

Fairbanks North Star Borough Comprehensive Recreational Trails Plan



Appendix F. Vision, Goals & Strategy Report



August 2021

Introduction

An essential component of an updated Fairbanks North Star Borough (FNSB) Comprehensive Recreational Trails Plan (Trails Plan) is developing a vision and a set of goals that reflect the community's priorities and desire for future recreation. The Trails Advisory Commission (TAC) worked collaboratively over multiple meetings with FNSB Staff, the project team, and the public, to develop the following vision, goals and guiding principles to guide investments in the recreational trails system and trail program for the 20-year horizon. Goals and guiding principles reflect priorities of the community and will be a base-line consideration for evaluating trail projects and initiative in the FNSB.

Vision Statement

The Fairbanks North Star Borough's updated Comprehensive Recreational Trails Plan will be centered on, developed around, and guided by a vision defined by the community through an iterative process. The project team distilled the following vision to guide the development of the Trails Plan and serve as the primary guidance for the next 10-20 years of the FNSB Trail System based on the conversations, input and work with the Trails Advisory Commission, borough staff, residents, and trail users:

The Fairbanks North Star Borough trail system is cherished and essential to our community identity, health and economy; connects our communities to each other and their surrounding wild landscapes through an expansive network; and provides all ages and abilities an unparalleled variety of high-quality experiences for every season.

Goals & Guiding Principles

Community-defined goals provide a roadmap to achieving the longer-term vision for the FNSB Trail System. Actionable guiding principles defined under each goal provide additional guidance for decision-makers on how available resources should be allocated.

1. Establish & Protect Public Access

The FNSB has the authority and ability to (1) protect existing access, (2) establish new access, (3) maintain trails, and (4) enforce applicable regulations.

- i. Expand administrative methods to protect and establish trails beyond process in FNSB Code Title 17 Subdivisions.
- ii. Clarify the level of autonomous decision-making authority for the Parks & Recreation Department and expand where needed.
 - Clarify or develop processes that may be required for certain proposed actions (e.g. a temporary closure should not have the same review process as a permanent change to a trail designation).
- iii. Develop and implement processes to ensure "adequate corridor widths are secured to protect the long-term experience and goals trail users are seeking, as well as the rights of enjoyment and use of adjacent lands by their owners" – Alaska State Trail Plan, 2000 pg. 46.

- Processes should also include other design considerations and metrics necessary to ensure safety, longevity and enjoyment of the trails.

2. Invest in Our Community Trail System as a World-Class Asset

The community & FNSB continue and expand their investments into the trail system, programs, and planning to benefit the community, meet current needs and future demand, and support growing and dynamic use of local trails.

- i. Highlight and develop the uniquely world-class potential of our trail system
 - Access to boreal forests, vast wetlands, alpine uplands, and sub-arctic geography
 - Connect all major communities by trails
 - The most expansive winter trail network surrounding a city of this size
 - Unrivalled diversity in types of trail activities
 - High latitude provides longest season for winter trail activities: a skiing, fatbiking, mushing, skijoring, and snowmachining mecca.
 - Especially convenient access to trails from residential areas
 - Experience Alaska's wilderness and adventures of any size right outside your back door.
- ii. Invest in protecting and creating essential legal public access
 - Funding for surveying
 - Funding for acquisition (ROW, easements, land, etc.)
 - Funding for trail planning and design
 - Establish standards for trail ROW to meet the vision of high quality trails
- iii. Invest in building and developing the necessary physical access
 - Develop access points to trails with parking and necessary trailhead amenities.
 - Seek out matching grants to leverage resources for development
 - Major improvements to priority trails where needed
 - Work cooperatively with user groups to develop activity-specific trail systems
 - Have staff who are dedicated to project coordination
- iv. Invest in the regular maintenance and upkeep of trail systems
 - Address maintenance needs through a combination of parks department staff labor, contracted services, and volunteer assistance
 - Employ a trail crew within the parks and recreation department dedicated to summer maintenance projects and winter grooming of high priority trails
 - Budget for contractual services to address maintenance and improvement projects beyond the capabilities of staff and volunteers
 - Work cooperatively with user groups to maintain activity-specific trail systems (Partnership/ Volunteer objective?)
 - Provide support to volunteers such as equipment and training necessary to complete projects
 - Work cooperatively with other organizations to train lead volunteers and build trail maintenance knowledge in the community
 - Have staff who is dedicated to volunteer coordination and outreach
 - Develop and streamline process to recruit and employ volunteer labor

- Establish standards for trail maintenance (facilitate volunteer success and meet high expectations for trail quality)
- v. Invest in programs to raise awareness of and help people access our trail system
 - Continue to develop programs like the Trails Challenge
 - Foster stewardship through educational programs like Leave No Trace
 - Partner with other organizations and businesses to provide equipment, instruction and incentives needed to get outdoors.

3. Foster Lasting Stewardship

The trails are cared for and valued by the community as a shared public asset and an environmental resource.

- i. Increase the availability of resources and frequency of opportunities to educate current and potential trail users.
 - Feature trails as educational tools themselves on climate change/environmental stewardship
 - Provide education on how to use the trails and proper trail etiquette
- ii. Continue to provide and expand trails programming to educate and engage more users.
 - Continue to feature the Trails Challenge
 - Support other organizations seeking compatible use of the trail system for public events (e.g. races, field trips, school programs, lifelong learning, etc.)
 - Advertise trails & programs
- iii. Increase active participation in the care and maintenance of trail facilities by local trail users, organized groups, and community partners.
 - Remove unnecessary administrative barriers to increase volunteerism
 - Incorporate Leave No Trace ethics into Trails Programming
- iv. Leverage FNSB resources to foster partnerships and volunteer opportunities

4. Improve Access for All Ages & Abilities

The FNSB trail systems provide essential, desired, and inviting trails that are accessible and enjoyable for users with differing abilities and activity preferences.

- i. Provide a system as diverse as the community it serves.
 - Establish and designate trails for a variety of specific uses and skill levels
- ii. Expand ADA opportunities.
 - While it is not practical for all types of trails to be fully accessible, especially in environmentally constrained areas, the trail system should comply with the standards set forth in the American with Disabilities Act where appropriate (from Chugach State Park Trail Management Plan, 2009).
 - Improve major trailheads to comply with ADA requirements.
- iii. Strive for equitable geographic distribution of trail facilities.

- Establish and protect trails and outdoor access in close proximity to all major population centers
- iv. Provide wayfinding, mapping, and signage for public trails.
 - Develop minimum standards/requirements for trailhead signage and wayfinding (implementation suggestion)
 - Utilize available technology and provide a one-stop-shop type portal for trail information and maps
- v. Develop trailheads for improved accessibility, visibility, and safety, including emergency response.
 - Develop and maintain trailheads so they are usable for their intended purpose, including parking areas (ability to park safely), informational kiosks, wayfinding, restrooms, shelter, etc.
 - Not all trailheads will require the same level of development; Consider volume of use, location, traffic impacts and seasonality
 - Where possible, strive for access from major roadways, not local or neighborhood streets
 - Improve visibility and awareness of trail access locations
 - Reduce traffic and parking impacts on adjacent property owners

5. Increase Connectivity

The trail system is expansive and interconnected, providing recreation and transportation opportunities between residential, urban, natural areas, and wilderness.

- i. Facilitate cooperation and coordination with public and private landowners
 - Incentivize establishment of public use trail easements
 - Develop or streamline processes for easement dedication where possible
 - Provide education and resources on landowner liability, trespass and other applicable statutes and borough policy
- ii. Consider trails as potential transportation solutions
 - Trails are utilitarian as well as recreational; they are transportation corridors between home, work, subsistence areas and more.
 - Establish connections to the transportation network, coordinate with transportation planning effort, and look for opportunities for rec trails to be transportation solutions
- iii. Provide and improve safe connections across natural and man-made barriers (e.g. River or Hwy)
- iv. Disperse users to reduce pressures
 - Reduce pressures caused by crowding and popular use/over-use
 - Reduce conflicts related to neighborhood parking by providing more connections between popular locations (e.g. if a neighborhood access is being overcrowded but another trail with a larger parking area is only 2 miles away – connect those two trails so neighborhood parking is reduced)
- v. Provide opportunities for different distance trips/outings (e.g. meet the needs of both endurance and lunch break activities)

- vi. Support regional or national destination trail connectivity projects, such as 100-Mile Loop Trail and Alaska Long Trail, to complement the local trail system
 - While prioritizing local trails, encourage establishment of large trail connectivity projects to drive economic growth and investment in eco-tourism.
 - Connect the FNSB trail system to regional and national trail systems on nearby State and Federal lands (e.g. Alaska State Parks trails and BLM White Mountains National Recreation Area trails).
- vii. Improve access for emergency response; increase safety and make trails less intimidating.
 - Develop connections that facilitate multiple ingress and egress locations for a trail system
 - Publish mapping and wayfinding information online and onsite to aid trail user navigation and reduce emergency response times

6. Improve User Experience

The trail system provides desirable outdoor experiences for users of varying activity types and ability levels year-round.

- i. Improve user safety.
- ii. Reduce user conflict.
- iii. Maintain user experience by maintaining integrity of trail conditions.
- iv. Direct users to the trail that provide the experience they are looking for.
- v. Provide facilities, amenities, and resources that support trail use and access.
 - Resources span a range from parking lots and restrooms to trail maps and apps
 - Develop and implement trail ratings of difficulty, surfacing etc. to inform users of anticipated experience
- vi. Create desirable experiences for varying skill levels.
 - Provide a mix of trails, from easy to expert, to address the variety of uses and challenge types
 - Communicate and manage expectations for experiences; expectations for multi-use trails should be different than trails dedicated for a single use, such as groomed for skate skiing.
 - Refine and develop plans for trail recreation areas (e.g. Skyline Ridge, Peede Road Open Space) that can provide a variety of trail experiences in a dedicated area.
 - Determine trail design standards based on the ground and desired uses
 - Develop achievable Trail Management Objectives to establish and document designed use, managed use, and design parameters for different types of local trails
 - Refer to available resources such as the Alaska State Parks Trail Management Handbook when developing local trail management objectives

7. Expand Recreation Opportunities

The trail network and programming are adaptable to new trends in outdoor recreation and are expanding to provide opportunities to current and future trail users.

- i. Increase dispersal of different trail types and experiences.
- ii. Repair, rebuild and maintain trails where needed to retain historic use of existing trails.
- iii. Prioritize new facilities that support under-served users or areas.
 - New trails in areas where there aren't any trails now, provide neighborhood access where residents would otherwise have to drive to trailheads, etc.
- iv. Provide niche experiences through trail development.
 - Highlight and develop trails that provide experiences uniquely available in our location
 - Access to long distance winter trails and hut-to-hut adventures
 - Winter specific activities: fatbiking, mushing, skijoring and snowmachining
 - Alpine tundra with endless, undisturbed viewsheds
 - Tailor trails to specific uses.
 - *Other important and unique experiences will continue to be identified and specified while developing implementation strategies.*
- v. Extend and expand summer seasonal use.
 - Retain land or important trail corridors on "high and dry" ground suitable for summer trail use and development

8. Plan for Change, Act for Sustainability

Use, management, and maintenance of trails considers long-term sustainability, is guided by strong environmental stewardship, and is proactive to changes in climate to continue providing the community with world-class recreation opportunities.

- i. Respond to recurring and anticipated changes in trail conditions to ensure long-term usability, enjoyment, and access.
- ii. Design and development of trails should consider sustainable goals/criteria
- iii. Use temporary, seasonal, or permanent use closures when needed to protect user safety and the environment.
- iv. Use trails as educational opportunities, especially as climate change is exacerbated in areas where trails are.

Strategy for Applying Goals & Guiding Principles

More specific recommendations will be determined as the FNSB Trails Plan update continues through the process. It will be especially critical to further develop specific strategies on the topics of trail protection and trail maintenance. All recommendations made in the Plan must directly implement, align with, advance, or support the objectives, guiding principles, goals and vision defined by the FNSB Community. The public process used to draft and approve the final updated Trails Plan will provide multiple opportunities for checks and balances to ensure all recommendations will, when implemented, move the community in the defined direction.

Trail Prioritization

Main components of the FNSB Trails Plan Update are the map and list of priority trails selected to receive Borough statutory access protection. The list will not be limited to existing trails, but also recommended new and alternative trail corridors, and can include whole parcels or areas to be developed for expansive trail systems. Trails recommended in the Plan should be in the lasting best interest of the community and therefore will support, align with, and implement the guiding principles, goals, and vision.

To choose recommended priority trails, a transparent unbiased process for priority determination is needed. The consultant team drafted a suggested process. Collaboration with the FNSB Trails Advisory Commission and staff will determine the final process used to make recommendations and select priorities for inclusion in the Trails Plan. Attached is the second draft of the Trail Prioritization Process, amended after a work session with the TAC. Another review and update by the TAC will occur prior to finalization of the process and the selection of priority trails.

The goals of the Trail Prioritization Process are:

- Provide a defensible process for, and record of, decision making
- Determine whether a certain trail should be included in, and thus protected by and managed according to, the Trails Plan
- Prioritize trails in the Trail Plan to best direct the allocation of FNSB resources

The overall structure of the Trail Prioritization Process is:

- Section 1: Trail Description (informational)
- Section 2: Plan Compliance (informational)
- Section 3: Favorable Trail Characteristics (scored)