economic coalition

invest in more pathway/apprenticeship programs

update facility planning to keep up with growth

invest in more parks and rec facilities

review staff- and assembly-driven code updates

protect historical trail access

address affordable housing

develop econ dev reporting system w/ indicators

recreation bond for community centers

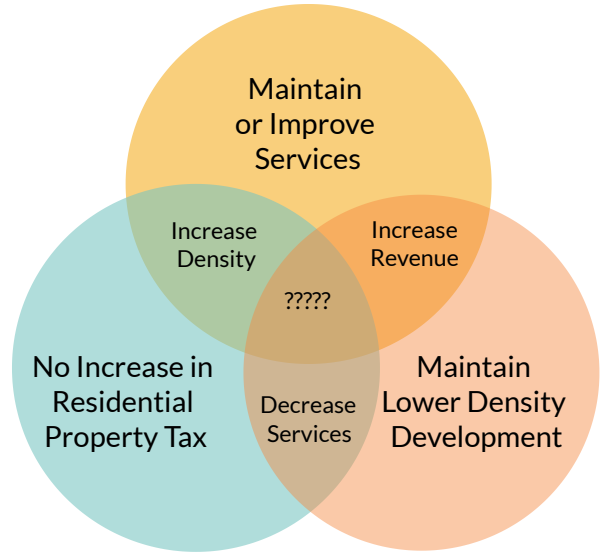
improve opportunities for citizen education and engagement



# Conclusion

## Policy Trade-offs

Throughout 2023, staff has spent hundreds of hours talking with the public, stakeholders, leadership, and elected officials about the issues facing Mat-Su Borough residents and dissecting survey and public workshop data. **When it comes to opinions about their community, Mat-Su residents are clear: they want maintained or improved services, they want to preserve the spacious character of the Mat-Su, and above everything else, they want to avoid seeing an increase in their residential property tax.**

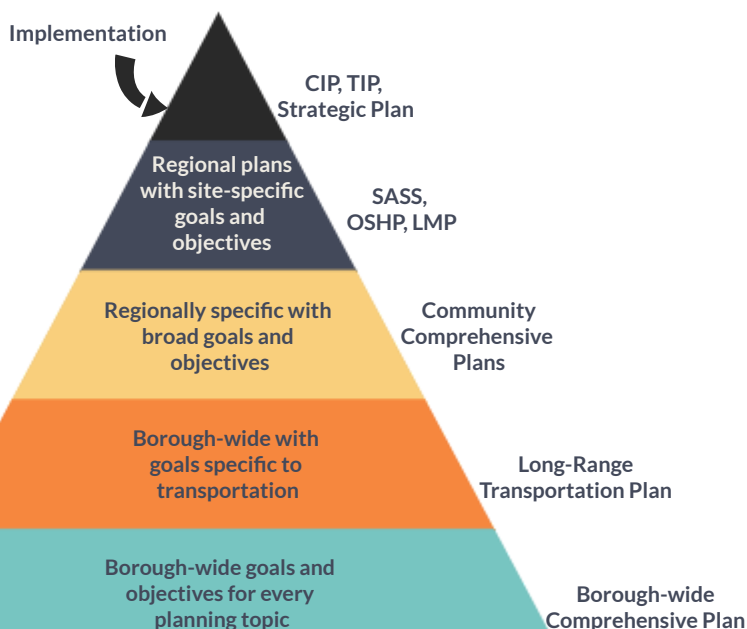


**However, how the MSB will manage the trade-offs from trying to do all three needs to be clarified.** That is where the Comprehensive Plan comes in!

As the population continues to grow, residents are looking to the MSB to provide the needed infrastructure to see more economic growth and develop reasonable land use regulations to help manage growth and protect their neighborhoods' character. Residents also want to see continued transportation improvements and support for parks and recreation opportunities and community centers, and they want to protect clean water and healthy salmon runs! There is no shortage of duties for the Mat-Su Borough, but balancing expectations with fiscal realities is the greatest challenge for every local government.

## AT A GLANCE: The Mat-Su Way

Finding the balance between too little and too much is a common problem for local governments. When considering potential policies for regulating land use, promoting economic development, and improving how the MSB delivers services, it is important to remember the regional uniqueness and varying needs of each community. The "one-size-fits-all" approach rarely works anywhere, but will certainly fall short for the residents of the Mat-Su.



## Planning Solutions

The Comprehensive Plan plays a pivotal role in how the MSB considers policy trade-offs. By incorporating public input, staff recommendations, best practices, and Planning Commission and Assembly priorities, the Plan can act as a guide for making sound decisions that shape the Mat-Su Borough's long-term physical, social, and economic character.

By integrating these forces and trends into the planning process, the MSB can ensure that the updated comprehensive plan is not only reflective of our current realities but also strategically positioned to navigate the evolving landscape.

# Contact Information for the Borough-wide Comprehensive Plan Update

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