

**Big Lake Comprehensive Plan
Planning Team Meeting #1
January 16, 2008
6:30-8:30pm, Big Lake Elementary School**

Welcome

- The planners introduced themselves:
 - From Agnew::Beck Consulting: Shelly Wade, Chris Beck and Heather Stewart
 - From the Mat-Su Borough Planning Department: Frankie Barker and Brad Sworts
- Frankie gave an overview of project, planning documents, maps, etc.
- Team members introduced themselves (name and representation)
 - Dan (James) Mayfield – long-time resident, married a girl from Big Lake
 - Terry Snyder
 - Eric Robson – teacher at the middle school, been a resident for four years, plans to stay
 - Kenneth Walch – has owned property in Big Lake for 25-30 years, permanent resident for one year, civil engineer, plans to stay (wife is Joan Walch)
 - ?? – Big lake resident since 1991, works in the Valley, lives in the Valley, plans to stay
 - Gerard Billinger – commutes to Anchorage
 - Bill Dugdale – has been coming out to Big Lake since the 1970s, bought a place 15 years ago, plans to retire from the hotel industry soon
 - Walter Ballard – grew up here, was raised here, pastor and mailman
 - ?? – has lived in Big Lake for five years, has owned property in Big Lake for 12 years, plan to stay
 - Noreen Austermuhl – property owner since 1992, her son is also a property owner, has lived in Big Lake full-time for the last five years, her husband has lived in (been coming to?) Big Lake since 1951. Big Lake is his life dream.
 - Dan Kruse – property owner (retirement home at Flat Lake) for 10 years (?), raised a family in Anchorage,
 - Mike Smulski - built cabins and has been living in Big Lake with his brother since the 1950s?
 - Ed Blocker – Big Lake property owner for five years, pastor, business owner, plans to stay a long time
 - Greg Strong – property owner since 1981
 - Casey Steinau – lives with partner at Morgan's Bluff, owns property and investment property
 - Cindy Riley – husband and she have been full-time residents for 20+ years
 - Ina Mueller – owns property at/in Big Beaver, still lives in Anchorage, trying to sell property in Anchorage.
 - Leone Harris – owned a house in Big Lake for 20 years, raised 2 kids in Big Lake, her grandchild lives in Big Lake, realtor

- Viki Kaas – real estate agent, property on Anna Lake (?), building a home, just got electricity
- Jo Cassidy – has worked at the Big Lake public library for 20 years, doesn't live in Big Lake
- Randi Perlman – moved to Wasilla nine years ago, owns property in Big Lake, Chamber of Commerce?
- Cindy Bettine – represents Big Lake on the Mat-Su Borough Assembly
- Linda Lockhart – moved to Big Lake in 2001 for work, president of North Big Lake Gardeners, fish and something magazine
- Bill O'Hara – has been coming to Big Lake for 40 years, has lived in Big Lake for 20 years, president of the Big Lake Community Council, was involved in the Big Lake Management Plan and the last update to the Big Lake Comprehensive Plan
- Royce Rock – lives in Anchorage, has had a cabin in Big Lake for many years, plans to move to Big Lake full-time
- Jay Cross – moved to Big Lake six years ago, has been coming to Big Lake for 50+ years
- Carol Kane – lives on the north shore, [is on the?] Big Lake Chamber of Commerce and Community Council
- Kim Woodbury – has lived in Alaska for 20 years, her husband has had property in Big Lake since 1972, oceanographer, investigated for oil companies, now doing excavation and house sites
- Jay Nolfi – lives in Big Lake, came to find out what's going on
- Kurt Hansmeier – has had a house in Big Lake his whole life, real estate developer

Overview of Planning Process

- Planners are mostly at the meeting to listen to the community
- Chris gave overview of project schedule (aiming for completing the project in about a year)
- Questions
 - In 2-5 years, what is the process for acting on the recommendations in this plan and enforcement of it?
 - Agnew Beck has done a number of plans in the Mat-Su Borough. The main value of the Comprehensive Plan is to set a general vision/broad goals and objectives. For public facilities/services, it is a good way to set priorities and set the stage for fundraising. For transportation, it is a good way to set priorities for improvements. For land use, the plan can set the general pattern; a Special Use District (SPUD) can then be used as the implementation tool to set specific rules about land use. The plan is also a reference point for the Mat-Su Borough when proposals for railroads, developments, etc. come asking for permission to locate in Big Lake.

- The Mat-Su Borough planners also have input on platting for developments and use Comprehensive Plans as a resource for making platting recommendations
 - Plans are only as good as the people using them – people need to support them
 - What is the relationship between the two plans handed out tonight?
 - The 1996 plan is the base document that is currently being updated
 - The Lake Management Plan is a subset of the 1996 plan and is not being updated
 - During the last planning process, community members selected a chairman; do we have a facilitator this time?
 - We think it would be helpful to have a chair as a point of contact on the Planning Team
 - We would like to understand the process; how residents and non-residents and team members and non-team members can participate
 - We'll go over that in a little bit – some decisions need to be made about that tonight
- Brad gave an overview of Mat-Su Borough comprehensive planning guidelines (handout).
- If there's major consensus on an issue, can the Mat-Su Borough override it? Can we decide something and then they say, "Nope"?
 - If it was illegal, yes. Otherwise, think it would be very difficult for that to happen.
 - In the Big Lake Comprehensive Plan right now, the setback differs from what people decided locally. Communities have come forward wanting the minimum lot size that the Assembly did not adopt. The Assembly passes the laws and regulations; it has the power.
 - In this decision-making process, the Planning Team will discuss important decisions, and the planners will act more as a scribe. The planners will also help Planning Team members understand technical issues and the consequences that are likely to ensue from any given decisions. The goal among this group is consensus: trying to avoid a "vote," and working with the group to talk through options and come to one that everyone can support and/or live with. To be fair, the planners facilitating these meetings have to structure the process so that everyone has a chance to be heard; they might have to ask talkative folks to let others have the floor for a while. This is a very large group compared to what Agnew::Beck and the Mat-Su Borough planners usually work with, so we may have to come up with new ways to reach agreement. Once a general consensus has been achieved, the planners will write down everything that's been concluded and put it in front of the Planning Team and to see if it's correct – does anything need to change? Then it will go through a public review process. The Planning Team ends up being a steering committee or sounding board for the community as a whole.

- If there is a particular issue that this group can't resolve, we will present to the Planning Commission and the Assembly options representing diverging areas of support and let them make the ultimate decision.
- So the American way of "majority rule" doesn't apply here?
 - In our experience, we find that it works better to get consensus. For the plan to have power you need more than a narrow majority support; as much as possible, you want it to have the support of whole community.
- How much access do you have to Borough-wide planning? If things come up in other plans, are we going to see all that?
 - We need to be clear about plans that are fixed and that we can rely on versus those that are still in progress that we want to keep informed about. For both of these, we're going to try to limit ourselves to the Big Lake area.
 - Planning team and community members will have access to other plans, including other community and SpUD documents via the project webpage and MSB Planning Division.
- If we get this done in 18 months, with the large issues going on right now (railroad, Parks Highway, etc.), how soon until the plan is passed?
 - We have to be realistic for modifying the plan – we can amend things, and we can commit to regularly updating the plan (every 5 years, for example). That depends on the resources the Mat-Su Borough has to do the planning.
- For this process, we aim to add, delete, and/or modify the goals from the 1996 plan.
- Public involvement will be incorporated into this planning process at all points in time, and community members are encouraged to participate. Right now, the planners are trying to identify stakeholders: full-time residents, part-time residents/ (vacation/retirement) property owners, agency representatives, Native corporations, etc.
- There are many helpful documents listed on the project website: http://www.agnewbeck.com/pages-portfolio/matsu/Big_Lake_Comp_Plan.html
- Shelly walked the group through the process diagram
- Question: do you want to have business owners represented among the stakeholders? What about visitors to Big Lake?
 - Yes, both. Please help us get the word out about meetings and workshops for this plan to all people with a stake in this process
- Is there a list of local community organizations somewhere?
 - You might want to include the school community
 - There is a Boys and Girls Club trying to get started
 - Cindy Riley volunteered to put together a list of organizations
- Apparently there was a letter from the Mat-Su Borough from May 2007 that says, "...general notice will be mailed to area property owners and registered voters notifying them of planning" – I've never received this letter.
 - (Frankie) As far as I know that's how we got most of you here tonight...That was the initial process for forming the Planning Team.

- Maybe we should send out a postcard to everyone to remind them of this process. Good suggestion.
- The publicity for public workshops will include public service announcements, advertising, flyers to be posted around town, information posted online with the Mat-Su Borough and Agnew::Beck.
- We're making sure we cover all property owners. We had feedback that an Anchorage meeting might be in order for folks who live primarily in Anchorage but own property in Big Lake.
- Another way to keep the community involved is to post questions on the project website so people can respond to them and send information by email.
- The Lions Club is very active. If you include groups like the Boys and Girls Clubs you're going to have to go through all of them...
- Can people other than the Planning Team attend these meetings?
 - Yes; we won't email everyone to let them know about the meetings, but they are open to the public.
 - We welcome other people, but we don't want to slow down the process. Because we want to keep this process moving, Planning Team members will get priority for discussion. We don't want to have to back up the process to get people who haven't been attending up to speed. Everyone is welcome to get on website and call the planners, plus meeting notes will be on the Agnew Beck website to give everyone a sense of what's happening. This isn't a closed-door process.
- This is a **big** planning team, and that is going to make communications challenging. The planners would like the group to choose a few people to be a point of contact for the Planning Team as a whole and to occasionally bounce ideas off of before engaging the entire Planning Team. Think about if you'd like to be one of those people or nominate someone.

Review Background Information

- Frankie gave an overview of background information as part of her introduction
- Many of the key background documents are listed on Agnew::Beck's project website.

Break

Initial Discussion of Project Issues

- Keeping the overall goal statement from the 1996 Comprehensive Plan in mind (review of goal statement), what do you value about Big Lake? What do you want to protect?
 - It's not Wasilla
 - Strong sense of community
 - Several hundred people come to community events at the middle school; I'm impressed by the community's phenomenal growth and community participation
 - Our sense of community has been here a long time and is highly valued
 - Resourceful, collaborative, cooperative spirit

- Attitude of “Giterdun” (get it done)
- For someone from Anchorage, it’s the quiet
- For some of us who live here, it’s the quiet
- Natural beauty, wildlife
- From an Anchorage-based perspective, in the Big Lake vicinity, as schools develop, the opportunity to live in Big Lake is the Alaskan dream. Anchorage is the next best thing to living in Alaska. You can live here in Big Lake, enjoy it, and still have amenities that rural Alaska doesn’t have.
- What is the “Alaskan Dream”? – A flush toilet and the view.
- The urban amenities in Big Lake include a full-service deli, a library, and a couple of restaurants
- There is a tremendous opportunity in Big Lake for people to form businesses and make a success of themselves because of the community
- Anchorage grew because there was of lots of opportunity; now I hear the same thing in Big Lake – that there are lots of opportunities. We need to grow and share our quality of life, but when will it become just like Anchorage?
- Everything that’s been listed so far comes with growth.
- But there are some areas of Big Lake that don’t have growth – barely a road, no cable TV, no modern amenities.
- Recreation is highly valued in Big Lake: snow-machining, fishing, ice-fishing, boating
- Not just Big Lake – other lakes too!
- Simplicity of life
- Diversity of lifestyle
- The beauty of the trees. We had the fire, but in the last three years, in the areas that didn’t get hit by the fire, I have watched developers clear-cut and ruin the beauty that was left. This has happened at a rate that is out of control.
- Growth is something you can’t totally control, but we can have control over how growth occurs. I have observed in Big Lake that there are no rules. People do whatever they choose to do. Over time, with more and more people, that stops working. I’m not into laws and regulations, but at some point, we need something.
- The variety of choices that you can make regarding quality of life – you can be further out in undeveloped territory or closer to town with more amenities, and you can still have all of these within short distance/travel time.
- For people who live here year-round, it’s the contrast: Big Lake is one community on weekends (with all the recreators) and another during the week (just the folks who really live here).
- During summer time, I lead tourists through the area; it’s neat to see that contrast of living the rural life but having some suburban areas, and as we get closer to the issues, we need to figure out how to manage growth to try to keep that quality of life.

- Diversity of people and ways of life: some of us don't have wells and are barely making it on a wood-chopping business; others are business owners; others are weekend people. It's really a big melting pot of people and friends. Everyone's just out here to have fun and trying to get by.
- Snow
- Wildlife
- Good roads (in some areas)
- Trails
- 360-degree view (Susitna, McKinley)
- The Big Lake study area is an extremely diverse area, and what we may want for the shoreline around Big Lake may be much different than what we want for the end of Burma Road. This might be one way to organize into smaller groups for specific use areas. For each of these areas maybe there's a major watershed decision that we need to make – limit growth and protect scenic values or promote development?
- Lake life: the loud boats, loud snow-machines, blasting 24-7 from Friday to Monday.
- It is a small town – not New England style with sidewalks and a town square; it's different. Snow-machines, bicyclists in summer, skiers on the road, and yet it's still a community – you get to know those people. Big Lake is very spread out, though; much more than I ever felt in Anchorage or Wasilla.
- I like Big Lake for the environment more than anything. I like to go fishing on weekends and get away from the loud (though I liked the loud when I was young). In the old days, I was part of the wild bunch, but now I like to feed the birds, and enjoy the loons.
- Boardwalk with interpretive signs, wildlife, nesting birds
- Access areas onto lakes. We have some public access problems. Garbage can be a problem.
- But the public should have a diversity of access points to the lake as well as residents
- Sled dog teams and trails
- Library and the programs that it has (wildlife walk?)
- I like to see the sky at night – we don't have much light pollution
- Having the sense of people being on the edge here – we have the amenities on one side of the lake, but on the other feel like you're out on the edge of living. People have the option to live on the edge (of wilderness, of survival) in Big Lake.
- Just that it's not Anchorage. I like the sense of getting away from the big town and the pressures of growth. I'm able to see the Northern Lights. All the time, I see Anchorage getting brighter (it's a good way to find your way home at night)...
- Title I school in Big Lake.
- I like the winding South Big Lake Road – thick snow, sun, blue sky, frost, road, absolutely gorgeous. I drove 10 miles before I saw a house because the trees were so heavy and bent over; it was like going to a fairy land.

- We have the Lake at our front door and the wilderness at our back door: I can watch the sunset, and Mt. Susitna. No light pollution.
- Climate (of Big Lake versus Anchorage)
- Let's have a few good rules rather than lots of rules like Anchorage that just complicate things.
- All of us have this commonality'; the agreement that these are the things we love.
- Tough issues/challenges
 - We desperately need a community center (geographically or a facility? – meeting place, facility)
 - Maybe a town square?
 - Water quality and level of the lake from the dam
 - Water needs to be monitored: where are things going? Why that way? We need to set a baseline.
 - Potable (well) water quality and lake/stream water quality are two separate issues
 - The specific characteristics of all water bodies in the area
 - Public use access easements – there is a significant history of that which needs to be looked at
 - Conservation easements are a sort of greenbelt provided by the Mat-Su Borough or the Federal government, giving private property owners a tax credit in trade for rights to develop the land which are held in perpetuity to protect the land from ever being developed
 - How do you balance the desires of people who have recreational property here and who want to retire here versus full-time residents? I know you talk about light pollution, but we have kids playing on roads in the dark and crime issues. We have to balance these needs. How do we encourage snowmachiners to stay away from populated parts of Big Lake?
 - Regarding water quality, it's very important to monitor the landfill.
 - Vandalism – for example, what has happened with the library and Jordan Lake
 - After school activities for kids – need to find something constructive for kids to do in between time they leave from school and their parents come home
- Question: What is the difference between a comprehensive plan and a comprehensive land use plan? The recommendations of the 1996 plan have never been implemented and they're pretty esoteric. Is this going to be a land use plan that's comprehensive but simple (for example, a map on the front page, with colored land uses identified with what's appropriate to do or not to do)? If you give us something simple telling us what we can and cannot do, it will actually be used. Nobody wants something that's big and cumbersome.
 - You folks can shape it. The State mandates that the comprehensive plan include land use, transportation, and public facilities, (with economic development an optional section).
 - There is a line where we don't want to write a zoning code as part of the comprehensive plan, but that could be a second step after this plan is

completed. Agnew::Beck is working with the Mat-Su Borough to do exactly that in Meadow Lakes. You could do that Big Lake.

- Do we have land use designations in Big Lake?
 - There's no zoning, but there are certain land uses.
- I didn't sign up to do a SPUD –I don't want to see this as a set-up for a SPUD. I want to make sure everyone understands the difference between the two.
 - A SPUD is a Special Use District. It's the Mat-Su Borough's word for "zoning"
 - There is zoning in the Borough, just not in Big Lake
 - There are some regulations about where commercial uses can locate in Big Lake based on the size of the road. There has been commercial development that wanted to locate in a neighborhood. The neighborhood didn't want it and kept it out because of road size restrictions.
 - If you don't want to go to a SPUD (which I think you guys should really address, especially the Borough Planners), then if you do this plan, is it enforceable? – No, the land use recommendations in the comprehensive plan would not really be enforceable unless the community does a SPUD.
- I thought this was more of a process for working through Borough improvements to roads and what to do with their lands, not to have 40 people sit down and decide exactly what is going to go where and how the community will grow over time.
 - This plan is a set of goals that state, "In general this is what we want to do and the direction we want Big Lake to grow toward." Let's not get stuck on implementation; we can come back and figure out how to do that in a way that everyone is comfortable with.

Next Steps and Adjourn

- Over the next six weeks, the planners will be doing research and learning about Big Lake and what the community's needs and priorities are.
- The planners will come back to the community and start meeting in small groups, make calls, have subgroups get together to hash out the issues and the ideas.
- There will be another meeting to show what the planners have learned and get feedback on that.
- Are we all engaging in this process with the understanding that this group will meet under the "Open meetings act" (which means you can't call people and meet in small groups)?
 - The planners will work with Mat-Su Borough staff to make sure we're following the law
- Can we email you with stuff we didn't get to say at tonight's meeting?
 - Yes. Absolutely – please do! Email: shelly@agnewbeck.com