

# 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

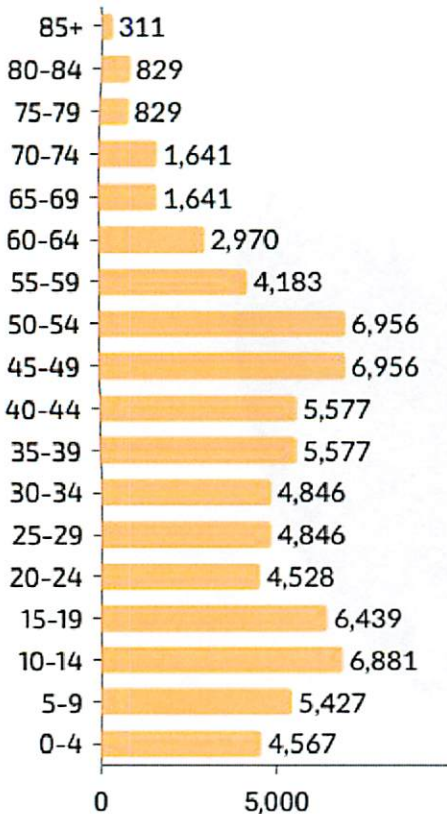
Headlines like these come as no surprise to residents of the Mat-Su. As residents watch development across all 30 communities, it can seem like growth is the only constant that people can count on.

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.

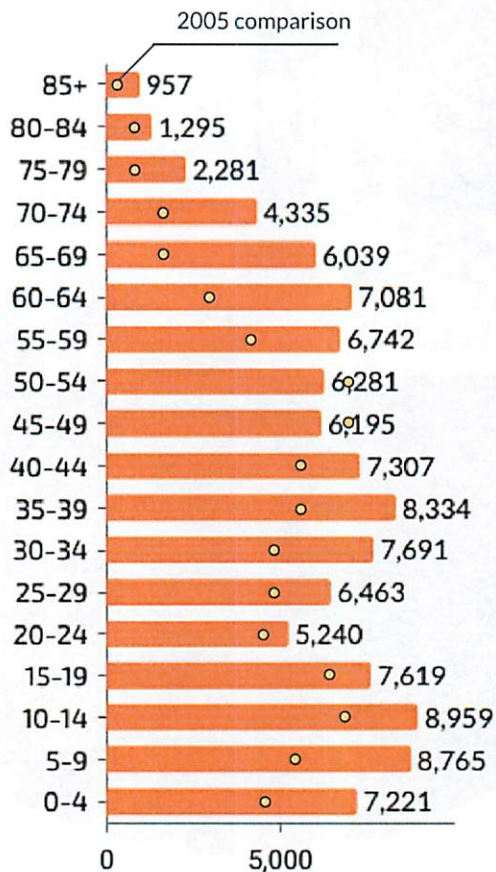
## Population Growth Across Age Groups

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

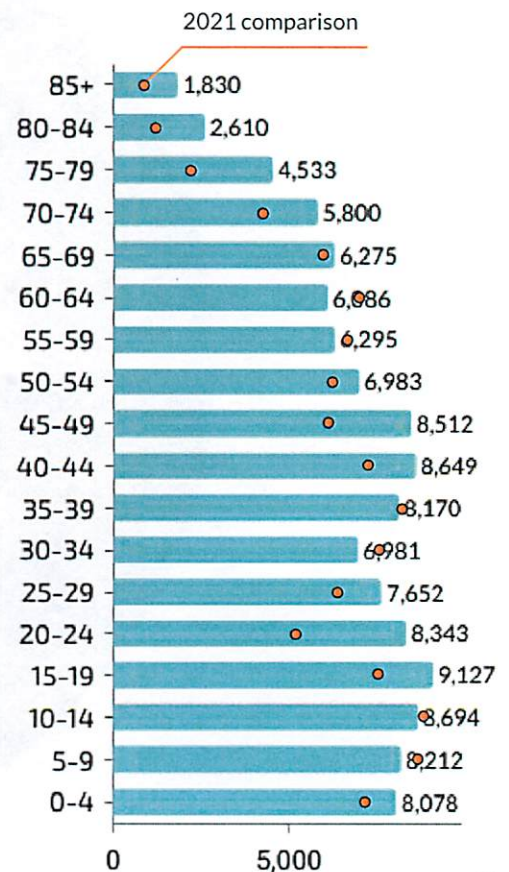
2005



2021

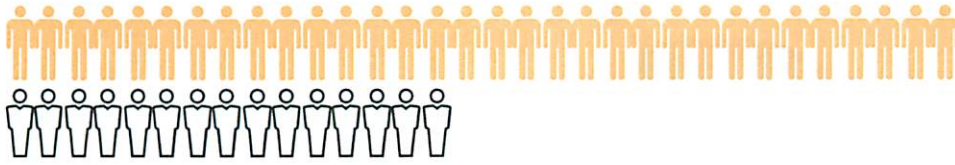


2035





# People

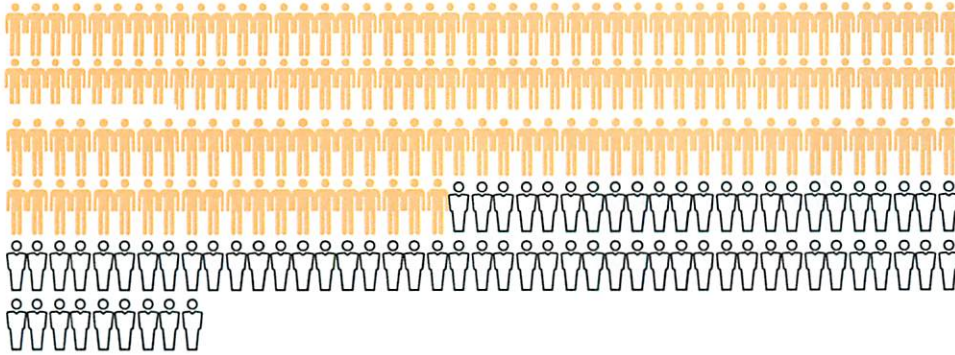
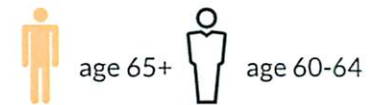


4,700

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

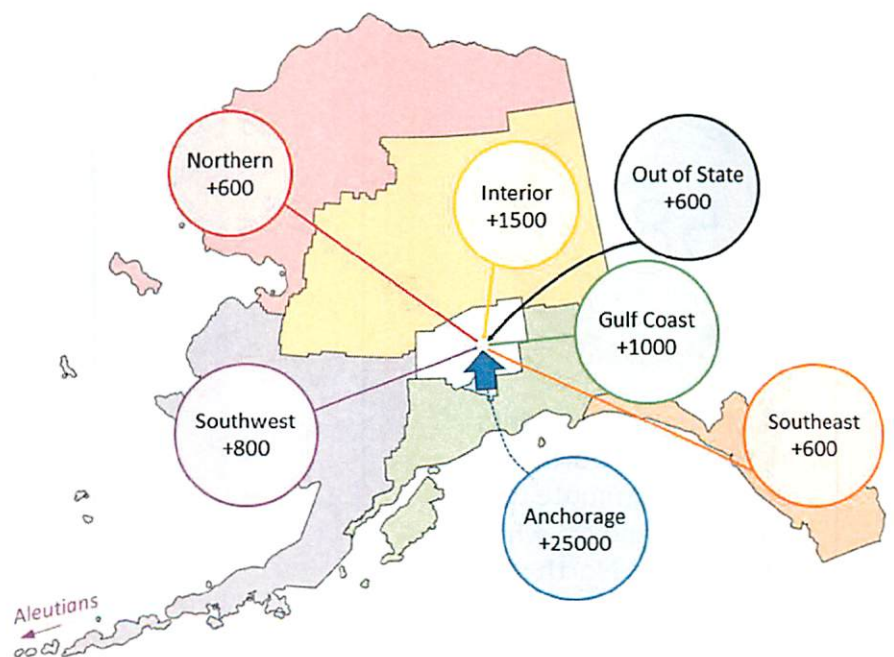
In the 20 years from 2001 to 2021, the Mat-Su Borough population has grown by roughly 47,200 residents.

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

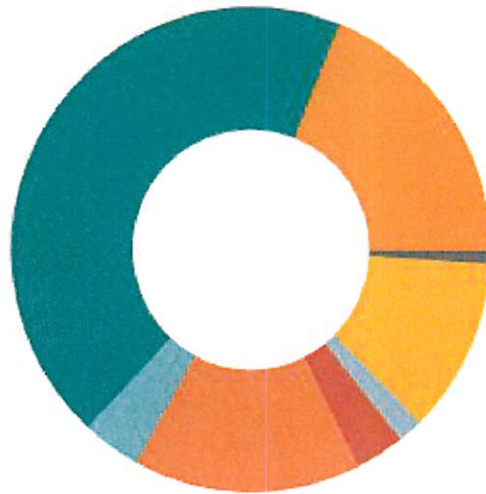




# Prosperity

## 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.

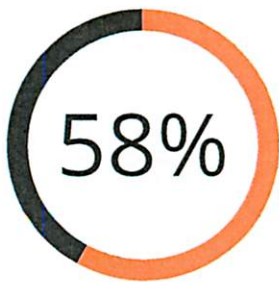


- Natural Resources & Mining 282
- Construction 3,193
- Manufacturing 465
- Finance & Real Estate 923
- Retail 4,253
- Transportation & Utilities 1,108
- Services 12,184
- Government 5,230

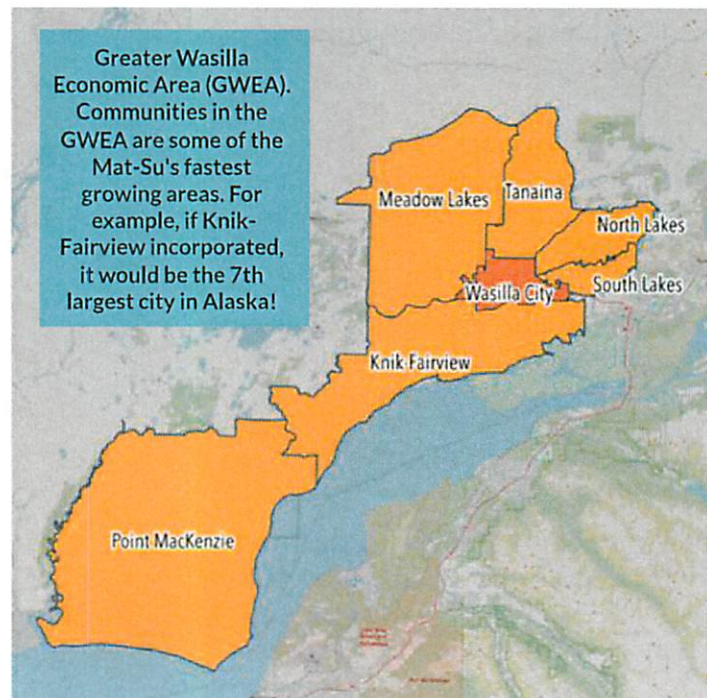
Trade, especially retail trade, is significantly down as an overall portion of the local economy compared to 20 years ago (15% in 2022, compared to 26% in 1999.) Overall, the Mat-Su Borough is gaining jobs. In 1999, there was 1 local job per 4.75 MB residents, compared to 1 local job per 4.06 MSB residents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

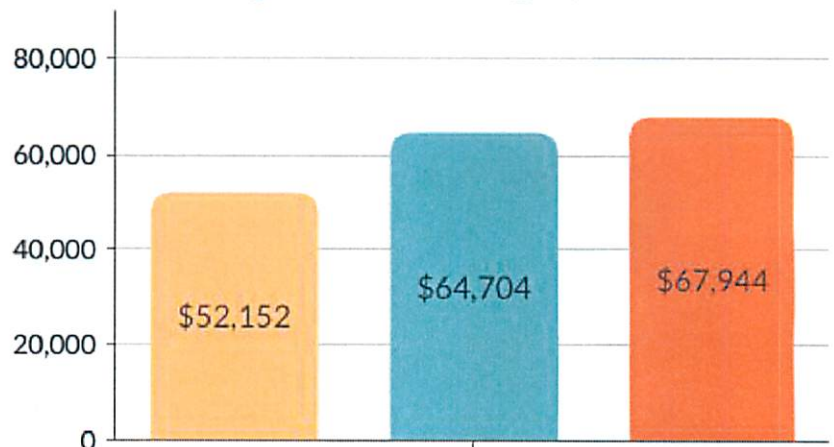
In 1999, the average single-family home in the Mat-Su cost 5x the annual MSB salary or 3.8x the annual Anchorage salary. In 2019, the average home cost is 6.4x the annual MSB salary or 5x the annual Anchorage salary. As the average appraised value continues to increase in the Mat-Su, homeownership will 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



*(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

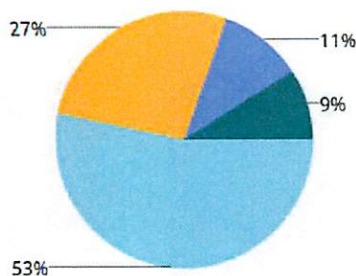
working to develop some initial solutions. The integration of well-designed transportation solutions becomes imperative to address the evolving needs of a growing community while minimizing the potential for traffic bottlenecks and other issues. The Mat-Su Borough can minimize the taxpayer financial 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



- 0-3 year priority 742
- 4-6 year priority 375
- 7-10 year priority 147
- Waste of tax payer money 125

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, 2002 - 2022

**+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

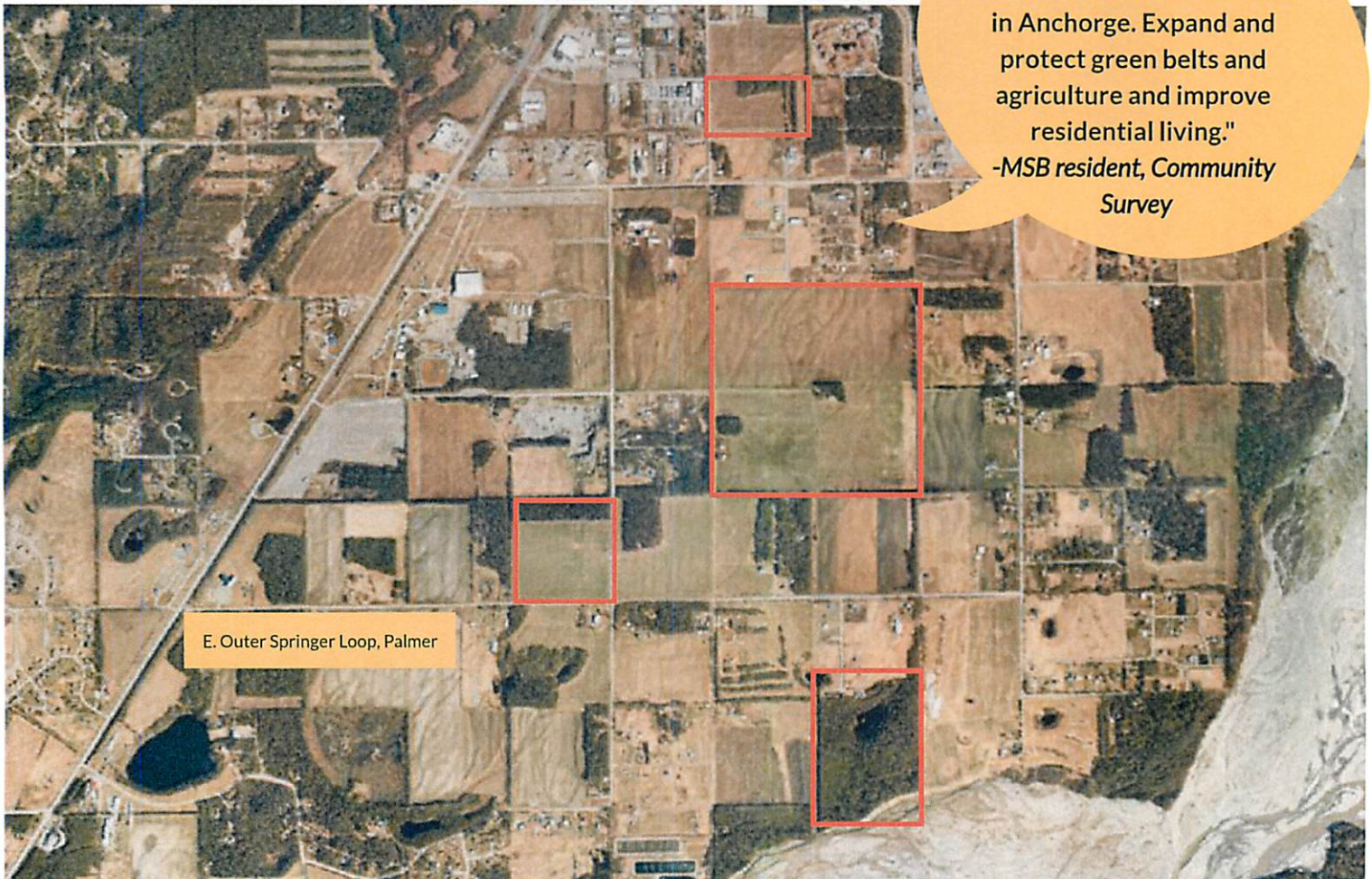
## Changing Landscapes

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

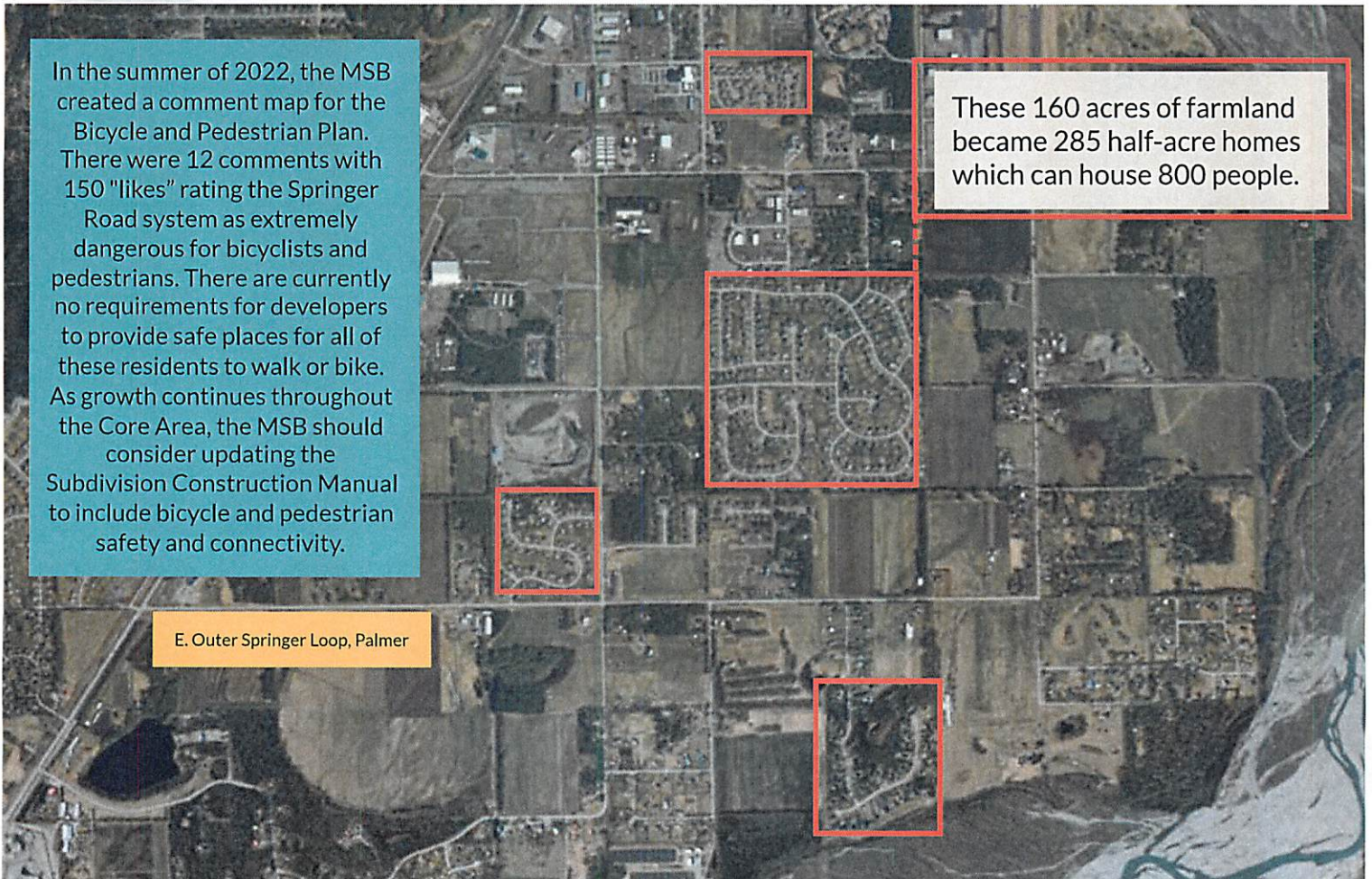
Many land use conflicts reveal a clear consensus of what residents would prefer. For example, Mat-Su residents are generally united in not desiring gravel pits near residential areas. But sometimes, a conflict forces a choice between two desirable things.

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.

### ... to 2019

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.





# 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.

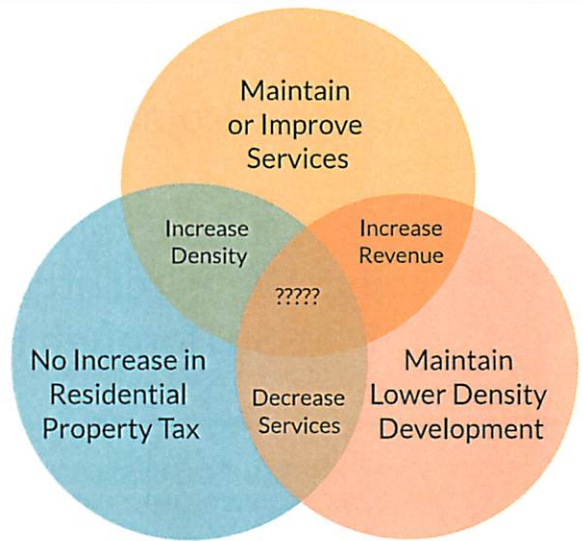
Land Use		Economic Development		Government Services	
existing zoning code diagnosis	standardize the implementation and evaluation of plans	invest in sewer & water	designate key-intersections mixed use	road, police, and public health powers	diversify revenue streams
develop a mandatory land use permit	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
identify and acquire needed trail ROW	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 access in the platting process	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.

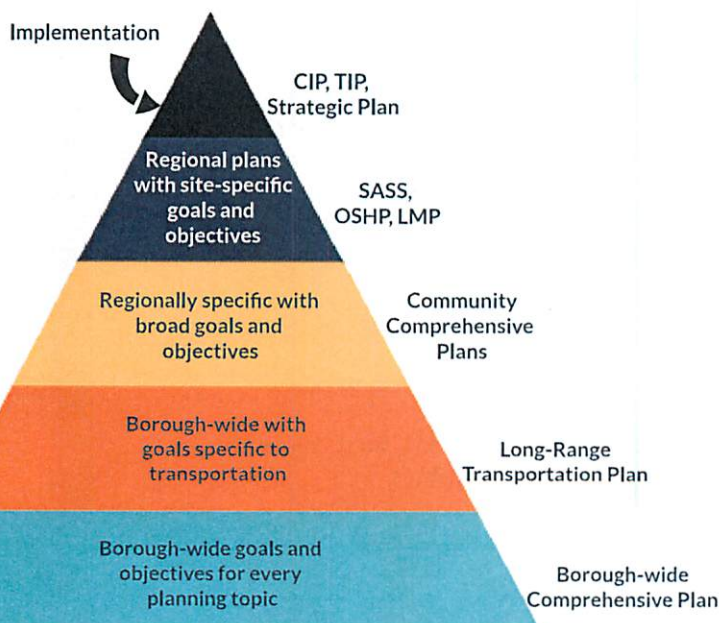
## AT A GLANCE: The Mat-Su Way

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

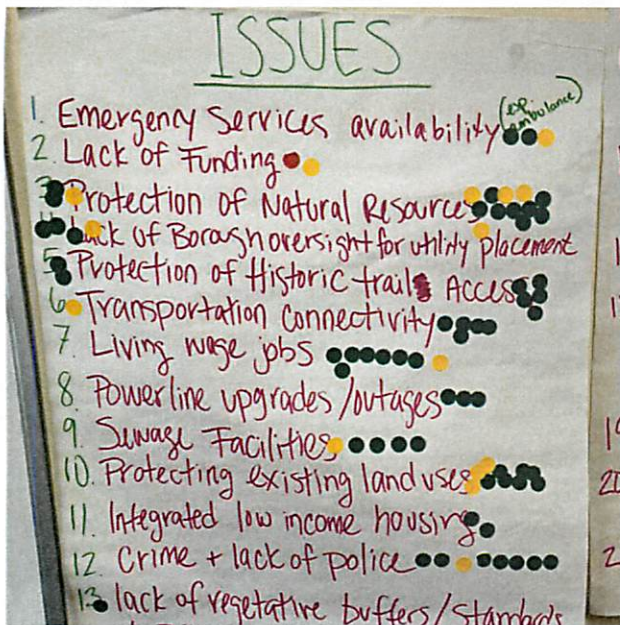
Project Manager: Kelsey Anderson

Phone: 907-861-8525

Email: [kelsey.anderson@matsugov.us](mailto:kelsey.anderson@matsugov.us)

Project Website: <https://compplanupdate.matsugov.us/>

Mat-Su Borough Homepage: [www.matsugov.us](http://www.matsugov.us)





# Matanuska-Susitna Borough

## Consolidated Issues and Solutions Tables

### Comprehensive Plan Update Public Workshops, Oct 2023 – Jan 2024

#### **General Information:**

The Mat-Su Borough Planning Department facilitated nine public workshops from October 2023 to January 2024. There were seven in-person workshops and two virtual workshops. The workshops were held for the Glenn Highway Region, the Greater Butte Region, the Greater Palmer Region, the Greater Wasilla Region, the Lower Parks Region, the Upper Parks Region, and the Knik-Fairview Region. In-person workshops were held in school libraries in the region and were open to MSB residents of all ages. In-person meetings were scheduled from 6:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. One virtual meeting was scheduled from 12:00 p.m. to 2:00 p.m. to offer an alternative time. There were approximately 160 attendees. Planning staff relied heavily on Facebook advertisements, radio interviews, and Public Service Announcements to get the word out. They also posted flyers in MSB libraries and emailed all community councils a schedule of all the workshops. Two workshops had to be rescheduled due to winter storms. Planning staff included Kelsey Anderson, Project Manager; Kim Sollien, Planning Services Manager; and Maija DiSalvo, Long-Range Planner. Staff reported on the public workshops to the Planning Commission on January 15, 2024, and held a Planning Commission workshop on the Guiding Principles on February 12, 2024. The Assembly received an update on the public workshops and the Guiding Principles on February 17, 2024.

#### **Engagement Method:**

Staff set up each meeting space by numbering between five and six tables, with four to five chairs at each table. As residents came in, they were asked to sign in and given a nametag with a number corresponding to the table number they were supposed to sit at. This was meant to randomize the seating and bring more diversity of thought to the small groups. Once everyone was seated, the Planning staff started each workshop with a short presentation titled *Comprehensive Plan 101*, where they taught attendees the basics of the comprehensive plan update and what planning issues are. Once the presentation was completed, residents were asked to work with the people at their tables to answer two questions.

1. What are the most pressing planning issues you're experiencing in your community?
2. What solutions would you like your local government to start prioritizing?

Groups were given 20 minutes for each question and then reported back to the group. Residents were encouraged to talk through ideas and get specific about wording so staff could better recognize the nuances of potential solutions based on each region's needs. Once all the issues and solutions were recorded, attendees were given 14 dots to help staff prioritize the information: 6 for issues, 6 for solutions, and 2 'super dots' to mark their top priority in each category. Not all attendees decided to participate in this final exercise.

#### **Takeaways:**

Each region approached issues and solutions differently, reminding staff of the vast differences between rural and urban needs and distinct community struggles. For example, in the Upper Parks meeting, residents were very clear that their infrastructure is not keeping up with the increase in tourism in their area. At the same time, the Greater Butte Region was heavily focused on planning



## Matanuska-Susitna Borough

### Consolidated Issues and Solutions Tables

Comprehensive Plan Update Public Workshops, Oct 2023 – Jan 2024

ways to increase economic growth in sectors that support the existing businesses and character of the Butte, like motorized recreation businesses and expanding existing recreation infrastructure. Staff created spreadsheets to capture each meeting's issues and solutions verbatim. In an effort to use the issues and solutions exercise as a tool for creating the goals of the Comprehensive Plan, staff consolidated the issues and solutions into a table for easier consumption by other staff, elected officials, and MSB leadership. The Project Manager will begin drafting the Comprehensive Plan following the Assembly Strategic Meeting on February 17. The Project Manager aims to write an issues-based plan that will provide an added opportunity for government accountability, which was a significant theme discussed at every public workshop.

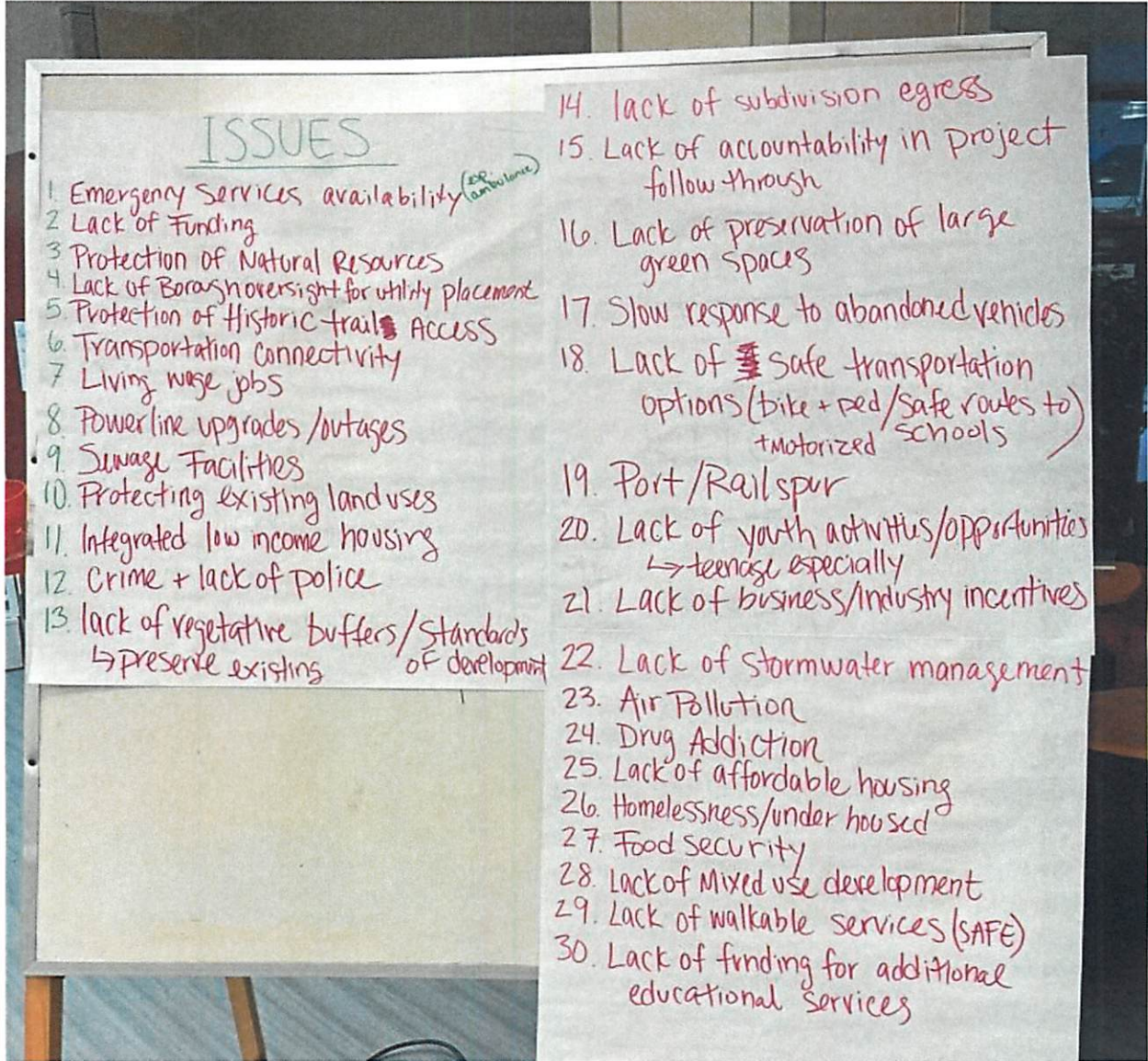
#### Example Solutions from the Greater Butte Region:





Matanuska-Susitna Borough  
Consolidated Issues and Solutions Tables  
Comprehensive Plan Update Public Workshops, Oct 2023 – Jan 2024

Example Issues from the Lower Parks Region:





## Corinne Lindfors

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**From:** Trisha Costello <costellotrisha@gmail.com>  
**Sent:** Tuesday, February 6, 2024 7:47 AM  
**To:** MSB Planning Commission  
**Cc:** Alex Strawn; Kelsey Anderson  
**Subject:** RE: Resolution 24-01

[EXTERNAL EMAIL - CAUTION: Do not open unexpected attachments or links.]

Hello Planning Commission,

My name is Trisha Costello and I am a Talkeetna resident. Recently there was a workshop held at Su Valley High School regarding the Mat Su Borough Comprehensive Plan update. It was led by Borough Planner Kelsey Andersen and attended by a handful of area residents, including myself.

Aside from gathering input on what we felt our pressing issues are and encouraging us to come up with possible solutions, the workshop offered a basic course on just what a comprehensive plan is, what it does and does not do for a community and the role that Special Land Use Districts take in helping to implement - to codify - portions of the comprehensive plans.

Shortly after attending the workshop I watched the January 15 meeting of the Borough Planning Commission. I was delighted to recognize Ms. Andersen as she presented an update to the Commission on Mat-Su Comp Plan Update project.

Afterward, there appeared to be just one actionable item on the agenda that evening: Resolution 24-01, calling for the reclassification of a piece of Borough land in Willow so the Borough may offer it for sale. Conversationally referred to as the Long Lake Road Sale. In the chambers was one Willow community member and he was joined through call-in by two other Willow folks that gave testimony on the same matter and with the same intent to ask that the Commission not allow the reclassification of the parcel of land that was in question.

I believe the Commission failed the Willow community by not taking into consideration the wishes and vision clearly stated in their Comprehensive Plan as it pertained to the question at hand.

Reclassifying that parcel allows the Borough to sell it. Granted, I get that the process of reclassification is an internal tool to get it on the market and does not really have bearing on land use, as explained by the MSB staff member presenting the case. However, once it is sold, and not within the jurisdiction of a current S.P.U.D. there is very little safeguard for the surrounding community that the land use will be in alignment with community vision.

Furthermore, using a 30 day public notice process does not allow sufficient time for local advisory boards or residents to be adequately informed and able to act in a timely manner. Most community councils and committees meet once a month in a volunteer capacity.

As there becomes more awareness in comprehensive planning, many communities are now coming to fully understand that forming and having the Borough adopt certain S.P.U.D. plans is critical as a means to implement the desires set forth by their comprehensive plans. At this time, however, the clear message from the Borough is that resources are not available to help communities do so.

To have moved forward - as the Commission did - with this particular land disposal demonstrates that the Borough is more interested in advancing an agenda that does not respect the public process, or the public wishes as defined in a community's comprehensive plan.

Knowing that communities have reached out to begin S.P.U.D. development and not making that a priority or even a possibility is unacceptable.

Did the Borough have to pursue this land sale? Or, because it brought to light that the community involved realized their vulnerability in not having either an updated comprehensive plan or a S.P.U.D. in place, would it not have



been prudent to put it on the back burner for a spell and instead work to resolve how the community desires are defined, protected and enforced? What benefit - beyond getting land into the tax roll - is there to pursuing this particular sale? And at this time?

The Commission had an opportunity to recognize that our Borough is growing and our planning and implementation documents that safeguard the very essence of what makes our lands around us home has not kept up.

In passing resolution Resolution 24-01 the Commission failed to serve the community of Willow. And as a resident of the Borough it shakes my faith that the Commission will make decisions that align with my own community's planning efforts and vision when the need arises.

Please take the time now to help communities do the work:

- Lean heavily on the comprehensive plans already on file for the various communities.
- Prioritize, energize and fund local planning and help communities create and implement S.P.U.Ds so the vision of their planning documents have real backbone.
- Establish a 45 or 60 day public notice policy.

Thank you for taking the time to read and consider these views. And thank you for your efforts to serve on the Commission.

Sincerely,

Trisha Costello

22611 S D Street, Talkeetna

907-315-8469

Talkeetna resident since 1995