

Alaska Trails Initiative

STATEWIDE TRAILS INVESTMENT STRATEGY

Work in Progress DRAFT

April 2020



Out for a socially distanced stroll, Sunday April 19, 2020. Whether it is access to a wilderness valley, or an in-town getaway, trails are a valuable, much-loved resource in Alaska, in all kinds of circumstances. *Source: Chris Beck*



SPONSORED BY ALASKA TRAILS & GROWING ALLIANCE OF STATEWIDE PARTNERS;
FUNDING PARTNERS INCLUDE:

Sitka Trail Works | Juneau Trail Mix | Mat Su Parks and Trails | Anchorage Park Foundation |
NPS Rivers Trails Conservation Assistance | Kenai Mtn Turnagain Arm National Heritage
Area | USFS Alaska Regional Office



INTRODUCTION

Alaska has only just begun to take full advantage of our State's phenomenal outdoor recreation resources.

Rich with vast wilderness landscapes, sky-high mountains, forests of sun-dappled birch and moss covered cedars, pristine creeks fed by glaciers, and blue coastal waters filled with marine life - Alaska is yet to fully plan for and capitalize on the economic, health and community benefits of our magnificent natural setting. This *Statewide Trails Investment Strategy* focuses on ways to build on and expand trail infrastructure to help Alaska make the most of our outdoor recreation potential.



Hiking Angel Rocks to Chena Hot Springs trail on a summer day. Source: Bryant Wright

Specific goals for the Trails Initiative and the investments identified in this document include:

- build a stronger, more durable Alaska economy, particularly at this critical time when AK needs both near term jobs and investments to create lasting, diversified economic health
- attract and retain residents, businesses, retirees
- make it easier and more inviting to lead active, healthy lives
- help expand diversity in outdoor recreation users
- guide growth to help sustain what makes Alaska unique

STATUS AND CONTENTS

This is a work-in-progress draft. It covers a large area of a big state, and presents information on over 50 discrete trail projects, each with its own complexities. While every effort has been made to accurately convey the recommendations provided by our partners, we apologize in advance for the inevitable omissions, errors and nuances lost in translation. Those are the failings of the principal authors, not our partners. The good news is we will keep this process going, and continue to refine, improve, and expand this document over the coming months and years.

Contents of this Draft Investment Strategy Document

1. Introduction & Overview (this chapter)
2. Recommendations for Site-Specific Trail Investments
 - Fairbanks region
 - Denali
 - Matanuska-Susitna
 - Anchorage
 - Seward to Anchorage
 - Northern Southeast – Juneau, Sitka
 - *Coming soon* – projects in other locations around AK
3. Recommendations for Statewide Trails Policies, for example strategies for:
 - capital and operations funding
 - streamlining trail approvals
 - maximizing the economic benefits of outdoor recreation
 - guiding growth to better stewarding Alaska's outdoor recreation resources
4. Appendices
 - Summary of Federal and State funding opportunities
 - Summarized version of Site-Specific Trail Investments (extract of section 2 above)

POTENTIAL FOR ROBUST OUTDOOR ECONOMY IN ALASKA

People and communities across Alaska recognize that outdoor recreation supports health, contributes to a high quality of life and—perhaps most importantly— drives spending that supports business, creates jobs and generates tax revenue that pays for schools and other public services. Investing in outdoor infrastructure attracts employers, residents, retirees, and skilled workforce, ensuring those communities thrive economically and socially. More than one job in ten in Alaska is tied to tourism and outdoor recreation spending¹. Smart investments could further grow this dynamic sector; good planning can make sure we grow while maintaining the quality of our natural settings and communities.

These numbers and the data in the sidebar showcase the important role outdoor recreation plays in the Alaskan economy and hint at the potential for even larger growth. Most of the outdoor recreation-related spending and job creation takes place in the summer months between May and September. However, Alaska has great potential to develop winter recreation options. Improvements in access and usability of winter trails, for snowmachines, fat tire biking and skiing, can turn Alaska into a stronger four-season destination.



FAST FACTS

\$412 BILLION

Outdoor recreation is the “Sleeping Giant of The US Economy,” providing 2.2% of the total US GDP, larger than fishing, farming, forestry, utilities, or telecommunications.²

\$3.2 BILLION

Annual in-state spending tied to AK’s outdoor industry³

DEMAND FOR NATURE WALKS & HIKING

The fastest growing activity for both air and cruise out-of-state Alaska visitors 2011-2016⁴

+ \$137 MILLION/YEAR

Extra spending if even just half of visitors added “ONE MORE DAY” (OMD) to their AK trip⁵

TRAIL USERS SPEND MORE, STAY LONGER

International tourists to New Zealand who participate in walking and hiking spend \$3600/trip vs. \$2800 spent by all holiday visitors. The average stay in New Zealand is 19 days; in Alaska 9 days⁶

AT LEFT: Alaska is a great place to be in the winter, be it out on your snow machine (Source BLM); or biking on the trails at Campbell Tract (Source: Bob Wick, BLM)

¹ Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development

Can't be said enough: **Alaska has only just begun to take full advantage of our State's phenomenal outdoor recreation resources.**

The goal of the *Investment Strategy* is to highlight trail projects and policies that can bring real returns on investment in Alaska, building from the input from our many partner organizations, agencies, businesses, and interest groups. Identified projects include better maintenance of existing trails; construction of new trails; new hut to hut systems; new access points and trailheads; and better wayfinding and branding of signature destination trails.

It is important to note that hand and hand with new investments is the critical need for expanded agency budgets to maintain and manage these systems, and partnerships for ongoing maintenance.

We need to deliver more of the experiences featured in the marketing materials used all over Alaska



FAST FACTS

MORE THAN \$126 M STATE & \$88 M MUNICIPAL REVENUES

generated by AK visitor industry through taxes and fees; funding a wide range community services ⁷

\$60 M backlog

in deferred maintenance of State Park infrastructure ⁸

\$3M IN SAVINGS

Due to health benefits of trails in 2015 Mat-Su study ⁹

81% OF ALASKANS

Engage in outdoor activities; Alaska's % is highest nationwide ¹⁰

50,000 hours estimated investment of volunteers maintaining & building trails each year in AK

RECREATION RETURNS ON INVESTMENTS

Study after study shows money invested in trails and outdoor recreation brings returns of 3 to 10 times the initial investment.

References:

² U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis. (2018). Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account: Prototype Statistics for 2012-2016

³ Economic Development In Alaska Impacts And Opportunities Outdoor Recreation. The University Of Alaska Center For Economic Development, March 2019

⁴ For visitors coming by air, participation grew from 38% in 2011 to 46% in 2016; for cruise visitors, from 20% to 26%. AVSP VII - Section 5 Visitor Activities

⁵ McDowell Group. Economic Impact of Alaska's Visitor Industry 2017. Prepared for Alaska Department of Commerce, Community, and Economic Development, Division of Economic Development

⁶ NZ Tourist Special Interest Report; Walking and Hiking, 2014

⁷ Revenues ATIA <http://www.tourismworksforak.org/industry-data.html>

⁸ State of Alaska, Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation

⁹ Economic Benefits of Trails, Parks, and Open Space in the Mat-Su Borough, 2015. Earth Economics

¹⁰ OIA. (2017). The Outdoor Recreation Economy.

PARTNERS² AND SUPPORTERS (*See below for definition of support)

The Investment Strategy is prepared by the Alaska Trails Initiative, sponsored by Anchorage-based nonprofit Alaska Trails. This document would not be possible without active participation and support from dozens of individuals and agencies. Alaska Trails is deeply grateful for the active participation and contributions from the following individuals, listed by area of focus.

Seward to Anchorage Trail Projects

Mackenzie Barnwell – Alaska Huts Association
Judy Bittner – Iditarod Nat'l Historic Trail Alliance
Tim Charnon, Karen Kromrey, Alicia King – USFS Chugach National Forest
Jessica Szlag, Lia Slemons – Kenai Mountains-Turnagain Arm Heritage Area (KMTA)

Mat Su Trail Projects

Wes Hoskins – Mat-Su Trails and Parks Foundation
Stuart Leidner – AK DNR Parks & Outdoor Recreation
Joe Meehan, AK Department of Fish & Game
Eric Phillips, George Hoden - Mat Su Borough
Bonnie Quill, Mat Su CVB

Southeast Trail Projects

Lynne Brandon, Sitka Trail Works
Ryan O'Shaughnessy, Juneau Trail Mix
Erik Boraas, Former Juneau Trails Mix
Dan Kirkwood, Pack Creek/Juneau Econ Development

Denali Trail Projects

Trena Haugen, Clay Walker – Denali Borough
Miriam Valentine, Jennifer Johnston - Denali Nat'l Park

Fairbanks Trail Projects

Alison Arians, State Division of Forestry
Deb Hickok, Visit Fairbanks
Brooks Ludwig, State Division of Parks
Geoffrey Orth, Interior Trail Association
Eric Troyer, multiple trail organizations
Jon Underwood, Happy Trails
Bryant Wright, Fairbanks No. Star Borough
Glen Hemingson, Skylar Travel

Anchorage Trail Projects

Joe Hall, Kurt Henzel – AK DNR DPOR
Chugach State Park Citizens Advisory Board, (in particular Mark “St Mark” Spano, Claire LeClair, Kevin Keeler, Shannon Donovan, David Hart, Irene Turlletes, & Joe Hall)
Josh Durand, Steve Rafuse, Maeve Nevins – Muni. of Anchorage Parks Department
Beth Nordlund, Diana Rhoades – Anchorage Park Foundation
Bill Popp, Emma Irish – Anchorage Economic Development Corporation
Julie Saupe, Visit Anchorage

Statewide/Multiple Sections

Keith Comstock, State of AK, DCCED
Mike Downs, Rivers Trails Conservation Assistance, NPS
Ricky Gease, Alaska DNR DPOR
Lee Hart, Alaska Outdoor Alliance
James King, Sharon Seim - USFS Alaska Regional Office
Julie Jessen, Sarah Leonard, Josh Howes chair and other members of the ATIA Tourism Policy & Planning Committee

Jean Ayers – AK State Parks LWCF
Wendy Sailors, Alaska DNR DPOR
Don Striker, Peter Christianson – NPS
Jeff San Juan, AIDEA
Erin Dovichin, Alaska Venture Fund
Patrick Shannon, National Forest Foundation
Reps of a range of outdoor rec businesses

IMPORTANT! DEFINING “SUPPORT” AMONG PARTNERS & CONTRIBUTORS

This is a work in progress draft. Projects included were developed through months of work with representatives of state and federal agencies, local governments, regional marketing organizations, trails-oriented businesses, interest groups and nonprofits; specific contributors are listed above. We feel confident saying the majority of those listed actively support the goals of this Trail Initiative and the recommendations in their portion of the draft document and are committed to make good faith efforts to make them happen. **However, it is important to note**, that even where support is given, it does not mean these are the only or singular priorities of these organizations, agencies and individuals. Likewise, while some of those listed contributed helpful suggestions, they have not reviewed the full draft nor given formal support. In coming months, as this Draft is further reviewed and refined, we will work to further solidify and clarify support for this Initiative and the recommendations presented here.

Thanks again to everyone for all the great ideas and contributions!

² If we missed your name, misspelled your name, or put it when you prefer not – our sincere apologies! Let us know, we'll get it right.

OUR PROCESS

The recommendations in this document come out of over two years of hard work by a great many people, summarized below:

Spring 2018-Spring 2019:

- Gathering of the trail advocates, fundraising for staff support
- Compiling information on trail benefits, projects and policies
- Culminating outcome was *Spring 2019 Trails Report* (available at AK Trails website)

Spring 2019-Spring 2020

- Second, more ambitious round of fundraising for staff support
- Creation of volunteer trail “Trail Task Forces” in each of the regions in the “Seward-Fairbanks Adventure Corridor” (at right)
- Multiple meetings with the “Trail Task Forces”

Next Steps

- Review and refine these recommendations
- Work together to implement these projects & policies

SOME DETAILS ON CONTENTS

The document includes trails projects in six distinct geographic regions in Alaska. Each chapter starts with the introduction to the specific concerns for each region, followed by detailed descriptions for the proposed projects.

A table for each topic summarizes information on each project; one key topic in this table is explained below:

Priority and Status This category synthesizes all the variables that go into deciding what projects should be included in the investment strategy. These considerations include project readiness, strength of public and agency support, presence of a clear lead and champion, and the magnitude of expected benefits. Rankings are made in two categories:

Priority

- Near term (highest priority for near term action)
- Mid term (in between)
- Longer term (promising, but work to be done, to better understand issues, options, feasibility, costs & benefits)

Status

- “Shovel Ready”: project has permits, designs, cost estimates and is ready to proceed
- Planning in Progress: project is approaching shovel ready; more detailed work is needed before action is possible
- Planning needed: long-term potential, but significant work remains to be completed



ABOVE: The Seward to Fairbanks “Adventure Corridor” Five of the six featured geographic regions (Southeast AK is the sixth, not pictured here): Seward-to-Anchorage, Anchorage, Mat-Su Valley, Denali Borough, and Fairbanks.

FEEDBACK AND NEXT STEPS

We hope this document provides enough supporting material and evidence to make a case for the need of more investment for trails in Alaska. We are welcoming your thoughts and feedback on this subject, and can be reached at Alaska Trails Initiative – contacts below.

“The Trails Initiative and Statewide Trails Investment Strategy are very impressive! With our current world situation, the importance of access to outdoor space has been so popular.”
- Melinda “Mindy” Eggleston, President, Delta Junction Trails Association. 4.21.90 Email

[Contacts for more info, for submittals of recommendations additions or changes](#)

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Note: Alaska Trails Initiative produced an *Alaska Statewide Trails Report* in 2019 (available at AK Trails website). Updated versions of key sections of that report are being developed, to be uploaded on the Alaska Trails website. These include sections on economic benefits, market trends, and a graphic/photographic overview of the diverse benefits and beneficiaries of trails.



IMAGES ABOVE, CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT: 1) Two hikers start the gradual climb from Beaver Creek Wild and Scenic River on their way to the eastern end of the 20-mile-long Summit Trail. *Source: BLM*; 2) Biking on Denali Park Road. *Source: NPS, Kent Miller*; 3) Two snowmobile riders reach the top of the big hill out of Fossil Creek on the Windy Creek Trail in the White Mountains National Recreation Area, Alaska. *Source: BLM*; 4) Kids run on trails at Eagle River Nature Center. *Source: Visit Anchorage, JodyO.Photos*