

Fairbanks North Star Borough Comprehensive Recreational Trails Plan



Appendix C. Status of the System



July 2021

Prepared For:
Fairbanks North Star Borough
907 Terminal Street, PO Box 71267
Fairbanks, Alaska 99707

Prepared By:
R&M Consultants, Inc.
9101 Vanguard Drive
Anchorage, Alaska 9950

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Background	1
Need for the Plan Update	1
Status of the System	1
Who the Trail System Serves	2
FNSB Demographics	2
Trail Users	2
Organizations and User Groups	3
Trail Use Survey Results	3
FNSB Responsibilities	1
Borough Authority	1
Liability	1
Parks & Recreation Department Role	1
Trail Staff	3
Trail Maintenance	3
Funding	4
Trails Advisory Commission	5
Trail Dedication/Establishment Process	6
Subdivision & Trail Dedication	6
Trail Nomination	7
Trail Partners	8
Trail Challenge Program	9
Recreational Trails within FNSB	10
Overview	10
Trail Plan Categorization	10
Dedication Status	10
Prioritization Categories A, B, C	11
Use Designation	12
Use of Trails	12
Historic Uses	12
Seasonality	12

Diversity & Multi-Use..... 12

Specific Uses..... 13

Existing Public Dedicated Recreation Trails 13

Trails Proposed for Public Dedication 13

Other Existing Non-Dedicated Recreational Trails..... 14

Currently Planned Trail Projects 14

System Needs..... 15

Common Problems 15

 Access Issues 15

 Conditions 15

 Usability & Awareness 15



Introduction

Background

The Fairbanks North Star Borough (FNSB) trail program was formally initiated in 1980 in response to local trail concerns and the continued loss of existing trails due to private development and other changes in land uses. The original Comprehensive Recreational Trail Plan (Trails Plan) was adopted in 1985 to provide guidance to the Borough for the protection and management of local trails. The Trails Plan is a tool used to identify, preserve, and manage important recreational trail corridors throughout the FNSB. The existing plan has three functions: it establishes a categorized system of trails, establishes maintenance policies for trails, and calls for a trail dedication authority to protect public access to trails. The Trails Plan is part of the Borough Regional Comprehensive Plan, which the Planning Commission oversees, with staff support from the Community Planning Department. The Trails Plan is primarily implemented by FNSB Parks and Recreation Department with advisory support from the Trails Advisory Commission.

Need for the Plan Update

The list of trails included in the Trails Plan has not been updated since 2006 and the issues, goals, strategies, and objectives identified in the Trail Plan remain artifacts from its original draft produced in 1985. Since 1985, FNSB communities have experienced considerable changes in local plans, ordinances, land uses, demographics and recreational pursuits and use patterns. These changes have impacted how Borough residents use and access recreational trails. Updating the 2006 Trails Plan will improve its usefulness and relevance, addressing the most salient needs of local trail users.

This project's vision is to collaboratively develop a new Comprehensive Recreational Trails Plan with a system-wide approach that will be the primary decision-making tool guiding FNSB and its partners to prioritize available resources for local trails. The updated Trails Plan will be based on the most recent available data and public participation to identify goals, policies and guidelines with actionable strategies to carry the FNSB through the next 10-20 years of trail management and development.

Status of the System

This Status of the System report is a review of the existing conditions of the trails program and identifies what trail facilities FNSB currently have, the conditions they are in, and where gaps or needs exist. This rounded understanding of the status of the trails system will inform the recommendations and priorities in the updated Trails Plan, in tandem with public input received during meetings with the Trails Advisory Commission, through the website, Trail Use Survey, and more.

Information presented in this report is from a variety of sources including detailed literature and governing code reviews, institutional knowledge of FNSB Parks and Recreation Department staff and Trails Advisory Commission members, and the public especially through their contributions on the online Interactive Comment Map. This report is intended to examine the present roles of various agencies and stakeholders with respect to trails and provide a more in-depth analysis of existing recreational trails within the Borough. The Status of the System report should be considered dynamic, like the trail system itself; an on-going document which should be periodically updated to reflect the changing status of programming and specific trails in the inventory.

Who the Trail System Serves

FNSB Demographics

The Fairbanks North Star Borough is home to 96,849 residents, according to the US Census Bureau’s 2019 Vintage Population Estimates. Since the original CRTP was adopted in 1985, the FNSB population has grown approximately 35.6%, see Table 1 below. According to the Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, 8,517 FNSB residents (8.8% of total population) were active duty military in 2019.

According to the 2019 American Community Survey and US Census Bureau, 23.8% of FNSB residents are under 18 years of age, 7.4% are under 5 years, and 11.2% are 65 years and over; 57.6% of FNSB residents are between 18 and 64 years old. The majority of FNSB residents identify their race as White (75.6%); 8.2% Alaska Native or American Indian, 8.2% Hispanic or Latino, 6.9% two or more races, 5.3% Black or African American and 3.4% Asian. 7.2% of FNSB residents are considered in poverty and the median household income is \$76,464 (2016-2020 in 2020 dollars).

The Parks & Recreation Department provides facilities and services to all FNSB residents, and therefore the trail system strives to provide beneficial recreation opportunities to all residents, of all ages and abilities.

Table 1. Fairbanks North Star Borough Population by Year. Sources: US Census Bureau & Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development

Year	Population	Active Duty Military
1980	53,983	
1985	71,433	
1990	78,091	7,500
1995	82,515	
2000	82,944	6,861
2005	88,248	
2010	98,260	8,166
2015	99,636	
2019	96,849	8,517

Trail Users

The FNSB covers 7,444 square miles within which are more than 1,000 miles of trails used for recreation and transportation. Activity or mode choice on the trails reflects historic use of the areas and growing recreation trends. Motorized, non-motorized, multi-use (all modes), and specialty or single-use trails all exist within the FNSB. A variety of developed and primitive trails provide users opportunities to exercise, recreate, commute, and gain access to wilderness and subsistence areas.

Extended winter seasons provide unique opportunities for winter recreation including dog mushing, skiing, snowmachine riding, snowshoeing, and fat-tire biking. Trails in the summer and shoulder-season

have a similar mix of motorized and non-motorized users including hikers, bikers, ATV and other off-highway-vehicle riders, horseback riders, and more. The FNSB trail system has diverse recreation potential for both traditional and trending types of trail use. Downhill or alpine skiing, fat-tire and mountain biking are gaining popularity statewide and have been identified as quickly growing uses in the FNSB. Motorized activities have also grown in their popularity, range, and impact due to technological improvements and availability of snowmachines and off-highway vehicles of all shapes and sizes. Intentional consideration and planning to provide desired experiences for all users is a leading charge of the updated Trails Plan.

Organizations and User Groups

User groups have coalesced around almost every major mode of trail travel participated in currently. User groups advocate to improve access and experiences for their users, generate support to keep their favorite trails maintained, and host events. Groups are in various states of organization. Some are formally established as 501c3 non-profits, others informal. They host a wide array of gatherings, sojourns on trails, and competitive events. User groups in the area communicate through email list-serves, social media, websites, and online forums. Most organized user groups center around non-motorized modes of travel. Among popular modes of travel, summer ATV riding is one trail use currently without a formally organized club. Clubs organized around OHVs are more focused on snowmachining or off-roading in full-size 4x4 vehicles. This may be because ATV travel facilitates an especially broad range of experiences (trail riding, dirt biking, mudding, obstacles, etc.), some of which are more dominated by another destination-oriented motivating activity, such as hunting, fishing or camping. A better understanding of the range of needs surrounding summer motorized trail travel is needed to ensure adequate supply and reduce impact.

Certain groups have organized around a specific area or trail system and have even formalized relationships with the underlying landowners/managers. Examples include the Alaska Dog Musher's Association (Jeff Studdert Sled Dog Trails, ADF&G), Nordic Ski Club of Fairbanks (Birch Hill ski trails, FNSB & US Army Fort Wainwright), Two Rivers Ski Club (Two Rivers Ski Trails at Two Rivers Elementary, FNSB), and Salcha Ski Club (Darrell Coe Nordic Racing Trails at Salcha Elementary, FNSB). Through their agreements with landowners, these groups provide basic maintenance of the trails systems for their constituents, for special events, and the general public.

Trail Use Survey Results

A survey was conducted online in 2021 to support the update of the FNSB Comprehensive Recreational Trails Plan and was distributed via randomly-selected mailings (mailed respondents) as well as online advertisements (online respondents). The survey collected information on FNSB residents' current and desired trail use, limitations they may have using the trails, opportunities, and how they value trails. The following information was collected via the survey from 1,213 FNSB residents about who is using trails, how and when they are recreating, and why they do so (see FNSB Comprehensive Recreational Trails Plan, Trail Use Survey Report for more information).

Respondent's **age groups are distributed relatively evenly for those 26 years and older**, with each group generally making up about a fifth of overall respondents. About 30% of mailed survey respondents and **34% of online survey respondents have children under 18 years of age in the home.**

A combined **83.67% of respondents said recreational trails are “very important” to their quality of life.** 13.60% said recreational trails are “somewhat important” to their quality of life, 1.82% are neutral or indifference and 0.83% of respondents said trails are not important. Respondents who are trail users chose the following primary answers for why they use trails (respondents could select up to five):

Online:

- Exercise or to maintain a healthy lifestyle (86%)
- Enjoy nature, views, fresh air (84%)
- Reduce Stress or improve mental health (78%)
- Spending time with family or friends (71%)
- Escape crowds or experience solitude (55%)

Mailed:

- Exercise or to maintain a healthy lifestyle (84%)
- Enjoy nature, views, fresh air (74%)
- Spend time with family or friends (69%)
- Reduce stress or improve mental health (56%)
- Escape crowds or experience solitude (52%)

Seasonal trail use reported by respondents shows **consistent use year-round** for the last 24 months. Respondents were asked to select all seasons they used trails. Spring (April-May) ranked lowest at 83% use by respondents, followed by Winter (November-March) at 84.83% use, Fall (September-October) at 91.87%, and Summer had the highest reported use of 93.78%.

Respondents were asked to indicate how frequently they participated in specific non-motorized and motorized activities in the last 24 months; respondents indicated that **about 80.86% of total trail use is for non-motorized activities.**

Table 2. Frequency of Trail Use by Mode Summary, FNSB Trails Plan Trail Use Survey Report

Frequency	Online				Mailed				Combined Total			
	Non-Motorized Uses		Motorized Uses		Non-Motorized Uses		Motorized Uses		Non-Motorized Uses		Motorized Uses	
Less than once a month	1051	76%	329	24%	83	68%	39	32%	1134	75%	368	25%
A few times a month	1505	77%	437	23%	82	71%	34	29%	1587	77%	471	23%
A few times a week	1464	85%	258	15%	70	85%	12	15%	1534	85%	270	15%
Daily or almost Daily	634	85%	116	15%	33	100%	0	0%	667	85%	116	15%
Total Use:	4321	81%	1023	19%	268	76%	85	24%	4589	81%	1108	19%

FNSB Responsibilities

Borough Authority

Alaska State Statute establishes the legal authority for governing bodies to exercise their appropriating and prioritization authority. The FNSB is authorized under Alaska Statute Title 29 as a second class borough with AS 29.35.210 defining their powers.

AS 29.40 grants mandatory areawide powers for planning, platting and land use, which is carried out by the Community Planning and Land Management departments.

AS 29.35.210(b) established conferred areawide powers for the transportation system acquired by ordinance which is carried out by the Transportation Department.

Acquired areawide powers include parks and recreation, acquired by election and implemented by the Parks and Recreation department.

The Borough defines its powers, privileges, rules and regulations in the FNSB Code. Multiple titles within the FNSB Code contribute to planning, establishment, maintenance and management of the trail system, including:

- Title 15, Building & Construction, Floodplain Management Regulations
- Title 17, Subdivision & Trail Dedication
- Title 18, Zoning
- Title 20, Land Acquisition, Management & Sale

For more information on the applicability of these Title, please see the *FNSB OEA Comprehensive Recreation Trails Plan Literature Review*.

Liability

Concerns about the Borough's level of authority and private landowners' potential liability is especially relevant to the Trails Plan, the trail system, and programming as the existence of private landowners who allow recreational activities on their land but do not charge a fee is prevalent throughout the FNSB. Alaska Statute Title 9 (AS 9.65.202) defines Tort Immunity which is intended to provide some protection from liability for landowners who are providing access to their land for public use. Alaska Statute Title 34 defines tort immunity from personal injuries or death arising out of the use of land subject to a conservation easement, provides protection from liability for landowners specifically with land that has a conservation easement 50 feet or less in width, except in cases of gross negligence or reckless or intentional misconduct. These State Statutes are the primary legal tools protecting private landowners and the FNSB from incidences occurring on the trail system.

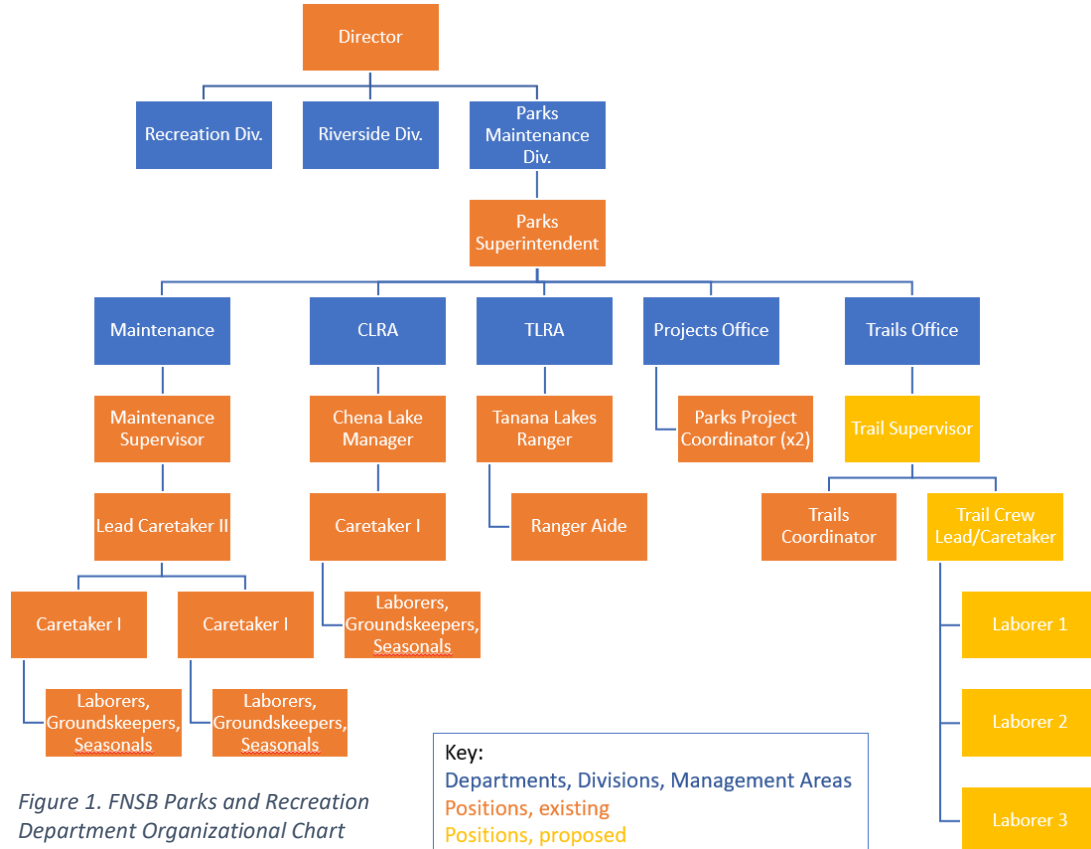
Parks & Recreation Department Role

Responsibility of the recreational trails program is with the FNSB Parks & Recreation Department, specifically under the Parks Maintenance Division and the Recreational Trails Office. This meets the intent of the first program implementation strategy identified in the original Comprehensive Recreational Trail Plan, 1985 and 2006. There is no specific set of regulations in FNSB code to direct the use of Parks and Recreation powers. A new title for Parks & Recreation may need to be considered to

address any roles that need codified. Title 2, Administration & Personnel, Chapter 2.28 Parks & Recreation describes the Parks Director position, their powers & duties, and the process for naming parks and installing memorials & plaques. The chapter does not currently contain the word “trail,” but may be a section that could expand on the department or director’s various roles in managing local trails, to the extent the roles need codified.

The FNSB Parks and Recreation Department’s mission is to preserve and create an inclusive community culture by providing places and programs designed to enrich the quality of life.

The Parks Maintenance division provides and maintains athletic, recreational, and park facilities to meet the community’s needs for healthy recreational activities that are accessible to all borough residents. The division fosters relationships and partners with civic organizations, youth and adult sports organizations, businesses, and other governmental agencies to provide cost effective and affordable recreation opportunities. The division provides facilities and locations for activities that improve physical and mental health, attract and retain community members, contribute to the economic base, and decrease deviant behavior by providing healthy alternatives for at risk youth. The division is comprised of six basic management areas; Parks Maintenance, Birch Hill Recreation Area, Chena Lake Recreation Area, Tanana Lakes Recreation Area, Recreational Trails Office, and the Project Office (see organizational chart below). The staff performs a variety of recreation facility management, renovation, and development functions at over 130 indoor and outdoor park facilities located throughout the Borough. The division works closely with partner organizations and the community to provide recreational activities at these locations. Additionally, staff provides support for large community events and landscaping beautification efforts.



Major Long-Term Issues and Concerns

- Lack of updated Comprehensive Park Plan and a current Community Park Services Needs Assessment is a major impediment to addressing systemic deficiencies within the Parks Division and Parks and Recreation Department overall (the current Trails Plan update will address this identified issue).
- Making all the Borough’s various park facilities accessible by addressing the extensive backlog of deficient and non-compliant facilities.
 - Most trails are inherited and in poor locations or with poor alignment; not designed for long term use or recreation.
- Developing a method to secure and maintain the legal use of the recreational trails identified in the Borough’s Comprehensive Trail Plan so as not to lose this resource. Currently only relies on statutory method through Title 17 Subdivisions for easements.
 - Trails crossing private property which may never subdivide nor voluntarily grant access.
 - Parks Department has no budget to proactively pursue and negotiate easements with landowners. Not well equipped to be opportunistic when approached by a willing landowner.

Objective for FY 2023

- Continue to recover from consequences of COVID pandemic.
- Complete Comprehensive Recreational Trails Plan and have it formally adopted by the Assembly.
- Develop strategies to addressing the staffing shortage crisis we are experiencing throughout the department, but most acutely in Parks Maintenance’s seasonal labor pool.

Trail Staff

The Trails Coordinator heads the Recreation Trails Office within the Parks Maintenance Division. Currently, the Trails Coordinator is the only position dedicated specifically to the planning, management, and maintenance of recreational trails within the FNSB trail plan. Chena Lake and Tanana Lakes Recreation Areas have staff who can perform basic maintenance and grooming on their trails when time allows. The major functions of the Trails Coordinator position are to implement the Trail Plan and facilitate trail planning efforts; seek and apply for funding sources for trail development; coordinate trail maintenance or construction projects; provide technical expertise and information about trail use, design, and construction; act as liaison for trail user groups and staff support for Trails Advisory Commission. The Trails Coordinator has also taken on the development of new trail programming by developing the Fairbanks Trails Challenge. Other recent trail-based programs, including Spooky Trail and “Try-a-thlons,” have fallen under the purview of staff in the Recreation Division.

Trail Maintenance

Parks Department relies on a combination of contracted labor, staff labor, and volunteer labor for trail maintenance and development. All maintenance and development efforts require coordination from the Trails Coordinator position.

Currently and historically, most major trail projects are completed by contracted labor funded through external grant programs, namely the Recreational Trails Program (see Funding for further information). Each year the Trails Coordinator plans one or two projects and applies for the program. If awarded, the

Trail Coordinator will bid the projects and manage the contracts. The Trail Coordinator may work closely with Parks Project Coordinators or other FNSB staff to execute projects depending on availability.

No Parks Maintenance division labor staff (caretakers, laborers, groundskeepers, youth crews, etc.) are dedicated to Borough trail systems in the Trail Plan outside of Chena Lake and Tanana Lakes Recreation Areas. Parks maintenance labor staff are occupied by responsibilities at other park facilities and are generally unavailable for trail projects. Mobilizing a FNSB staff member or crew for trail maintenance currently requires removing staff, vehicles, and equipment from assigned duties at another park or recreation facility.

Formal volunteer events are also rare due to the relatively high time cost associated (organizing the event, recruiting volunteers, etc.) and the relatively low output. Volunteers are typically untrained and prohibited from using necessary tools like chainsaws due to risk and liability and so may be less productive than staff or contracted labor. The 2006 Trail Plan calls for developing an Adopt-a-Trail program and partnering with user groups. No such program has been developed. In 2019, the FNSB administration developed volunteer policies for groups and individuals. Many trail users seem to prefer to take care of trails on their own, off the FNSB's "radar," rather than deal with formalities and requirements associated with FNSB volunteer policies. Some barriers include indemnification language, lack of formal organization or non-profit status, ability to fund insurance for the work performed, limited support, inconsistent membership, or lack of specific expertise.

Recommendations

Any expansion of maintenance service on the trails using either contract, staff, or volunteer labor will require additional staff to supervise, coordinate, or perform the work. Legal access must also be granted prior to engaging in or supporting any work along a trail corridor. Securing access may require funding and staff coordination.

Funding

The Parks & Recreation Department is primarily funded through appropriations from the Borough's General Fund. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2020-2021, the Parks & Recreation Department's appropriation was about 5.15% of the General Fund. The FY 2021-2022 budget reflects a slight increase to 5.44% of the total General Fund appropriations (\$9,434,560 of \$141,508,316); this appropriation is the fifth highest of the total budget. Education receives the largest appropriation of approximately 28% of available funds, followed by Public Works at about 15%, and contributions to Debt Service and the Capital Improvements Program of about 6.9% each.

The overall Parks & Recreation Department budget is divided between all borough recreation facilities including parks, major recreation areas, pavilions, athletic fields, ice rinks, pools, and recreation center, and the staff needed to maintain and manage them. Aside from the Trails Coordinator position, there is no funding specifically dedicated for recreational trails in the budget. Trail needs compete for available funding for contractual services and commodities lines within the Parks Maintenance budget (\$369,000 and \$312,000 respectively for FY2021-22). Nearly all the Parks Maintenance contractual and commodities budget is spent to take care of non-trail facilities. Depending on need, a small number (1-3) of small projects (<\$5,000) are funded through the parks maintenance budget each year to address urgent trail issues. Larger projects are typically funded through external grant programs. Separate project-specific general fund appropriations cover grantee match requirements.

Many recreational trail projects and planning, including this update of the Comprehensive Recreational Trails Plan, are funded through state and federal grants. The Recreational Trails Program (RTP), a Federal Highways pass-through grant administered by the Alaska Department of Natural Resources, Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation, is currently the only regularly applied for grant for trail-specific projects.

The Recreation Trails Program (RTP) provides reimbursable, matched funds to develop and repair recreational trails and trail-related facilities for both non-motorized and motorized recreational trail uses. The RTP program also provides funds for trail related environmental protection, safety and educational projects. One round of grant applications and awards occurs each fiscal year. The typical maximum individual grant award amounts are \$75,000 for non-motorized and diversified projects and \$100,000 for motorized projects. As this is state-funded, long-term stability of the grant program and amount of potentially available funds is not guaranteed and fluctuates with state administrations. To access RTP funds, the FNSB Parks Department competes against projects nominated for the State Parks system, other municipalities and Boroughs, and NGO/non-profit organizations.

The Transportation Alternatives Set-Aside Program (TAP) is administered by the U.S. Federal Highway Administration and helps states fund a variety of activities related to improving surface transportation assets, including on- and off-road pedestrian and bicycle facilities, environmental mitigation, and recreating or improving recreational trails projects. Recent policies around allocation of these funds have made funding more available for recreational trails projects. TAP funding allocations will be passed through the region's metropolitan transportation planning organization, Fairbanks Area Surface Transportation Planning (FAST Planning). To access these funds, the FNSB Parks Department and trail users must participate in FAST Planning's Transportation Improvement Program and Metropolitan Transportation Plan updates to ensure recreational trail projects are identified and therefore eligible for funding allocations.

Trails Advisory Commission

The Trails Advisory Commission (TAC) was established in 1980 by ordinance and is governed by Chapter 4.112 of Fairbanks North Star Borough Code. Borough residents of various geographic areas of the borough with demonstrated interest in the trail system and involvement in trail use or development make up the thirteen-voting member commission. Residents interested in serving on the TAC submit a formal application and commissioners are appointed by the Mayor and confirmed by the Borough Assembly. Commissioners are volunteers and hold staggered three-year terms. The TAC meets quarterly, or more during high activity times, and is up for reauthorization every six years, by ordinance. All TAC meetings are open to the public and advertised in accordance with FNSB regulations and the State of Alaska's Open Meetings Act (AS 44.62.310). FNSB Parks & Recreation is responsible for coordinating the TAC; the Trails Coordinator serves as advisory staff currently.

The TAC is the advisory body to borough government on matters relating to trails within the borough, especially relating to the Comprehensive Recreation Trails Plan, a component of the Comprehensive Plan of the FNSB. Per FNSB Code 4.112.090, responsibilities and duties of the TAC include:

- Inventory and review the current trails within the borough and make recommendations to the mayor concerning present and future needs;
- Review all state and borough land disposals and make recommendations to the Mayor in regards to trail needs and trail routing;

- To provide a forum for citizen input into the trails assessments and needs for the borough and to advise the Mayor of these findings;
- To encourage public and private subdividers to incorporate a trail system where needed on a voluntary basis. Such trails would be laid out following property boundaries, section lines and public rights-of-way;
- Replace the duties of the Parks and Recreation Commission in regards to trails and the borough trail system;
- Work within the parameters of the FNSB policy on recreation trails, and shall from time to time review that policy and recommend any changes to the mayor; and
- Provide initial review of proposed amendments to the comprehensive recreational trail plan and shall make a recommendation to the planning commission and borough assembly on such proposed amendments.

Efforts by the TAC are frequently working to address appropriate designations of trails as motorized, non-motorized, or multi-use, and most commonly the lack of legal easements and rights-of-way for much of the trail system.

Recommendations made by the TAC should support a safe and enjoyable trail system for diverse users.

Trail Dedication/Establishment Process

To establish and grow a permanent recreational trail network within the FNSB, legal public rights-of-way must be acquired to protect recreational uses. The FNSB currently has one primary method of acquisition to establish legal public access: the subdivision and platting process per Title 17.

Subdivision & Trail Dedication

The subdivision and platting process outlined in FNSBC Title 17, Subdivisions has played a significant role in the identification and preservation of trail corridors for well over three decades. In fact, the current wording of 17.56.040 Trail Easements is nearly identical to the language that first appeared in a major Title 17 revision that became effective November 1, 1985.

As part of the subdivision process, FNSB Code requires that easements be dedicated for Category A & B trails. The easement width and intended use for existing and realigned trails, as well as some limited grade, slope and geometry requirements are included.

In 2011, FNSB Parks and Recreation prepared a flow chart that outlines the complexities of establishing easements on public and private land, including FNSB-owned lands. As a reference document, the flow chart provides a good overview of the process. Although utility easements are mentioned in the flow chart, the status of these easements for trail uses is problematic. Utility corridors are an attractive and ready-made physical corridor, but the easement rights granted by the owner are typically limited to utility purposes only. A separate permission is necessary from both the utility and the underlying property owner to use the corridor for trail purposes.

Weakness of Title 17:

Reactive: Community & FNSB wait to use its only teeth until a landowner has to subdivide.

Surprising: Developers are not often aware that a trail crossing their property is part of the Trail Plan and subject to Title 17 dedication requirements until they actually begin the subdivision platting application process.

Expensive: Typically requires the landowner hire a surveyor and major plat applications have an associated fee. The process offers no compensation, even if landowner is providing a public dedication. Without means to compensate, FNSB is unlikely to get voluntary dedication of a trail unless subdivision is needed for other reasons.

Inflexible: Plat applications must be reviewed within a strict timeline. This typically doesn't allow time for adjustments or negotiations. Trail location must be precisely determined ahead of time. Trails in the plan that need additional planning/design work may not fare well if subjected to this process prematurely.

Uncertainty: A parcel with a trail may never need to subdivide, so Title 17 trail dedications may never be required. Absent an alternative, a single undedicated parcel can make an otherwise protected trail unviable.

More information and assessment of existing trail protection tools is provided in accompanying [Appendix B. Trail Protection Toolkit](#).

Recommendations:

A thorough discussion with state, federal, and major large landowners (i.e., Native corporations, University of Alaska, etc.) should be conducted to see if the timeline can be streamlined further.

Clarify availability of utility corridors.

Identify other methods beyond new subdivisions for acquiring legal-access. The need for this is expanding as development of land in the FNSB continues; there are significantly fewer opportunities to establish public trails after land has gone through the subdivision process. Through the Trail Plan update, FNSB needs further instruction on how and when to pursue other means of trail access in the event Title 17 Subdivisions may not be applicable or feasible.

Trail Nomination

When residents want to have trails recognized in the CRTP, a formal trail nomination process is followed. In 2012, FNSB Parks & Recreation and the TAC developed a *Guide to Nominating Trails to the FNSB CRTP* that describes what kinds of protection or restriction inclusion in the Trails Plan provides a trail and outlines the steps residents need to take for nomination. The guide is intended to help residents identify what information is needed, what the questions they must answer, and how to present their proposal to the TAC. The guide is still used as the primary resource for individuals or user groups seeking trail additions to the CRTP.

To submit a request to have a trail officially recognized, the following is needed:

- Map of the proposed trail
- Support from other trail users, including letter of support from groups and individuals
- Proposed use designation; Non-motorized, Multi-Use, or Dual designation based on seasons

- Proposed Category (see section *Recreation Trails within FNSB*); Category A, statewide or regional significance, Category B, community significance, or Category C, neighborhood or local significance
- Proposed protection status; dedicated or recognized
- List of landowners that the trail crosses and record of contact/notification

After submitting the necessary information to the TAC, the proposal representative will present their request at a TAC meeting for Commission consideration and recommendation. If recommended for approval by the TAC, the proposal will go before the Borough Planning Commission for a public hearing, and if approved will then go before the Borough Assembly.

Recommendations on the Nomination process:

- As written, the burden of property owner contact seems to fall on the petitioner. Evaluation into how successful this has been in getting sufficient engagement on the trail before going to public hearing is recommended.
- It is unclear if the process requires cooperation or support from landowners and whether TAC member discretion determines if a proposal is in the best interest for the public *and* the property owner(s). Clarification on these responsibilities and requirements is recommended.
- Clarify when approval by the Planning Commission or Assembly is required for a proposed Category C trail. Category C trails do not obligate the property owner or the borough to any aspect of the trail other than recognizing there is a trail the public is using unless it is a Category C trail that is to be *dedicated*.

Recommendations for the Guide:

The *Guide to Nominating Trails to the FNSB Comprehensive Recreational Trail Plan* is a relatively comprehensive document to help residents formalize desired trails, however it could be condensed into a more user-friendly format. Use of infographics, action-oriented text with explanatory attachments may increase approachability and public understanding of the process and the amount of effort required for a successful nomination.

Trail Partners

Partners throughout the FNSB provide residents and visitors with high-quality trail experiences by managing, maintaining and otherwise supporting trail systems in their respective areas or managed lands. These partners range from the federal to local level with varying levels of effort or operational context.

Federal:

- Bureau of Land Management
- US Fish & Wildlife Service
- Military Installations and Bases
- US Army Corps of Engineers
- Alaska Public Land Information Centers (made up of nine State and Federal partners)

State:

- Alaska Department of Natural Resources: Division of Parks & Outdoor Recreation; Division of Forestry; Division of Mining, Land and Water; and Division of Agriculture
- Alaska Department of Transportation & Public Facilities
- Alaska Department of Fish & Game
- Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority

Regional:

- City of Fairbanks
- City of North Pole
- University of Alaska Fairbanks
- Fairbanks North Star Borough School District
- Fairbanks North Star Borough Departments
 - Public Works
 - Community Planning
 - Health & Social Services
 - Natural Resources Development

Private & Local:

- Interior Alaska Trails & Parks Foundation
- Alaska Dog Musers Association
- Alaska Skijoring and Pulk Association
- Nordic Ski Club of Fairbanks
- Salcha Ski Club
- Two Rivers Ski Club
- Running Club North
- Fairbanks Offroad Lions
- Fairbanks Racing Lions
- Fairbanks Cycle Club
- Alaska Trails, non-profit
- Interior Alaska Land Trust

Trail Challenge Program

The FNSB Parks & Recreation Department has one primary trail program which is funded through Parks Department allocations, the Fairbanks Trail Challenge.

The Fairbanks Trail Challenge is an all-ages, all-abilities, outdoor scavenger hunt designed to get residents exploring more local trails and develop new skills. Each summer and winter season, Parks & Recreation Department staff temporarily install special signs in various locations along a dozen or so local trails. While the signs are up, residents are encouraged to visit the trails, find the signs and take pictures with them to prove what trails were completed. To log a trail for the challenge, residents share

their sign ‘selfies’ on personal social media using a public hashtag for tacking, post the photo on the dedicated Trail Challenge Facebook Event Page or email the photo to the Parks & Recreation Department for tracking. Residents are logging their trails are placed in a drawing for sponsored prizes.

Part of the growing success of the Trail Challenge is due to the Trail Challenge guide, which is updated for both the winter and summer challenges. The guide provides detailed maps and descriptions of the trails included in the challenge, including difficulty level, trail distance, allowed activities, and directions on how to access the trails. Directions on how to take the challenge, contact information, tips for participating, and educational information on Leave No Trace practices and trail etiquette are also included in the guide.

Recreational Trails within FNSB

Overview

The 2006 Trail Plan contains 62 recommended trails or trail systems consisting of nearly 1,000 miles of trail. A far greater number of trails exist within the FNSB boundary than are documented in the Trail Plan. Many were inventoried in 1984, and more new trails have been developed or seen use in the decades after. The most notable or unique qualities of the FNSB trail systems include extensive access in the winter due to frozen ground and waterways, extended access in the summer due to the midnight sun, wide diversity of types of trail use, connectivity of trail systems throughout the populated area, and ultra-long-distance trail routes (50 miles or more) connecting communities to each other and to special landmarks. Trails in the FNSB are used year-round for nearly every conceivable use or mode of travel. During winter, available trial miles increase considerably. Trails crisscross the community, taking people between neighborhoods and to and from recreation areas. A majority of trails have a multiple-use character, blending all kinds of trail users. There are a mix of formalized public trail systems managed by different government agencies as well as trail systems meandering through and between residential neighborhoods, crossing private property, with varying levels of protection, or lack of.

Trail Plan Categorization

The 1985 FNSB CRTP categorized its trails by status (“proposed for dedication” or “existing publicly dedicated trails”), priority level/intended managing authority (Category A “State or Federal”, Category B “Proposed Components of the FNSB Trail System,” & Category C “Neighborhood Trail Networks”), and use designation (“non-motorized” and “multi-use”). The established system provides clear delineation of primary management, maintenance, and funding authority, as well as how Borough right-of-way acquisition authority and dedication processes will apply. It has been in use since its inception and is understandable by FNSB staff, other agencies, and the public.

Dedication Status

Dedication or access status remains a relevant criterion for sorting trails in the trail plan. The 2006 Trail Plan includes 44 trails “proposed for public dedication.” Throughout the years, several sections of various trails in this category have been dedicated to the public across different parcels. Public dedication of sections of trail have occurred primarily through the FNSB Title 17 Subdivisions process.

Among the proposed trails, only a few have achieved complete public access since the Trail Plan's original adoption. These include several RS2477 trails (formally recognized through a State of Alaska process in the 1990s) and a small number of other trails platted through the FNSB's subdivision process.

Many trails in the Trail Plan still lack complete public access. Among the 250 miles of Category B trails "proposed for public dedication," about 100 miles of trail cross private property, affecting nearly 700 individual parcels. About 35 miles of those trails lack legal public access (across nearly 200 parcels). Some miles of trail cross public land and even FNSB property. Access to miles of trail on public land may also be temporary if the landowner disposes of property prior to public dedication. The FNSB and community must have legal access to the entire length of a trail prior to investing public funds into their development.

The Trail Plan also lists 18 "existing publicly dedicated trails." These are primarily established trails within federal (BLM), state (DNR, DPOR or ADF&G), or borough recreation areas. Most are protected and accessible via fee-simple ownership by a government agency and management policies, rather than via an easement interest across private land. Today there are far more established trails that fit in this broad category. The FNSB has developed new recreation areas including Tanana Lakes Recreation Area, Isberg Recreation Area, and Skyline Ridge Park. Alaska State Parks has also constructed several new trails in the Chena River State Recreation Area.

Prioritization Categories A, B, C

The three-category system (A, B, C) for prioritization defines where efforts of the borough trail program should be concentrated and where other agency responsibilities lie. The established system provides clear delineation of primary management, maintenance, and funding authority, as well as how Borough right-of-way acquisition authority and dedication processes will apply. It has been in use since its inception and is understandable by FNSB staff, other agencies, and the public. Based on management changes, some trails may be more appropriate in different categories. Recategorization can occur during the planning process.

Category A: Trails with statewide or regional significance that are located primarily on state or federal land, and are therefore intended for management by state or federal authority. Dedicated easements are required to reserve these trails during any subdivision of land the trail crosses.

Category B: Trails with community-wide significance and can cross both public and private lands that are intended or proposed to be managed by the borough. Dedicated easements are required to reserve these trails during any subdivision of land the trail crosses.

Category C: Trails with neighborhood or local significance and can cross both public and private lands. Maintenance and management of these trails will typically be by local trail user groups, neighborhood associations, or other volunteers. Easement dedication is not required during any subdivision of land the trail crosses. In the event rights-of-way are established, other uses may be noted as available and the borough does not assume responsibility of these easements or trails.

Use Designation

The Trail Plan divides trails into “Multi-Use” (including motorized uses) and “Non-motorized” use designations. There is little or no more specific definition of these categories. The wide range of off-highway vehicle types and sizes are not considered in the current plan and as such are not reflected in easement language or FNSB park regulations. While other agencies create limits based on curb weight, width, or number of drive wheels, FNSB makes no such distinction in its park rules or Trail Plan. There is also little consideration for the seasonal suitability of specific trails, though policy recommendations in the Trail Plan suggest considering seasonal closures for motorized use when applicable.

Use of Trails

Historic Uses

Many miles of trail in the FNSB are remnants from old access routes used from pioneer days or before local road systems were adequately developed. They may have accessed mining claims or logging areas or facilitated travel between isolated communities. It is likely that many of these routes were aligned based on short-term efficiency: to create the fastest way from point A to B or the easiest path to cut through a forest or install with a bulldozer. As utilitarian transportation migrated to the developing road systems over time, the remaining trail routes were used more and more for recreational travel. Many of these trails that we use may have been originally constructed irrespective of long-term maintenance needs, recreational uses, and seasonal ground condition limitations. One legacy of this type of trail is miles of old trail that need realigned to become more usable and manageable.

Within the Borough are also some trail systems that were designed, built or modified purely for recreational purposes. These exist primarily in established parks, recreation areas or conservation areas owned and managed by government agencies. Recreation-focused trails outside of formal recreation or conservation areas include portions of the Skarland Ski Trail, the Ester Dome/Happy Valley Singletrack biking trails, and the Koponen Homestead trails.

Seasonality

Ground and soil conditions have a profound effect on the seasonal accessibility of different trails and their ability to sustain different uses. Vast areas of land in the FNSB are laden with permafrost, muskeg, sloughs, and poor-draining soils. Wet areas become generally traversable in the winter when the ground is frozen, and snow covered. For summer trail use to be sustainable requires careful alignment along higher elevation terrain and south and west aspects and/or significant hardening (installation of foreign material, usually gravel) within sections of poor soil. This is especially true for high-impact activities like ATV riding. The current Trail Plan does not give specific guidance on seasonal uses of individual trails. A cursory analysis of Trail Plan trails shows that roughly 480 miles are currently suitable for winter-only travel while 560 miles may be suitable (or feasibly developed) for all-season use.

Diversity & Multi-Use

Multiple-use is the predominant use designation for trails in the Trail Plan. Existing land/terra trails in the Trail Plan are predominately multiple-use motorized (31 trails/trail systems, ~660 miles) while others are designated non-motorized multiple-use (24 trails/trail systems, ~360 miles)¹. Encountering different

¹ This list excludes trail systems undeveloped at the time of the 2006 trail plan: Cripple Creek Trail (I-C2), North Star Bridle Trails (I-AR2), Murphy Dome Ski Trails (I-AR2), Ester Community Trail System (I-BR2); and excludes water trails.

modes of travel on one trail system, especially in winter, is a highlight of trails in the area. For example, on a single winter cross-country ski outing in the Goldstream Valley trail system, one might cross paths with fat bikers, walkers or snowshoers, a dog team, and a group of snowmachiners.

Specific Uses

Only a few trail systems are designed and constructed for specific uses. Those include winter cross-country skiing (University of Alaska Fairbanks North Campus trails, the Birch Hill Recreation Area trails, and elementary school trail systems at Pearl Creek, Two Rivers, and Salcha), singletrack mountain biking (Ester Dome/Happy Valley singletrack trails), summer hiking (Angel Rocks, Chena Dome Trail, Granite Tors trails in the Chena River State Recreation Area), and dog mushing (Jeff Studdert Sled Dog Trails). The FNSB has also recently partnered with the Fairbanks Offroad Lions to develop a motorized-offroad area within the Tanana Lakes recreation area.

Existing Public Dedicated Recreation Trails

Formally Managed Recreational Trail systems within the FNSB include:

- FNSB-managed trail areas
 - Birch Hill
 - Chena Lake & Tanana Lakes Rec Areas
 - Isberg Trails
 - Skyline Ridge
 - Elementary Schools (Pearl Creek, Two Rivers, Salcha)
- Those within other agencies' management areas
 - UAF
 - ADF&G
 - State Parks
 - BLM White Mountains
- Other trail systems
 - Goldstream Valley Trails
 - Chinook Conservation Area
 - Ester Singletrack
 - Skarland Ski Trail
- RS2477 Trails

Trails Proposed for Public Dedication

The 2006 Trail Plan includes 44 trails proposed for public dedication. Throughout the years, several sections of trails have been dedicated to the public across different parcels. Among the proposed trails, only 19 have complete dedication since the Trail Plan's original adoption. These include several RS2477 trails (formally recognized through a State of Alaska process during the 1990s) and trails platted through the FNSB's subdivision process.

Other Existing Non-Dedicated Recreational Trails

The 1984 trail inventory remains somewhat relevant today. There are trails on the ground in use by members of the community (privately or publicly) that are not dedicated or managed by the FNSB or other public agencies. The Trails Plan Update is seeking information from the public to learn where these trails are and which are of significance to the degree that they should be recommended for dedication in the updated Plan.

Currently Planned Trail Projects

The FNSB Parks Department typically takes on one or two major trail projects each year, most often funded through the Alaska Recreational Trails Program grant. Grant funds and Borough resources are primarily directed to trails on FNSB-owned land or recreation areas formally managed by FNSB that have a master plan. Development needs and projects that solve problems on these trail systems are prioritized over trail systems where the Borough has a lesser ownership interest. Due to the backlog of maintenance and development needs in FNSB recreation areas, lack of trail maintenance budget, limited available grant funds and programs, limited staff capacity for project management, and lack of necessary access rights, the Parks Department rarely addresses issues on trails in the Trail Plan, regardless of Category (A, B, or C).

Project direction is also guided by the FNSB Capital Improvement Plan (CIP). The CIP is updated every two years and outlines capital projects funding priorities over the next 10 years and “beyond.” Projects may be fully or partially funded through the Borough’s CIP fund, or partially or fully funded through external grant programs. On February 24, 2022 the Assembly passed Resolution No. 2022-03 adopting the FY 2023 CIP. The FY 2023 CIP includes a number of trail-specific projects, as well as upgrades to Chena Lake and Tanana Lakes Recreation Areas that include trail system improvements. Trail-specific projects include:

- Isberg Recreation Area Master Plan Implementation (Funding Beyond FY33, \$3.14M)
 - Develop the Isberg Recreation Area according to the adopted 2007 Master Plan. Improvements include hardening existing trails; constructing new trails; building a new trailhead; and installing a restroom, wayfinding and interpretive signage.
- Skyline Ridge Park Trail System Development (Funding Beyond FY33, \$1.03M)
 - Develop Skyline Ridge Park’s trail system and connect to the Goldstream Valley Public Use Area. Improvements will include trailhead facilities and wayfinding, many miles of new trail, selective clearing and removal of abandoned Army installation infrastructure.
- Peede Road Recreation Development (Funding FY30, \$2.57M)
 - Develop recreation access to Peede Road Open Space: road surface improvements, trailhead parking, restroom, wayfinding, construct one-mile interpretive trail loop, build connection to Chena Lake Rec Area, fix motorized trails, remove litter.
- Equinox Marathon Trail Extension and Completion (Funding Beyond FY33, \$2.41M)
 - Secure public access easements and construct trail sections including the Farmer Mine connector, install wayfinding, improve trailheads at key access points. Improves access to multiple trail systems including the proposed Alaska Long Trail, connecting Fairbanks to Seward.
- FNSB Public Community trails Improvement Program (Funding FY23, \$350K annually)
 - Complete trail improvements including securing public access to the FNSB Trail System as proposed in the Comprehensive Recreational Trail Plan. Phased annually, 1 of 18

priority trails will be surveyed and missing easements purchased or negotiated. The project will include critical connections, new construction, or restoration for routes as connecting easements are purchased. Design funding shall be included out of the construction phase per project.

System Needs

Common Problems

Access Issues

As discussed under *Dedication Status*, there are significant miles of existing trails that lack public access, impacting management and maintenance of those trails. Lack of public access also impacts FNSB's ability to establish and maintain trailheads, provide on-trail wayfinding, conduct maintenance activities, and advise trail users where to recreate. Trail users have expressed that lack of knowledge on whether a trail is private or public is a common limitation to their use of trails or is of significant concern.

Conditions

Poor trail conditions in the FNSB are mostly associated with entrenchment, erosion, and vegetative overgrowth.

The primary culprits for entrenchment and erosion issues are trail alignment and inappropriate uses of seasonally wet trails. Many local trails are aligned on ridge tops. Along ridges, years of use, especially by motorized vehicles, have caused the trail to become entrenched. When the trail tread is below the grade of the surrounding land, water collects in the trail and cannot drain. Sediment is continuously displaced as trail users splash through the puddles, and the problem worsens over time. This problem is solved by filling ponds with a lot of hard material (very costly) or by realigning the trail to the side of a hill where runoff can drain from the trail naturally. Ridge trails often enter or exit the high, flat ridge by way of a steep "fall-line" heading straight up or down the hillside. Fall-line segments do not allow water to leave the trail, rather channel it and result in erosion of the trail tread. Solutions for fall-line alignments involve installing drainage features and/or realigning the trail to take a path less steep than the slope of the hill. Entrenchment and erosion happen far more easily on already wet and fragile, organic soils. These conditions are suited only for low impact modes of travel or when the ground is frozen and hard. Use of ATVs on poor soils has created deep channels and ruts throughout the local trail systems. The problem persists until a new, better alignment is provided for the ATV use, or the fragile ground is artificially hardened to accommodate the use.

Usability & Awareness

Residents and visitors new to local trails or trail activities often report difficulty finding where to go. Established trailheads, restrooms, kiosks and maps, wayfinding signage, and online information are all very rare, especially considering the total miles of trail in the area. The result is an extensive trail system that is frequented by a smaller number of dedicated and familiar users, but uninviting to the average public or new or novice visitor. Lack of developed access and maps are often a result of legal access issues; the FNSB is careful not to promote use of trails that may send visitors into trespass. Resolving legal access issues may be the key to open the door to developing trails, improving usability and promoting their use.