

Existing Conditions

Natural Characteristics

The Matanuska-Borough's 62 acre Matanuska River Park is a valuable natural asset. A major site feature is the park's bedrock substrate along its northern edge that deflects the Matanuska River eastward, protecting park uplands (and Palmer lands generally) from erosion.

The Matanuska River is a large, glacial-fed braided river with continually shifting water channels. A USGS analysis of river bank erosion comparing aerials in 1949, 1962, and 2006 show that although riverbank edges have shifted upstream and downstream of the site, the park's rock outcrops and river's edge have held fast over the decades. These outcrops, along with dramatic steep slopes and elevation changes on portions of the site (see map, right) also offer scenic viewpoints to the glacier-fed Matanuska River, and the Chugach and Talkeetna Mountain ranges.

The area's natural landforms have played a role in local history. In the early 1900s George Palmer, for whom the City of Palmer is named, established a trading post on the Matanuska River, opposite the park, on an old Dena'ina and Ahna trade route between the interior and saltwater. During the Matanuska Colony era, the area's glacial soil deposits attracted Max Sherrod to establish a 90-acre farm. The area's soils, said to be 35-100 feet deep and cut like chocolate cake, helped Max win the Alaska State Fair's first largest cabbage contest with a 23 pounder in 1941.

User Characteristics

The Matanuska River Park is one of the Mat-Su Borough's most treasured parks, and has been developed through decades of volunteer and community investment. Residents and visitors consider the park a "gem" because of its scenic setting, river access, network of non-motorized forest footpaths, and the quality and scale of available community and visitor infrastructure. The park is also an attraction for families and residents, providing sheltered picnic areas, outdoor play spaces (a large grassy play field, playground

Site History and the Sherrod Complex

In 1971 Max and Dorothy Sherrod donated their historic farm to the Borough. After land was set aside for school facilities and ball-fields, the Borough set aside 30 acres for a park. In 1986, the Borough doubled the Matanuska River Park's size to 62 acres by purchasing an adjacent forested riverfront parcel from Herbert and Claire Kopperud, who donated the equipment and labor to create a turn-key campground.

Today, the rich Bodenburg Silt loam soils on the western upland portion of the park are well-drained and support a day use area and camping. The eastern, forested lowland portions of the site have a very different soil profile (Kidazqueni-nikalsen complex, 0-2 percent slopes). These silty soils support a towering cottonwood forest and a few single track footpaths, but are poorly drained and easily erode if the vegetative mat is broken. Adding to the potential for erosion and spot-specific drainage issues, windblown glacial silts continue to accumulate and create dune-like steep features, especially along the site's eastern bank.

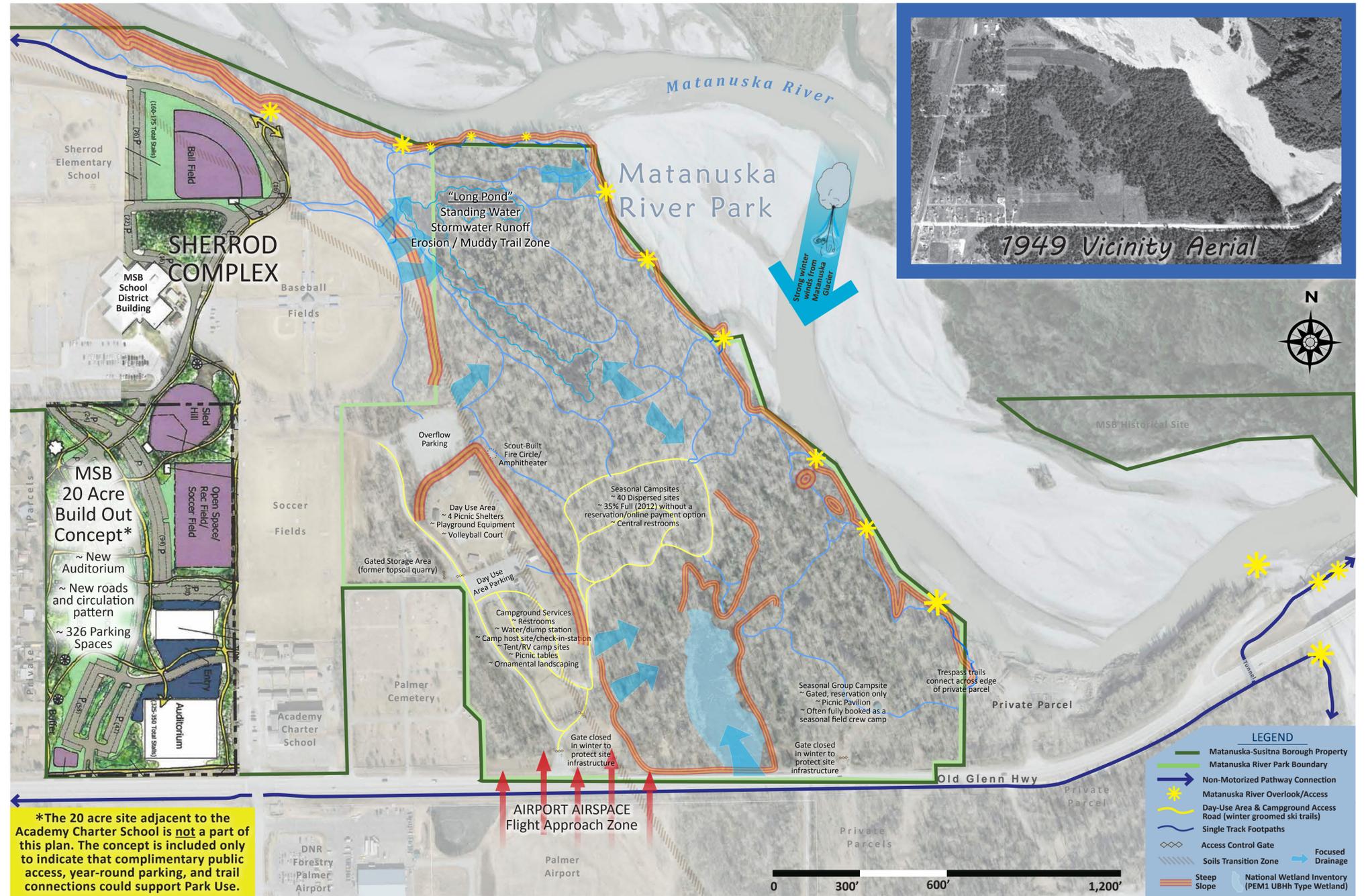
In terms of site water features, the steep slope and soils transition angling north-south across the park creates lowland ponding. A large "frog pond" on the south end of the site is listed in the National Wetland Inventory and is valued as an outdoor teaching site by nearby schools. A long drainage feature to its north is conversely missing some of the aquatic habitat and vegetation characteristic of a mature wetland. Anecdotal statements from longtime residents and 1940s aerials indicate that this ponding has expanded over time. Moreover, the water has algae growth (see photo, below) likely related to stormwater runoff and excess fertilizer from upland sports fields.

The site ponds and towering forest along the river offer habitat for eagles, falcons, frogs, and many other species. It is enjoyed for bird and wildlife viewing, and science education by nearby schools.

equipment, and an outdoor volleyball site) forest trails and river access. A seasonal campground and RV park hosts visitors from Alaska, the lower 48, and around the world.

The park is well-loved and used both because of what it offers, and because it is well integrated into the fabric of the Palmer community. The park is easy walking distance from downtown Palmer, nearby schools and residential areas (although sidewalk and trail access could be strengthened). The park is also well-located for highway travelers.

The Borough's Sherrod lands today host multiple school facilities and sports fields which inter-relate well with the Park. A newly acquired 19-acre Borough parcel will add more facilities and add complimentary access and parking (see concept, right). Other adjacent uses include Palmer's Pioneer Cemetery, of historical community significance, and private lands to the east that experience some trespassing by Park trail users.



***The 20 acre site adjacent to the Academy Charter School is not a part of this plan. The concept is included only to indicate that complimentary public access, year-round parking, and trail connections could support Park Use.**



Matanuska River Park's entrance includes wayfinding signs, a site map, a dog waste station and gates that are closed in the winter.



A popular day use area provides picnic pavilions, play equipment, a volley ball area, grass fields and scenic views to Pioneer Peak.



User-created paths in the forest and along the river are enjoyed by walkers, runners, and mountain bikers.



On-site ponding apparently has expanded over the decades, potentially as a result of upland runoff, soils, and changes to natural drainage patterns.



The park connects Palmer with its waterfront and looks across the water toward the historic site of George Palmer's original trading post.



A visitor check-in station and host site are open seasonally to support campground operations and provide oversight.



The campground loop has 40 sites, and provides a rustic, dispersed camping experience that many visitors enjoy.

Matanuska River Park Master Plan

Adopted MARCH 4, 2014
Ordinance #14-040, IM #14-046
Prepared by USKH

Matanuska-Susitna Borough



Desired Future Conditions

Community Gem

- The Matanuska-Susitna Borough's Matanuska River Park is a well-maintained, non-motorized, family-and community-oriented recreation and open space attraction showcasing Palmer's scenic riverfront setting, history, and community pride.
- Community investment focuses on preserving the site's overall scenic and natural character, while developing and maintaining complimentary park features to a high standard.

Something for Everyone

- Park visitors of all ages and physical abilities are able to enjoy the park and find outdoor recreation opportunities suited to their needs:
 - Parents and Children:** The park supports unstructured play and family outings with open fields, play equipment, picnic shelters, easy walking and biking trails, and youth group activity and learning opportunities.
 - Youth:** The park creates a constructive recreational and social outlet by building a new Palmer Bike Park. The attraction includes technical, pre-engineered bike features in a well-defined area, and is developed with youth sweat equity, programming, and oversight to ensure it functions as a positive park feature.
 - Adults:** The park seeks to provide gathering spaces for picnics, group activities, and unstructured play and exercise. Features include an outdoor volleyball area, informal play field, walking, running, biking and ski opportunities, and riverfront access.
 - Older Adults:** The area provides a safe and environment for enjoyable daily walking with a trail built to Americans with Disabilities Association (ADA) standards, with occasional seating and viewpoint enhancements.
 - Tourists:** The site welcomes independent travelers and provides a quality experience on a seasonal basis, showcasing Palmer's scenic and historical features. Camping and visitor facilities are rustic, but well-maintained with services provided on a payment basis to enhance revenue streams for park upgrades and maintenance.

Co-Located Borough Facilities

- Adjacent public entities in the Sherrod Complex (sports fields, schools, school district building, etc.) provide a complimentary and cost-effective mix of year-round uses, amenities, and infrastructure.
- To the extent possible, parking is located offsite on adjacent Borough lands with trail links to enable the park to retain its open spaces.

Connect to the Riverfront

- A new Matanuska Riverfront Trail enhances public river access, creating a promenade with overlooks at scenic points, linked to an expanded regional non-motorized pathway network. Safety education and strategic barriers address Matanuska River access issues and risks.
- Options are considered for extending the public riverfront experience up and down stream. Potential waterfront private parcel acquisitions and/or easements are explored to provide public access and/or extend the riverfront trail.
- As the regional population grows, the potential for creating a public riverfront attraction is explored (see opportunity site, right) to potentially include a large waterfront pavilion for public events/rental, a recreation facility with decks and a roof-top view area, a nature center

with rental cabins, a kayak or boat launch, and/or another option that takes full advantage of the site views, and attracts residents and visitors.

Window on the Past

- Engage residents in appreciating Palmer's historical river connections, including the Dena'ina and Ahtna trade route between the interior and saltwater, and George Palmer's trading post across the river through river access and interpretation.
- Work with the community non-profit Palmer Pioneer Cemetery to expand their operating space northward (after an existing park stockpile area is decommissioned) and respectfully interpret the historical cemetery for park users and visitors.
- Continue to recognize and honor the important contributions of past donors such as Max and Dorothy Sherrod, Herbert and Claire Kopperud, and the many volunteers including Eagle Scouts who have invested in Matanuska River Park.

Respect Natural Site Features

- The site's bedrock and riverbank vegetation are retained for their flood protection value, with allowances for minor enhancements at key view and riverfront access points. In any areas where the riverbank does not feature rock substrate, maintain a generous erosion setback.
- Existing site vegetation is highly valued, including native forest and ornamental landscaping. Clearing is minimized, with allowances for proactive removal of dead and down trees, authorized site development, viewshed management, and safety/security.
- Non-motorized trail users enjoy low impact soft-tread trails built to sustainable standards that are adapted to the erosion-prone, water-holding soils present on much of the site.
- Upland runoff and drainage are managed using Low Impact Development (LID) and measures that clean water, minimize lowland soil saturation, and restore positive site drainage.
- The southern "Frog Pond" is preserved and enhanced as wetland habitat with some footbridges and boardwalks added to enable appropriate access and nature education.

Leverage and Protect Community Investments

- Work with the City of Palmer, the Pioneer Cemetery, Palmer Bike Park, Alaska Trails, The Boy Scouts of America, and other partners to create a positive future for the park that stretches public investments and enhances use.
- Continue to use gates, a seasonal site host, and other measures as needed to protect the park.
- Work with the City of Palmer to minimize park impacts from future airport expansion while supporting air transportation safety.

Maintain a Quality Community Attraction

- Implementation over the next 20 years helps meet projected recreation and open space needs for the Palmer area. Phasing priorities include:
 - Phase I** – Upgrade and maintain existing facilities, while working with partners to ensure that the park provides "something for everyone."
 - Phase II** – Build the Forest Trail, and address site run-off, drainage, and water quality issues.
 - Phase III** – Finalize the riverfront opportunity site plan concept and begin implementation.
 - Phase IV** – Build a Matanuska Riverfront Trail with links extending river access.

Activity Zones

1 Active Use Zone ≈ 20 Acres*

- Work with partners to enhance and maintain the day use area for family and community-oriented uses.
- Work with partners to integrate a new Palmer Bike Park within a well-defined, currently under-utilized area (see map). Include pre-engineered bike skill features and a trail course to support multi-age/ability recreation:



- Provide a revenue-generating seasonal campground that enhances independent tourism in Palmer, and that showcases historic and natural elements.
- Focus all major Park access, infrastructure, and services in this zone to a high quality standard.
- Create an ADA accessible multi-use pathway:

Matanuska Riverfront Trail

This is a high capacity trail that connects Palmer to its waterfront, provides a transportation link to regional and community destinations, and supports tourism-day trips. Sited for ADA access and easy slopes, with a few scenic destination overlooks.

| | |
|----------------|--|
| Designed Use | Pedestrian (USFS Trail Class 5) |
| Managed Use | Wheelchair, Hiker/Pedestrian, Bicycle. |
| Prohibited Use | All Motorized Use |
| Target Design | Paved, ADA, multi-use trail designed to maximize aesthetic and scenic values. Minimize forest clearing, and incorporate a 3' deep root guard to stop the asphalt damage typical of trails in cottonwood forests. |

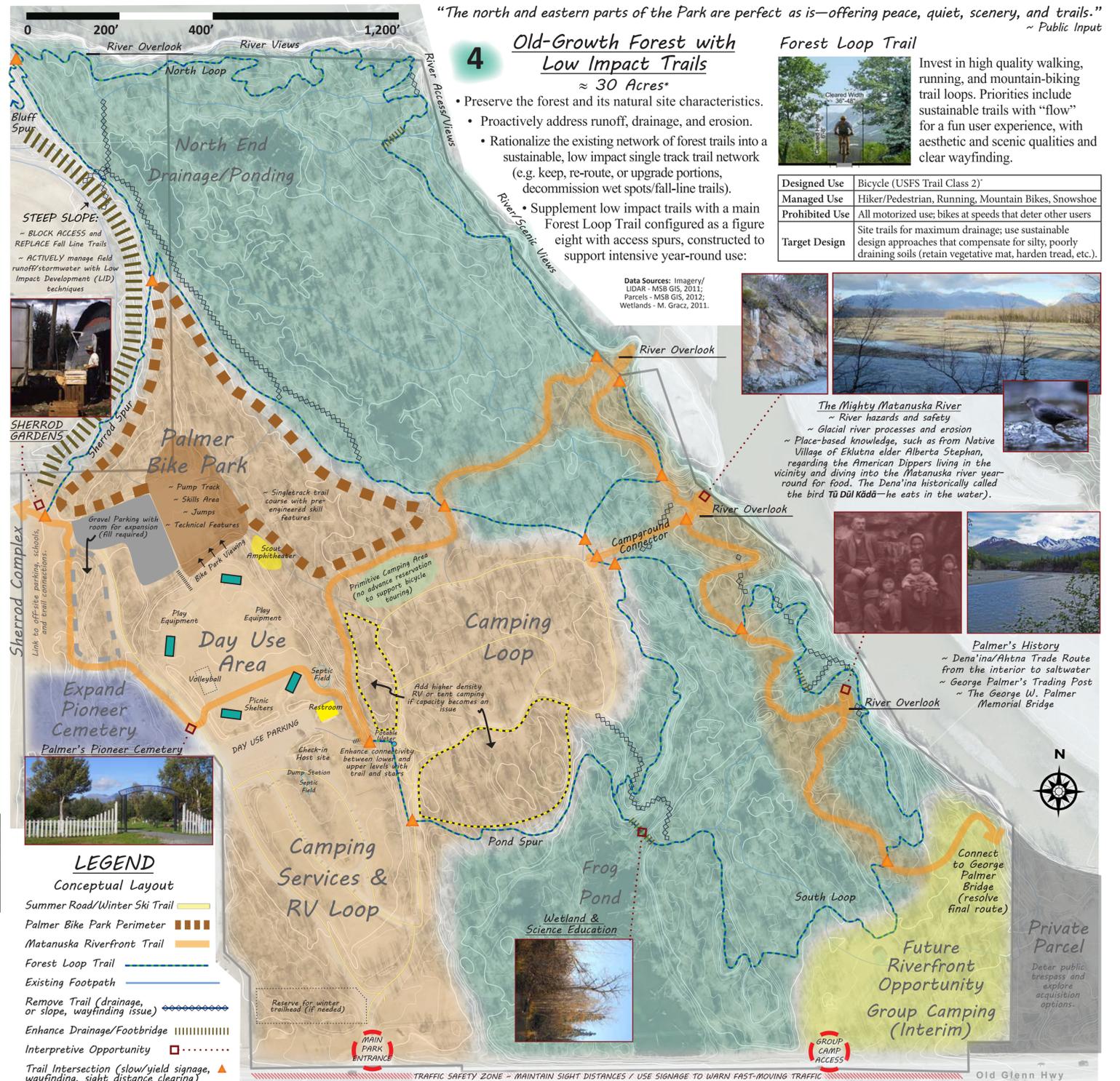
2 Pioneer Cemetery Expansion ≈ 4 Acres*

- Decommission Borough stockpile and transfer lands.

3 Riverfront Opportunity Site ≈ 8 Acres*

- Retain this scenic waterfront property as a group campsite while exploring long-term opportunities for a river-oriented destination. Consider the costs/benefits of acquiring waterfront parcels to the east and south, and creating a larger public attraction to include the Borough's historic George Palmer Trading Post site, linked along the river, and tied together with the bridge and a new multi-use trail.

* Intended acreage (the activity zone map is not to scale and is only intended to indicate relationships).
Disclaimer: Planning is conceptual; due diligence is needed to finalize layouts (e.g., wetland delineation).
Thanks to Alaska State Parks for their trail class graphics. Additional information on USFS trail class standards are online: www.fs.fed.us/recreation/programs/trail-management/trail-fundamentals/



"The north and eastern parts of the Park are perfect as is—offering peace, quiet, scenery, and trails." ~ Public Input

4 Old-Growth Forest with Low Impact Trails ≈ 30 Acres*

- Preserve the forest and its natural site characteristics.
- Proactively address runoff, drainage, and erosion.
- Rationalize the existing network of forest trails into a sustainable, low impact single track trail network (e.g. keep, re-route, or upgrade portions, decommission wet spots/fall-line trails).
- Supplement low impact trails with a main Forest Loop Trail configured as a figure eight with access spurs, constructed to support intensive year-round use:

Forest Loop Trail

Invest in high quality walking, running, and mountain-biking trail loops. Priorities include sustainable trails with "flow" for a fun user experience, with aesthetic and scenic qualities and clear wayfinding.

| | |
|----------------|---|
| Designed Use | Bicycle (USFS Trail Class 2) |
| Managed Use | Hiker/Pedestrian, Running, Mountain Bikes, Snowshoe |
| Prohibited Use | All motorized use; bikes at speeds that deter other users |
| Target Design | Site trails for maximum drainage; use sustainable design approaches that compensate for silty, poorly draining soils (retain vegetative mat, harden tread, etc.). |



The Mighty Matanuska River
~ River hazards and safety
~ Glacial river processes and erosion
~ Place-based knowledge, such as from Native Village of Eklutna elder Alberta Stephan, regarding the American Dippers living in the vicinity and diving into the Matanuska river year-round for food. The Dena'ina historically called the bird Tū Dūi Kādā—he eats in the water.



Palmer's History
~ Dena'ina/Ahtna Trade Route from the interior to saltwater
~ George Palmer's Trading Post
~ The George W. Palmer Memorial Bridge



Future Riverfront Opportunity
Group Camping (Interim)



"Make the Park a trail hub linked to schools, play fields, the Mat River/George Palmer Bridge/Butte Trail, the rail trail/Downtown, and fairgrounds." ~ Public Input

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