BIG LAKE COMMUNITY COMPREHENSIVE PLAN UPDATE
(DRAFT Issues & Goals Report)

Project Sponsored by
The Matanuska Susitna Borough Planning Department,

With support from the Big Lake Community Council and community volunteers

Project Developed by
Big Lake Community Planning Team - Members:

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Woodbury.

With Assistance from
Agnew::Beck Consulting, LLC
March 2008

Photos Agnew::Beck Consulting
Please Come

to the

Public Workshop, Open House & Potluck
Friday: May 16, Meet & Greet Potluck 6:30 - 9 p.m.
Saturday: May 17, Public Workshop 10 a.m - 4 p.m.
at Houston High School

On-site child care will be provided.

Help shape Big Lake’s future by sharing your ideas. The Mat-Su Borough needs your help to update Big Lake’s Community Comprehensive Plan.

Residents, landowners, homeowners, recreators, business people and all other interested folks and community members, please contribute your vision for the benefit of Big Lake’s future generations.

For more information, please email: shelly@agnewbeck.com or call: 907.222.5424

“...It is the intent ... to learn of and respect each community’s desires for its present and future way of life and to insure that these desires become each community’s portion of the Matanuska-Susitna Borough comprehensive plan....”

— Big Lake Comprehensive Plan, 1996
Big Lake Issues & Goals Report::DRAFT

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COMMUNITY VISION

“Big Lake is finally becoming a community.”

Planning Team Member

What do you want for your community?

The purpose of a comprehensive plan is to help residents, landowners and businesses think about and define their hopes about the future of Big Lake, and then to set goals and strategies to move towards this future.

A first step in this process is to articulate a broad vision for the kind of place people want the community to become. Questions to answer include:

- What are some of the qualities of the Big Lake that people particularly enjoy and that need to be kept or strengthened?
- What characteristics, what services and facilities, need to be changed or improved?
- What kind of community does Big Lake want to become?
- How much population growth does the community want?
- How much effort will the community make to create new jobs?
- Do Big Lake residents want to actively shape the future of the community?

Based on work by the community planning group some possible broad directions for Big Lake are presented below. This list can serve as a reference point for decisions on the more specific goals covered on the following pages.
What is Big Lake’s vision of what “community” means? What kind of place should Big Lake be in 20 years?

**A Low Density Bedroom Community** – a place with many of the qualities of the area as it is today, with large areas of open space, and limited commercial development.

**A Bigger & Somewhat Higher Density Bedroom Community** – a larger community with residential areas like Eagle River, but still with only limited commercial development.

**A Retirement & Second Home Community** – a place dominated by retirees and second homes with comparatively few year-round residents, limited local employment and commercial development.

**Main Street, Small Town Community** – a community with a stronger community core – more like a traditional American small town, with expanded commercial, civic services and employment; and a clearer sense of identity.

**Recreational Community** – a mix focused on maintenance and improvement of the area’s recreation and tourism resources. This would include retaining trails and open space; retaining good public access to Big Lake and other water bodies, and managing development to protect environmental and aesthetic values.

**Default Community – ‘Hands Off’ Alternative** – assumes no active effort by the community to guide the future. Likely outcomes include slow increase in population, slow expansion of development along the Big Lake road, some loss of traditional trails, risk of decline in water quality, open space and recreation opportunities.
INTRODUCTION

For some time now, Big Lake has been struggling with the complicated challenges that come with growth in rural Alaska. As in many other parts of Alaska, Big Lake residents are concluding that while they don’t welcome regulation, taxes, or more meetings, they nonetheless want to guide the future of their communities. To this end, the community council passed a Comprehensive Plan in 1996. A little over a decade later, Big Lake has elected to update that plan, as the community continues to evolve.

The Purpose of This Report

Updating the 1996 Big Lake Comprehensive Plan will entail a blend of identifying current issues and goals in the community and re-visiting the issues and goals identified in the 1996 Plan, in order to evaluate their relevance today and in the next 10 years and beyond.

This report summarizes the status of the 1996 Plan’s goals and recommendations as well as the initial conclusions that have been drawn about Big Lake’s current planning issues and goals from meetings with the Big Lake Planning Team. This report is meant to frame these points so that they can be considered by the community at the first Community Workshop in May. The report also offers background information about the Comprehensive Plan process, the people and organizations involved and the Big Lake Community itself. Sources for this report include…. This report was produced by Agnew::Beck.

The Comprehensive Planning Process

The process of creating the Big Lake Comprehensive Plan is anticipated to take about 18 months, and will involve a number of parties. First and foremost is community members themselves, who drive the entire process. Other participants include land and business owners, community councils, state and local governments, and large land owners like Native Corporations, the University of Alaska and the Alaska Railroad.

The Matanuska-Susitna Borough (Mat-Su Borough) encourages communities to develop comprehensive plans (Assembly Resolution 86-7; PC Resolution 93-27). The Mat-Su Borough helps communities prepare and implement plans by providing technical assistance, background information, staff and/or consultant support, and the opportunity to take part in the Mat-Su Borough’s annual capital improvements programs.

Generally, the Mat-Su Borough appoints a Planning Team to guide preparation of the Comprehensive Plan. For the Big Lake Plan, as required under Mat-Su Borough Resolution 07-02, a general notice was mailed to Big Lake area property owners and registered voters notifying them of the planning effort, the proposed schedule, and a request for planning team nominations in 2007. Interested individuals were required to complete a Comprehensive Plan/SPUD Team Commitment Form (Appendix X). Commitment Forms were reviewed by the Mat-Su Borough Planning Commission and 42 community members were invited to become Planning Team members. The Big Lake Planning Team began to meet on a monthly basis in January 2008. These initial meetings allowed the group to ask questions about the process, share important background information, and begin to identify important issues that the Comprehensive Plan will address. This group will continue to meet periodically throughout the planning process, and will be responsible for recommending approval of the plan to the Community Council. The members of the Big Lake Planning Team are:

Noreen Austermuhl, Walter Ballard, Lisa Behrens, Gerard Billinger, Ed Blocker, Albert Bolea, Sanford Bowles, Jo Cassidy, Jay Cross, Todd Denman, William Dugdale, Lori Flannery, Kurt Hansmeier, Leone Harris, Viki Kaas, Carol Kane, Heidi Kelley, Victoria Knapp, Dan Kruse, Linda Lockhart, James (Dan)
Mayfield, Ina Mueller, William O'Hara, Randi Perlman, Daleann Pond, Cindy Riley, Eric Robson, Royce Rock, Yvonne Ruth, Floyd Shilanski, Rosa Shilanski, Michael Smulski, Terry Snyder, John Stallone, Casey Steinau, Gregory Strong, Mike Szymanski, Lawrence Taylor, Jr, Monica Thomas, Kenneth Walch, Marlene Westland, and Kim Woodbury.

An initial community workshop will be held in May 2008 to share with the greater Big Lake community the initial work done so far, summarized in this report. The workshop will be an important opportunity for community members to give feedback on the direction that the planning process is going, and to add their knowledge, ideas, and concerns to the process. The consultants will take this information and work with the Planning Team and Mat-Su Borough planners to prepare a draft Comprehensive Plan, which will be reviewed by the greater public at a second community workshop in Fall 2008. The feedback provided at this second workshop will allow the consultants to work with the Planning Team and Mat-Su Borough planners to refine the plan and its implementation strategies over the following several months.

Finally the Comprehensive Plan will go through the approval process, anticipated for Spring 2009. The Mat-Su Borough relies on the local Community Council to ensure that the Comprehensive Plan reflects community views. The Community Council will review and approve the final plan at a public meeting. One of the main values of adopting a Comprehensive Plan is to allow the Big Lake community to speak to the Mat-Su Borough and other interests in a collective voice.

Once the Community Council approves the Comprehensive Plan, it then submits it to the Mat-Su Borough. First the Mat-Su Borough Planning Commission and then the Mat-Su Borough Assembly will hold public hearings to review and approve the Big Lake Comprehensive Plan. Once adopted, it will replace the 1996 Plan as the official planning document for the community. When necessary, it can be further amended or updated through the same process.

The consultants from Agnew::Beck provide expertise in the fields of Planning and Community Organizing and help shepherd the Comprehensive Plan through the drafting and approval process. Though Agnew::Beck offers assistance to the community, Planning Team and Mat-Su Borough throughout the project, it is the community that sets the objectives and guides the outcomes. The following graphics depict the steps involved in the comprehensive planning process, the Mat-Su Borough approval process, and the proposed schedule for the Big Lake Comprehensive Plan Update.
The Comp Plan Process

COMMUNITY VALUES
Where Are We Now?

GOALS STATEMENT
Where Do We Want to Be?

DATA COLLECTION
What Do We Need to Know?

ACTION PLAN
How Will We Get There?

Phase 1

Community Survey

Phase 2

Phase 3

WHAT IS THE APPROVAL PROCESS FOR A COMP PLAN?

COMMUNITY RESIDENTS, BUSINESSES & PROPERTY OWNERS

PLANNING TEAM

COMMUNITY COUNCIL

MSB PLANNING COMMISSION

MSB ASSEMBLY

AGNEW :: BECK

Community volunteers appointed and approved by MSB Planning Commission

ADOPTED COMP PLAN guides development of the Community.

CONSULTANTS are hired by MSB at the request of the Planning Team to facilitate the Comp Plan process.
Project Area

Big Lake is a community of 3,082 people (as estimated in 2006 according to the DCCED but “not DCCED certified,” pop. in 2000 Census was 2,635), 131.9 square miles of land (over 84,000 acres) and 12.9 sq. miles (over 8,000 acres) of water. Located in the Mat-Su Borough, it is 13 miles southwest of Wasilla, next to Houston and Knik-Fairview. Land ownership is a mix of public and private entities, with major landowners including the Mat-Su Borough, the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority (AMHTA), Native Corporations, and the State of Alaska.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Private</td>
<td>24166.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Borough</td>
<td>21104.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental Health Trust</td>
<td>8813.024</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Corp</td>
<td>4336.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>1931.818</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Big Lake is an area with many beautiful lakes and rivers, wildlife, wooded areas, and mountain views. These natural features endear Big Lake to its long-time residents, as well as translating into recreational opportunities that draw tourists and second-home buyers. Residents also value the diversity of lifestyles available in Big Lake, from small-town urban amenities to homestead-living.

Some important trends and concerns have surfaced at the Big Lake Planning Team meetings. Changes in the social makeup of Big Lake: there used to be modest second homes, mostly Anchorage residents. Then Big Lake became a place where people with little money could buy land, usually well back from the lake, for very low prices. More recently, children of original second home owners are building large, costly second homes, and more people are coming to Big Lake to retire. In general, the area has become more like a year-round community. A problem is that a large percentage of year-round residents are retired, and better schools in neighboring communities are drawing families out of Big Lake. These trends are resulting in a significant gap in income levels among Big Lake residents and a lack of middle class families, who are often a stabilizing influence in communities.

At Big Lake Planning Team meetings, many have said that there are now two Big Lakes: one rich, one poor, and expressed concern that the Plan serve all residents of all incomes. One of the biggest challenges for this plan is finding ways to create a more stable, prosperous community: there are few local jobs, there is little spending in the community and the school has a poor reputation.

An important challenge for the community will be finding ways to get more social and financial support for the school. The “poorest school in Mat-Su Borough,” Big Lake Elementary is a Title 1 school. Its facilities are greatly in need of upgrading, yet it provides critical services for the community beyond education. For example, for some students without access to running water at home, the school is used to wash clothes and take showers. Despite the importance of the school to the Big Lake community, all recent school bonds have failed, and many students have relocated to other schools in adjoining communities. Planning Team members have even reported that “people move away because they don’t want to send their kids to Big Lake Elementary.”

Community work Done / In Progress

The 1996 Big Lake Comprehensive Plan identifies goals and makes recommendations toward meeting those goals.
This section provides a brief overview of the history of the Big Lake area and sets the stage for the policies in this plan. Items covered will be the history, setting and land use and economic trends and activity.

**History and Culture**

Early inhabitants were the Athabascan Dena'ina Indians. Around 1899, the Boston and Klondike Company made the first sled trail north into the Talkeetna Mountains from Knik via Big Lake. Homesteaders in 1929 and after World War II settled Big Lake. Materials were transported from Pittman railroad station over eleven miles of rough trail. By 1959, a number of lodges and several children’s camps were operating on the lake, and at least 300 cottages and camps were owned by individuals. Lake-front lots became accessible in the 1960s and 1970s, with the expansion of roads and power. In June 1996, the "Miller's Reach" wildfire destroyed more than 37,500 acres in the Big Lake and Houston area, including 433 buildings and homes valued at $8.9 million. Low housing costs, the semi-rural lifestyle, and a 45-minute commute to Anchorage have supported growth in the Mat-Su Valley.

**Land, Environment and Climate**

Land ownership in Big Lake is largely split between Borough and private ownership. Other major landowners include the Mental Health Trust, Native Corporations, the University of Alaska as well the State of Alaska.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Land Owner</th>
<th>Acres</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Big Lake Community Council*</td>
<td>87371</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private</td>
<td>24166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Borough</td>
<td>21104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental Health Trust</td>
<td>8813</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Corporations</td>
<td>4336</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Alaska</td>
<td>1935</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State of Alaska</td>
<td>1931</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Land ownership acres do not add up to the council area. Only the largest landowners are listed here and a large number of parcels from the Borough are listed as unknown ownership.
Social Environment

Regional Growth
The growth of the Matanuska-Susitna Borough has been well documented, with growth rates among some of the highest in the country and certainly Alaska.

Big Lake Population Trends and Demographics
Big Lake’s population has generally increased and is known as a recreationist’s playground. Both the Borough and the Big Lake area have undergone rapid growth in the past twenty years with Big Lake’s growth outpacing the Borough’s at points. More recently both the Borough and Big Lake have grown less quickly but still at a rate as, or more, quickly than the rest of the state.

Table 1. City of Big Lake Population Statistics 1960-2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Big Lake Population</th>
<th>Average Annual Growth</th>
<th>MSB</th>
<th>Average Annual Growth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>8,188</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>-7.0%</td>
<td>6,509</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>410</td>
<td>27.5%</td>
<td>17,816</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>1,477</td>
<td>13.7%</td>
<td>39,683</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>2,635</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>59,322</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>3,082</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>77,174</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Shifting Age of the Population
Big Lake has a relatively old median age at 37.8. A more complete breakdown of population by age groups of Big Lake from 1990 to 2000 see Table 2.

Table 2. Age Statistics for Big Lake, 1990-2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 5 years</td>
<td>113 (8%)</td>
<td>144 (5%)</td>
<td>4,147 (7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 to 19 years</td>
<td>367 (24.8%)</td>
<td>638 (24%)</td>
<td>16,553 (28%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 to 34 years</td>
<td>277 (18.7%)</td>
<td>420 (16%)</td>
<td>9,743 (16%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35 to 54 years</td>
<td>457 (30.8%)</td>
<td>977 (37%)</td>
<td>21,005 (35%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55 to 64 years</td>
<td>160 (11%)</td>
<td>262 (10%)</td>
<td>4,374 (7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65 years and over</td>
<td>103 (7%)</td>
<td>194 (7%)</td>
<td>3,500 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total:</td>
<td>1,477</td>
<td>2635</td>
<td>59,322</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Big Lake area has both a shrinking youth population and a rising retiree (55-65) population.

Table 3. Comparative Age Statistics, 2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Median Age</th>
<th>Percent 65 &amp; Up</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Big Lake</td>
<td>37.8</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mat-Su Borough</td>
<td>34.1</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alaska</td>
<td>32.4</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Land Use and Housing

MLS currently lists 44 homes for sale in the Big Lake area with a median price of $180,000. (http://realestate.yahoo.com/Alaska/Big_Lake)

The predominant type of residential development is singly family detached housing (86 percent of existing housing in 2000). Trailers and mobile homes are the second most common housing type (7 percent).
Housing Characteristics

Table 1 shows the number of housing units for the Big Lake and the MSB in 1990 and 2000. Housing units increased by three percent annually in the MSB between 1990 and 2000, growing from 20,953 housing units in 1990, to 27,329 housing units in 2000, while the number of housing units in Big Lake increased much less quickly - growing by just under one percent annually. Housing grew from 1,933 housing units in 1990 to 2,122 housing units in 2000. The growth in the MSB is reflective of its relative close proximity to the Municipality of Anchorage. Big Lake’s small growth in housing stock and increase in population could be explained by the large drop in the vacancy rate as people turned vacation/recreation homes into permanent residences.

Table 2. Number of Housing Units in the Affected Area, 1990 and 2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>MSB</th>
<th>Big Lake</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Housing Units</td>
<td>20,953</td>
<td>27,329</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual Percent Change</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Vacant Units</td>
<td>7,559</td>
<td>6,773</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vacancy Rate</td>
<td>36.1%</td>
<td>24.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2008.

The Census Bureau describes vacancy status by units that are available for rent, for sale, used for a recreation, seasonal or occasional home, for migrant workers, or other. These categories also provide insight into housing uses. Table 2 shows the reasons for the vacancy status above. The notable point from this table is that among vacant housing units almost 90 percent of those are vacant for seasonal, recreational or occasional use. This is greater than the Borough-wide figure of 81 percent in 2000.

Table 3. Reason for Vacancy, 2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>MSB</th>
<th>Big Lake</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Vacant Housing Units</td>
<td>6,773</td>
<td>1,151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For rent</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For sale (only)</td>
<td>5.2%</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rented or sold (not yet occupied)</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For seasonal, recreational, or occasional use</td>
<td>81.0%</td>
<td>89.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For migrant workers</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other vacant</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2005.
Economic Overview

Matanuska-Susitna Borough

The Mat-Su Borough is the third largest borough in the state, both physically and in terms of population. At 24,683 square miles, it is about the same size as West Virginia; however, 90 percent of its residents live in a relatively narrow east-west corridor that stretches between the community of Sutton to the east on the Glenn Highway, and the community of Willow to the west on the Parks Highway. The Borough has only three incorporated cities: Houston, Palmer, and Wasilla. These cities account for about 19 percent of the Borough’s population (Fried 2003).

Historically, most of the communities in the MSB were established to support farming, gold, and coal mining. Mining largely disappeared from the Borough when the Valdez Creek gold mine closed in 1995, but potential for other mining such as coal bed methane and possibly even diamonds exists. While the Mat-Su Valley is still the largest agricultural producer in the state, farming has been largely overshadowed in importance by other economic players.

Today, the MSB economy derives its vitality from a variety of sources, the most prominent of which is its role as residence of choice for many people who work elsewhere—either in Anchorage or on the North Slope. According to Census 2000, approximately 35 percent of the MSB’s labor force works outside of the Borough. Wage and salary jobs in the Borough are largely in trade and services in support of resident households. A large share of the economic base is provided by thousands of daily commuters to Anchorage and residents working at other jobs sites around the state.

1 A placer gold miner from Palmer discovered purple and orange garnets in gravel he dredged up a few years ago close to Shulin Lake, 24 miles southwest of Trapper Creek. Geologists consider garnets “indicator minerals,” suggesting that diamonds might be in the vicinity (Dobbyn, 2005).
Income and Employment

This section covers the size of the labor force, unemployment, and types of employment within Big Lake. Table 3 shows the employment status for residents of the Big Lake area and MSB, 16 years and older, according to the 2000 Census. Over 66 percent of MSB residents, 16 years and older are in the labor force, and 53 percent of Palmer residents, 16 years and older, are in the labor force. The unemployment rate in Big Lake is just above 8 percent, compared to over 10 percent Borough-wide.

Of those individuals not in the labor force, almost 40 percent in Big Lake, there are many reasons. For example, individuals may have given up actively seeking employment because of a lack of opportunities or travel time, the community may have a high percentage of retired individuals, or stay at home parents, or the community may be very tied to subsistence practices.

Table 3. Employment Status in Big Lake and MSB

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employment Status</th>
<th>Big Lake</th>
<th>MSB</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population 16 Years And Over</td>
<td>2,017</td>
<td>42,705</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Employment (%)</td>
<td>53.4</td>
<td>66.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civilian Employment (%)</td>
<td>53.4</td>
<td>65.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment Rate (%) *</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military Employment</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not In Labor Force (%)</td>
<td>39.1</td>
<td>33.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000.
* The unemployment rate is based on the number of people in the civilian labor force.

Table 4 shows the median household income for households in Big Lake and in the MSB. In 1999, the median Big Lake household income was 16 percent less than the MSB median household income.

Table 4. Median Household Incomes, Big Lake and MSB

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Big Lake</th>
<th>MSB</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>$36,583</td>
<td>$40,745</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>$43,382</td>
<td>$51,221</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We need to learn from Anchorage – Big Lake is still young, what can we do today? What’s needed to create the community we want to have for our children in the future?  

Planning Team Member

Preliminary Goals for Key Community Issues

This section presents draft goals for the future of Big Lake. These initial goals reflect input from the community planning team. These goals are preliminary – they’re presented here as a starting point for discussion. Each goals section is comprised of areas: general background information, preliminary goals, important issues regarding each goal and possible strategies for achieving goals.

Land Use & Environment

General Background Information

Big Lake has grown slowly over the last 15 years (see Chapter 3, Growth Trends, for details). The community has multiple personalities: for some it is a place to live and work, for others a place to visit on weekends. For others it is a bedroom community, a place to come home to after driving to work, in Wasilla, Palmer or Anchorage. For still others it is a place to retire, or to dream of retiring.

Preliminary Community Goals for Land Use and the Environment – What do you think?

1. Maintain rural character and visual quality
2. Create a Big Lake town center
3. Guide the location of future development
4. Guide the character of future development
5. Protect the natural environment and water quality
Goals – Important Issues & Potential Strategies

1. Maintain rural character and visual quality

**Important Issues**
Commercial activities in Big Lake are spread out along the Big Lake Road. Many people have expressed a desire for a new commercial and civic center for the community – a “town center” where people could buy convenience goods, go to a bakery or bookstore, get a cup of coffee, use the library and related trails, a new community hall, and meet friends and acquaintances. Need more discussion – what are the positive, unique qualities that make Big Lake Big Lake?

- “This is a special place.”
- “I love leaving the Parks Highway and driving up to the lake. We’ve got a beautiful community out here.”
- “The lakes are pretty, but it’s hard to see off into the distance. I wish there were more viewpoints, places where you could get oriented.”
- No mountain views? (hard to be oriented, compared to Anchorage where Chugach are always visible)
- Special places in Big Lake? Jordan Lake trails near library, view from hill on south side (BLM fire service building, nice view, but located behind a fence, no public access), open wetlands out west (during winter)

**Potential Strategies**
- Encourage relatively low density residential development
- Take actions to maintain access to public open space, waterways and trails
- Encourage retention of the natural feel of the community
- Others?
2. Create a Big Lake town center

**Important Issues**
Commercial activities in Big Lake are spread out along the Big Lake Road. Many people have expressed a desire for a new commercial and civic center for the community – a “town center” where people could buy convenience goods, go to a bakery or bookstore, get a cup of coffee, use the library and related trails, a new community hall, and meet friends and acquaintances.

- “We need to create a town center district, a nice place where you can walk around, see neighbors and friends, buy convenience goods. Need a place to be the center of Big Lake”
- Town center could be a place that serves locals and visitors too (“I’d like to see quaint small buildings, galleries, restaurants”, “a main street feel”)
- More town center ideas:
  - Need a community center building
  - Need good parking
  - Trail connections important - slow down, but don’t eliminate 4-wheelers
  - Consider using land by the outlet to Big Lake (Fish Creek); perhaps tied to church land, for community center building

**Potential Strategies**
- Work actively to create a commercial and civic core for the Big Lake area. Specific steps include those below:
- Build from the existing town center
- Aim to concentrate uses, to make it practical for people to walk between stores (need 10-30 acres – 10 acres is an area 660’x660’)
- Provide good access. Provide better connections between town center, airport, and Big Lake.
- Encourage the mix of uses that creates a lively, successful center; including commercial, civic, residential, recreational
- Create a comfortable, attractive environment that invites people to linger, for example, by including seating, places that capture sunlight and let people get out of the wind, attractive and appropriately scaled buildings, historical information
3. Guide the location of future development

Important Issues
To date, there was not a strong expression of a need to place restrictions on land use (e.g., discouraging industrial or commercial uses in residential neighborhoods), or to guide certain uses to certain locations (e.g. to concentrate future commercial uses in the town center). More discussion is needed.

- Maintain residential character
- Keep the generally residential character of areas that are predominately residential today, but don’t preclude small businesses in these areas
- Need to improve on land uses, convenience of airstrip and floatplane operations (see economic development section)
- Encourage growth in core, around Big Lake and in some other areas, but also let some areas of the Big Lake community council district be less accessible, more rural/wilderness/quiet, etc.

Potential Strategies

- Identify certain parts of Big Lake as best suited for commercial, industrial or other non-residential uses.
- Establish rules that restrict certain uses, particularly in residential areas. Options include discouraging uses with noticeable off-site impacts (site, smell, noise, etc.) (e.g., rules that prohibit or only conditionally industrial uses, or more intense commercial uses in residential areas)
- Encourage future commercial uses to concentrate in the town center area.
4. Guide the character of future development

**Important Issues**

Again, there was not a strong expression of a need to place many restrictions on land use. Someone said – “what we need are a few good rules.”

- Create a town center district (in Big Lake Mall vicinity)
- Direct other commercial uses to Big Lake Road “light industrial”
- Possibility of design standards for tourist-related commercial?
- We need to regulate site condos (“and avoid the legal loophole that got a lot of ugly, cheap condos built in Anchorage”)
- Protect visual quality – need rules for signs (not too strict, but don’t allow signs too big, or flashing signs that are annoying and can be unsafe)
- Dark skies – establish rules to direct lighting downwards, neighbors shouldn’t shine lights onto adjoining property
- Views about standards for lot sizes
  - (Most said) existing borough lot size standards are OK (40,000 SF minimum)
  - (one said) we should set minimum lot sizes of 1.5 to 2.5 acres
  - “If we set lot size minimums that would cut out many people who don’t have a lot of money”
- Need to keep open space and vegetation, but community has to be fire safe

**Potential Strategies**

- Set guidelines re signs, lights other aspects of development that detract from visual quality, or quality of life?
- Establish rules re junk in yards (e.g. removal, screening)?
- Establish rules and/or advisory guidelines regarding building heights or setbacks? (or just rely on existing borough standards – 50’ from water).
- Encourage land owners to protect key natural features

5. Protect the natural environment and water quality

**Important Issues**

Discuss natural systems, reference map.

- Motorized boat traffic is damaging shoreline, causing erosion (other views: motorboats are not a big issues, most serious shoreline erosion is just ongoing natural phenomenon)
- Need better rules for use of motorboats - “courtesies”
- Septic tanks, if used in the wrong location, if not well managed, can pollute surface water, ground water
  - Certain areas of Big Lake are a mess “my dogs break out when they go in the lake”
  - Complying with rules re septic tanks is costly, often does little to improve protect water quality
  - Many people have old, non-functioning wastewater systems
• “Lots of people are just slobs, dump trash, anything else in the lake without a second thought”
  o Fireworks another significant source of pollution
  o Big Lake level is controlled by dam (views vary on benefits of raising or lowering lake levels)
• Need to have better standards to protect lake and stream front vegetation – riparian vegetation is important to wildlife, to water quality
• Streams are being encroached upon by new subdivisions
• People who fish, use Big Lake don’t have good places to go to bathroom, so some areas are traditional “public restrooms” – “these places are a mess, ugly smelly, toilet paper and piles of human excrement”
• Concern about people dumping garbage off end of roads – “people use any space to dump garbage”
• Concern about removal of birch trees for commercial logging/chipping by MSB, State and private businesses
• Concern about air quality from wood burning
• Concern about oil leakage

Potential Strategies
• Ensure septic systems don’t pollute groundwater,
  o Be reasonable about responding to realities of older, smaller lots
  o Find a way to monitor water quality in septic systems, rather than imposing one-size-fits-all standards, e.g. provide for options in meeting water quality objectives
  o Set up annual (or every 3 year) testing programs
  o Be realistic about costs
• Protect key streams - Fish Creek, Meadow Creek
  o Consider controls on removal of stream front vegetation
  o Consider other actions to protect water quality, e.g. discourage filling of wetlands, protect small streams, protect quality of water running off individual lots
• Identify fish stocks in Big Lake – what are they?
• Take action to improve solid waste management
  o Dumping; people don’t want to pay hauling fees for large items like refrigerators
• Energy alternatives
  o Assistance for winterization?
Recreation & Open Space (air, water quality, green infrastructure)

General Background Information
With its lakes and rivers, fish and wildlife, open space, trails, quiet and solitude, Big Lake has many recreation and open space amenities, which are important to quality of life and the community’s identity. Outdoor recreation is a major draw for tourists and second-home owners in Big Lake. It is also valued by year-round residents as one of the primary reasons they choose to live in the community. Without adequate protections, these recreational qualities will tend to be eroded as more land is developed.

Preliminary Community Goals for Land Use and the Environment - What do you think?
1. Identify and reserve regional trail system (legal trails)
2. Identify and reserve lake access points
3. Inventory Big Lake recreation attractions, determine what the town has, what it needs
4. Maintain open relationship with the State and gain clear understanding of State management plans for Big Lake

Goals – Important Issues & Potential Strategies
1. Identify and reserve regional trail system (legal trails)

   Important Issues
   • Great trail system but, not secured or inventoried – mostly winter trails
   • There are no trailheads or parking

   Potential Strategies
   • For residents, for visitors
   • Multi-purpose system – trails for motorized and non-motorized, for skis, bikes, dog team, hikers, four wheelers, snow machines
   • (Work toward having some lighted loops)
   • Some trails particularly important for dog teams, e.g., trails southwest of Big Lake
   • Need to resolve issue of who would own and manage trails that now cross private land, but could be dedicated for public use
   • Improve trail management (brush trails, deal with dust, etc.)
   • Railroad could block trails
   • Improve summer trail system
   • Build more trailheads with ample parking areas
   • Suggestion that a trail is needed south of Big Lake, connecting the “town square”/Big Lake mall area to the western boundary of the community council area
2. Identify and reserve lake access points

Important Issues
- Theoretically Big Lake has 160 legal access points, but majority blocked, overgrown, undeveloped
- Big Lake resources: quiet, lakes, “start of good snow,” beautiful lakes
- People are blocking off legal public lake access. “I complain to the borough and they don’t do anything.”
- Lack of public access points and inaccessibility to access point that do exist – They are blocked off by individuals or they’re not maintained.
- Have to drive across private property to access lake
- Not enough boat ramps
- No boat ramp docks to accommodate persons with physical disabilities

Potential Strategies
- Need more access points at west end of big lake
- Particular need: re-open legal section line access currently being blocked by an adjoining private owner (location – north western side of lake – see map)
- Need more lakeside recreation sites with day parking, docks, picnic areas, etc. (and somehow deal with the waste management issues that come with these)
- Need to protect access to the lake for winter car use – major access point on small peninsula on lake’s southern shore is private, could go away
- Need to build boat ramp docks to accommodate persons with physical disabilities

3. Inventory Big Lake recreation attractions, determine what the town has, what it needs

Important Issues
- “mud bog” area (volleyball, sledding, community events)
- Possible golf course? (suggestion for a golf course on State land near Rocky Lake and Old Fish Hatchery)
- Viewpoints (not many today)
- Don’t have an RV dump station (as in don’t have one currently and need one or don’t want one ever?)
- Need public toilets
- Private camp sites
- More overnight campsites
- Need more parks
- Recreation facilities
- More recreation sites
- Noise on lake – limit boat traffic
- More parking
- More boat ramps

Potential Strategies
4. Maintain open relationship with the State and gain clear understanding of State management plans for Big Lake

**Important Issues**
- Unclear how state manages public spaces

**Potential Strategies**

**Transportation**

**General Background Information**
Big Lake’s transportation system includes all the roads, paths and facilities that allow the movement of private vehicles, trains and planes, as well as walking, skiing, four wheelers, snow machines and other trail activities. Currently this system includes (major roads, airstrip, trail system, railroad, other?)

**Preliminary Community Goals for Land Use and the Environment - What do you think?**

1. Improve airport
2. Redo Burma Road – take into consideration future truck traffic from Port MacKenzie connection
3. Get the South Big Lake realignment process moving
4. Alaska Railroad

**Goals – Important Issues & Potential Strategies**

1. Improve airport

**Important Issues**
- Need a float plane base (check previously prepared aviation plan for ideas; Diamond Lake possible location)

**Potential Strategies**
- Expand runway length (need 3000 feet, only have 2700)
- Control uses under flight path
- Make more space for economic activities
- Make more “user friendly”
- Develop Big Lake a “bush plane base”
2. Redo Burma Road – take into consideration future truck traffic from Port MacKenzie connection

**Important Issues**
- Certain key roads roads are skinny, curvy, dangerous – best example: south Big Lake road. Been trying to get it improved for years. Road carries 200 + gravel trucks a day – scary
- “All Big Lake Roads are substandard.”
- What is status of proposed road to Fish Creek area (across Little Su)?

**Potential Strategies**
- At least plow it in the short term
- Can build roads as development demands and resources permit

3. Get the South Big Lake realignment process moving

**Important Issues**

**Potential Strategies**

4. Alaska Railroad

**Important Issues**
- What is status of proposed rail line, how will this affect Big Lake?
- Alaska Railroad project – how will new route connecting Mat-Su communities to Port MacKenzie affect Big Lake?

**Potential Strategies**
**Economic Development**

**General Background Information**

**Preliminary Community Goals for Land Use and the Environment - What do you think?**

1. Keep natural environment
2. Improve services
3. Attract Visitors
4. Create attractive town center
5. Market improved image of Big Lake
6. Take more advantage of airport as center of economic activity

**Goals – Important Issues & Potential Strategies**

1. Keep natural environment (clean and green)
   
   **Important Issues**
   
   • Noise pollution – boats on lake

   **Potential Strategies**
   
   • Attract clean, non-polluting businesses

2. Improve Facilities and Services (see Public Facilities and Services)
   
   **Important Issues**

3. Attract Visitors
   
   **Important Issues**
   
   • “We have potential to attract a lot of visitors, and more residents, but we’re not making best use of what we’ve got here”

   **Potential Strategies**
   
   • Need more jobs for young families, but how do we do that?
     - One option – “tourists”
     - Hard to attract travelers, what does Big Lake have to offer that isn’t available in many other places in Alaska
   
   • Trail system & lakes: make some very accessible for the general visitor base and some less accessible for the privacy of residents and visitors seeking a quieter, more remote outdoor experience
   
   • Organize community (Big Lake-branded) events
   
   • Develop art fair/open market in town center
   
   • Take more advantage of airport as center of economic activity
     - small businesses there already (plane restoration, plane maintenance)
     - Awkward relationship between lake and airport, needs improvement
     - Find a place for floatplanes (proposal in past for lake south of Big Lake)
4. Create Attractive town center

**Important Issues**
- Encourage local businesses
- Possible design standards for tourist-related commercial?

**Potential Strategies**
- Develop art fair/open market in town center
- Focus town center area on services, retail

5. Market improved image of Big Lake

**Important Issues**
- Big Lake has a reputation for bars and drunks on boats, on snowmachines

**Potential Strategies**
- Develop art fair/open market in town center

6. Take more advantage of airport as center of economic activity

**Important Issues**

**Potential Strategies**
Public Services & Facilities

General Background Information
As an incorporated area, Big Lake relies on the Mat-Su Borough and partnerships with adjoining communities for the services and facilities it requires. In many areas, community services and facilities are generally acceptable, but there is a desire for further improvements.

Preliminary Community Goals for Land Use and the Environment - What do you think?
1. Improve community facilities; top priorities include the school and a community center.
2. Improve community services; top priorities include solid waste management and utilities provision in underserved residential areas.
3. Improve the community’s capacity to pay to develop and operate needed community services and facilities.

Goals – Important Issues & Potential Strategies
1. Improve community facilities; top priorities include the school and a community center.
   Important Issues
   • School facilities are in need of improvement – poor quality of school causing families to leave Big Lake for neighboring communities with better schools.
   • Community Center is a high priority
   Potential Strategies

2. Improve community services; top priorities include solid waste management and utilities provision in underserved residential areas.
   Important Issues
   • Poor solid waste management – people dump garbage in any open space
   • Access to natural gas all around lake
   • Access to utilities on far west end of Big Lake (and other lakes to west – names?)
   Potential Strategies
   • Can graduate from onsite by lot to community systems to sewer as population/density increases

3. Improve the community’s capacity to pay to develop and operate needed community services and facilities.
   Important Issues
   • MSB maintenance ends in an area where many people have homes
   Potential Strategies

Additional Public Facilities & Services issues are listed in the Public Facilities & Services Matrix that follows.
### Public Facilities & Services Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FACILITY</th>
<th>RESPONSIBLE ENTITY</th>
<th>CURRENT FACILITIES</th>
<th>ISSUES / NOTES / NEEDS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Public Administration</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Center</td>
<td>Anyone we can get</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>• High priority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Art fair/open market?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Possibly expand library with community center?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big Lake Fish Hatchery</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Idea to turn it into a golf course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post Office</td>
<td></td>
<td>Leased from private owner</td>
<td>• Lucky to have a Big Lake address</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cultural Facilities</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library</td>
<td></td>
<td>Built 2003</td>
<td>• Wonderful &amp; well incorporated with Jordan Lake Nature Area – does not include the amount of community dedicated space originally planned that is now needed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Possibly expand library with community center?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historic &amp; Cultural Sites</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Cemetery</td>
<td></td>
<td>None</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Public Safety</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Water Safety</td>
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<tr>
<td>Police</td>
<td>AK State Troopers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fire</td>
<td>Volunteer with</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emergency Medical Services</td>
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<tr>
<td>Health Services</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools</td>
<td>Title 1 - MSSD</td>
<td>Huge immediate need for structural improvement</td>
<td>Would like land special land</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daycare / boys club</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Suggested during discussion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Governance & Community Identity

### General Background Information

**Preliminary Community Goals for Land Use and the Environment - What do you think?**

1. Explore options for creating greater capacity to carry out community goals, community projects

### Goals – Important Issues & Potential Strategies

1. Explore options for creating greater capacity to carry out community goals, community projects

#### Important Issues

- Previous plan had a lot of good recommendations, and a few things even got done, but large majority of plan recommendations were never acted upon
- Big Lake needs to have greater capacity to control its own future, we need more capacity to get things done
- We know we need some rules, but not too many “need a few good rules”
- Enforcement is a huge issue – lots of needed rules aren’t getting enforced. Who will enforce new rules that might come out of this plan?

#### Potential Strategies

### Table: Utilities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FACILITY</th>
<th>RESPONSIBLE ENTITY</th>
<th>CURRENT FACILITIES</th>
<th>ISSUES / NOTES / NEEDS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Water &amp; Sewer</td>
<td>Private/public creation</td>
<td>Public water &amp; sewer to be encouraged where feasible – possible infrastructure could be created via transitional private/community systems</td>
<td>Question of feasibility in time frame – possible on site systems as required by DEC Want to explore possibility of securing ROW in short term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electricity</td>
<td>MEA</td>
<td>More access?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telephone</td>
<td>MTA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>MTA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solid Waste Disposal</td>
<td>RV dump?</td>
<td></td>
<td>Definitely need to address dumping in open space areas, especially of large items that people don't want to have to pay to have hauled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural Gas</td>
<td>More access?</td>
<td></td>
<td>(more alternatives?)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>