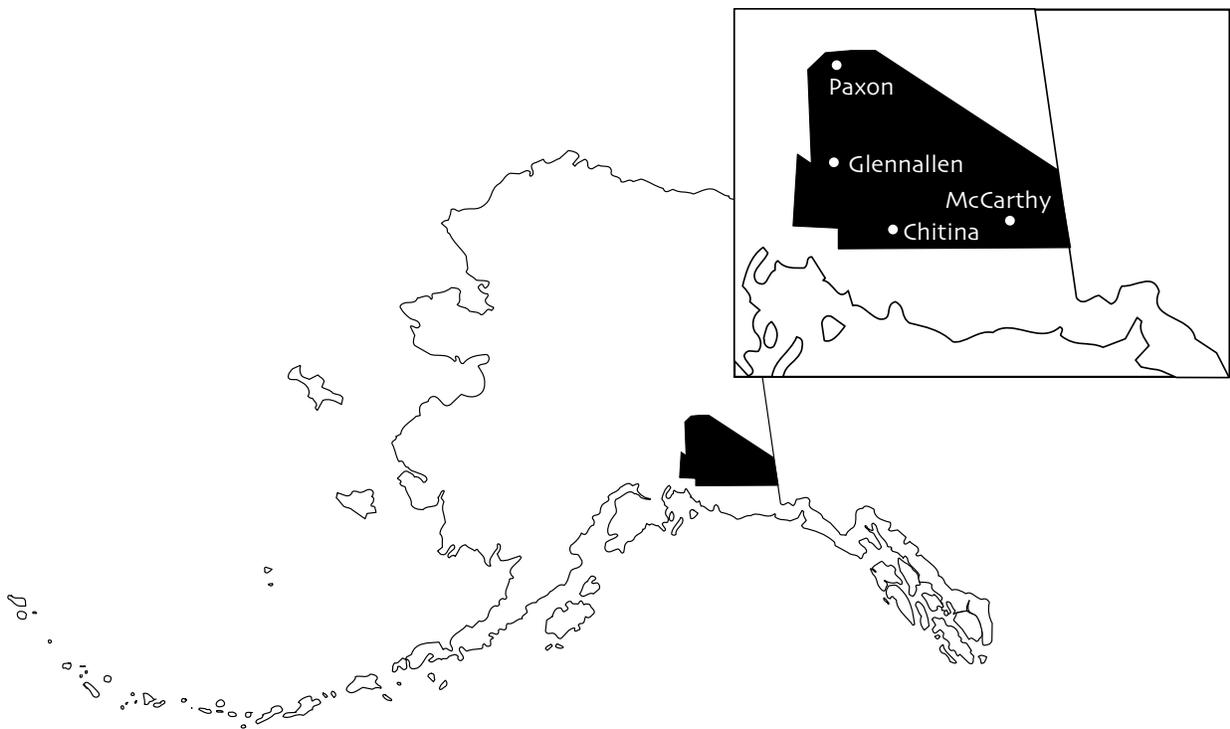


Rural Alaska Tourism Infrastructure Needs Assessment



Copper Valley

A joint project of the
Copper Valley Economic Development Council
and the
Alaska Department of Commerce and Economic Development
Divisions of Trade & Development and Tourism

Introduction

In 1995, the Alaska Regional Development Organizations (ARDORs), a network of state-designated and regionally-empowered economic development corporations, identified tourism industry development as a common objective. Further, they concluded that a lack of basic public infrastructure was one of the greatest barriers to orderly industry development and impeded the optimum movement and accommodation of travelers within the state. This lack is particularly pronounced in rural Alaska, where tourism represents one of the few economic development opportunities available to many communities. Subsequently, the ARDORs determined that a top priority was to conduct a rural tourism infrastructure needs assessment. Although other projects could be considered, the focus of the assessment would be on “public infrastructure,” or that for which state and/or local government would have the primary responsibility.

Performance of the infrastructure needs assessment was included in a successful funding proposal submitted to the U.S. Department of Commerce, Economic Development Administration (EDA) by the Alaska Department of Commerce and Economic Development, Division of Trade and Development (DTD).

Concurrently, Governor Knowles’ *Marketing Alaska* Initiative recommended that the Alaska Division of Tourism (DOT) prepare a comprehensive strategic plan for tourism development using a public process that involves all affected parties, looks at the desired future condition of tourism in the state, identifies infrastructure needs and opportunities for public/private partnerships, creates an effective permitting process, considers sustainability, and creates year-round jobs for Alaskans. The information collected through this regionally-based assessment is essential to the beginning of any statewide tourism planning process and is also relevant to other state planning efforts including the Statewide Transportation Improvement Program, the Airport Improvement Program and Governor Knowles’ Trails and Recreational Access in Alaska (TRAAK) initiative.

Marketing Alaska also directed the Division of Tourism to work with the Department of Community and Regional Affairs to implement rural tourism development strategies using the recently established Rural Tourism Center as a one-stop resource for rural Alaskans interested in tourism development. The objectives of the Center, a joint venture of the division, Alaska Village Initiatives, and USDA Rural Development are to coordinate statewide rural tourism efforts, provide rural tourism assistance, and collect and share general tourism information.

The joining of these initiatives, and the financial support of the EDA, resulted in a partnership between the ARDORs, the Division of Trade and Development and the Division of Tourism to carry out a process to identify the public infrastructure needs of rural Alaska as identified by the people and organizations who are stakeholders in the regions.

Project Implementation

Successful implementation of the tourism infrastructure needs assessment project required participation from a broad spectrum of stakeholders including representatives of tourism businesses and organizations, communities and municipal agencies, public land managers and private land owners, and others who participate in or are impacted by tourism industry development in each region. The Department of Natural Resources, Division of Land, and the Department of Transportation and Public Facilities, Division of Statewide Planning, with their

planning and graphics expertise and understanding of capital improvement project processes, were involved in early discussions about the structure, content and outcomes of this effort.

The assessment was carried out through a series of regional roundtable meetings occurring from May through September 1996. A standardized format for each meeting was agreed, with flexibility for the unique requirements of individual regions. Roundtable meetings were open to the public, however, invitations were specifically sent to agencies and organizations involved in the management of tourism-impacted lands and facilities and to those having a direct interest in tourism industry development in the region. Although the summertime scheduling of these meetings made it difficult for some potential participants to attend, it was determined that this problem would exist to a greater or lesser extent no matter when they were held.

The roundtable meetings were structured to specifically accomplish three objectives. First, to identify the public infrastructure already in place. In support of this objective, Geographic Information System-generated maps of each region were produced showing existing tourism infrastructure and resources to the extent this information was available in existing GIS databases. These maps illustrated what was in place, where development opportunities might exist, and the spacial relationships between infrastructure and geographic features. At the conclusion of each meeting, these valuable reference tools were presented to the local host organization.

The second objective was to become aware of new infrastructure and attractions under development in each region. Federal, state and local organizations made brief presentations regarding their planning processes and new projects under development or in various planning stages. Private sector project developers were also encouraged to share information about their new or planned projects.

Then, recognizing what is in place and what is being planned, participants identified additional infrastructure projects that would either build on what exists, meet current industry needs, or create new industry development opportunities. A panel discussion followed to explain the criteria various funding sources use in assessing project feasibility. It was recommended that "fundability" should be considered in prioritizing projects.

Although it was suggested each region prioritize proposed projects to indicate their relative importance or the preferred sequence for implementation, some regions elected not to take this approach.

Each meeting closed with a discussion of how to move the proposed projects ahead through individual initiatives, through legislative action, and by forming partnerships among stakeholders to advocate for priority projects.

It should be noted that the projects and priorities identified in these meetings reflect the thinking of those in attendance. Although every effort was made to have broad representation of the public and private sector interests, the projects identified and the priorities given them do not necessarily represent a majority opinion of the residents of the specified region. Additionally, some areas of rural Alaska are not included in this assessment. Those are the regions in which there were no designated Alaska Regional Development Organizations at the time the meetings were conducted. These areas include the Bering Straits region, the majority of the Doyon region, and the area of the Fairbanks North Star Borough.

COPPER VALLEY

Sources: *Ahtna Cultural Center, Market Review*, Copper River Native Association, January, 1992; *Regional Development Strategy*, Copper Valley Economic Development Council, Inc., June, 1995; *Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve, Visitor Study*, National Park Service, Summer 1995; *Alaska Visitor Statistics Program III*, DOT, Summer 1993; *Rural Alaska Community Visitor Profiles*, Rural Tourism Center, June, 1996; and, *Rural Tourism Infrastructure Roundtable Meeting*, Glennallen, Alaska, June, 1996.

A. REGIONAL SNAPSHOT

The approximately 12,000 square mile Copper Valley region in the eastern portion of southcentral Alaska is surrounded by the Alaska, Wrangell, Chugach and Talkeetna mountain ranges. The region includes over half of the Wrangell St. Elias National Park and Preserve, the nation's largest national park, and is traversed by the Trans-Alaska Pipeline. Glennallen, 190 miles from Anchorage and 255 miles from Fairbanks, is the area's commercial hub and a service center for many of the twenty-one surrounding communities. The region's total population is approximately 3,100.

ACCESS

Access to the communities of the Copper Valley region is most commonly via the road system. The main transportation routes through the region are the paved Glenn and Richardson highways. The gravel Edgerton Highway and Nabesna Road provide access into Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve. In addition, many Copper Valley communities can be reached by scheduled and chartered air taxi service.

PRIMARY TOURISM ATTRIBUTES AND ASSETS

The Copper Valley has abundant natural, scenic beauty including the greatest concentration of mountain peaks over 14,500 feet in North America. Wildlife is also plentiful and many of the region's communities maintain a strong sense of their traditional culture. Several communities now offer visitor services, with their primary focus on catering to "rubber tire" traffic. A largely untapped asset in the area is the spectacular Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve. Primary attractions in the region include the Kennicott Mine, sportfishing and hunting and; in winter, dog mushing, snowmobiling and cross country skiing.

CURRENT VISITATION TO REGION

The Copper Valley region receives visitors from two primary sources: Alaskans from other communities within the state and nonresident visitors from outside Alaska.

Alaskans travel to the Copper Valley region to take advantage of the great hunting, fishing and outdoor recreation opportunities, to visit the McCarthy-Kennicott area, and in transit to other Alaska communities.

For most nonresident visitors, the region does not constitute a travel destination, but is primarily a transportation corridor to other areas of the state. The recognized "stand alone" visitor destinations within the region are McCarthy-Kennicott and Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve.

Alaska Visitor Statistics Program (AVSP) data is available only for the community of Glennallen. However, since most of the visitor traffic to the region flows through Glennallen, it provides a reasonable representation of visitation to the region. According to the AVSP, more than 100,000 nonresident visitors traveled to Glennallen during the summer of 1993. Most Glennallen visitors (86%) traveled to Alaska for pleasure purposes; while only 10% traveled to visit friends and relatives and 4% traveled for business purposes. An overwhelming majority of visitors to Glennallen were independent travelers (95%). This is consistent with travel patterns for highway visitors who generally plan and make their own travel arrangements.

POTENTIALS FOR DEVELOPMENT

The greatest opportunities for tourism development in the Copper Valley region are associated with the Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve. Although accessible by road, there has been little or no visitor infrastructure developed within the park, with the exception of that found in the McCarthy-Kennicott area which is reached through Chitina. Visitor services remain undeveloped along the Nabesna Road, the northern access route into the Wrangell St. Elias National Park and Preserve.

Additional opportunities exist for development of visitor attractions and infrastructure that could encourage highway travelers to “stop, stay and spend” beyond that which currently occurs. These could include more recreational opportunities, as well as basic visitor services.

Opportunities also exist within the region to further develop its winter tourism, appealing particularly to recreationists from in-state.

CHALLENGES TO TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

The location of the Copper Valley as an intermediary stop for visitors traveling to and from other destinations is both an opportunity and a challenge. The challenge lies in the need to develop more attractions and roadside infrastructure to motivate visitors to stop for significant amounts of time.

Additionally, Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve lacks significant infrastructure within the park. Tourism would benefit from enhanced access into the park as well as attractions and activities within the park. Further development of the McCarthy-Kennicott area is hampered by its limited visitor capacity and accessibility.

These problems are compounded by a lack of marketing clout and expertise. For the region to take full advantage of its visitor assets, visitor awareness must be increased. This requires additional marketing dollars and expertise to effectively promote the area and compete with other visitor destinations within the state. One positive note is that Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve is becoming increasingly attractive to tour operators and wholesalers. As infrastructure and visitor attractions and activities are developed, marketing assistance should be available from a variety of industry sources.

TOURISM DEVELOPMENT AND PROMOTION ORGANIZATIONS

Currently, no organization focuses exclusively on tourism development and promotion within the Copper Valley area. The Copper Valley Economic Development Council, Inc., an Alaska Regional Development Organization, provides technical assistance for tourism, and other, economic sector development to individual businesses and organizations within the region. Local chambers of commerce and visitor centers focus much of their effort in the area of tourism development and promotion.

B. PRIORITY INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

1. DEVELOP STA-KEH CAMPGROUND

Location: Mile 129 Glenn Highway, near Glennallen

Description: RV's and other campers are currently camping without permits on land belonging to the Department of Transportation and the Bureau of Land Management. There are no public facilities at these spots. This type of camping is creating over crowding and potential public safety hazards. A campground could be built by the Gulkana River to alleviate this problem.

2. PROVISION OF PUBLIC FACILITIES: DUMP STATIONS, DUMPSTERS AND PUBLIC REST AREAS

Location: Copper River Valley

Description: Dump stations, dumpsters and rest areas with toilet facilities are needed to serve the traveling public. This will lead to a cleaner, safer environment, enhance the visitor's experience, and reduce conflict with area residents. This represents an immediate need; so while the challenges of funding are addressed, portable outhouses should be installed at the areas of greatest need; in particular, the Edgerton Highway. Both residents and tourists will benefit. The Department of Transportation, Division of Tourism and private enterprise could potentially partner on this project.

3. DEVELOP A MULTI-AGENCY TRAILS PLAN

Location: Glennallen and Surrounding Region

Description: Develop a comprehensive trails plan to enhance biking and hiking opportunities for a range of expertise and provide people an experiential connection with the area. This plan would need supporting public facilities (restrooms), planning and construction funds and cooperation from land managers and owners.

4. BUILD A WRANGELL-ST. ELIAS VALLEY RESORT

Location: Chistochina on the Glenn Highway

Description: A year-round resort, accessible by highway and air, accommodating visitors participating in a variety of National Park tours would offer a focal point for visitors and make Chistochina a visitor destination. Copper Valley businesses would make tours available to the visitors including hiking, cultural tours, snow machining, cross country skiing, mountain biking and wildlife viewing. The Chistochina Village Council is researching the feasibility of this project.

5. **CONSTRUCT WRANGELL-ST. ELIAS NATIONAL PARK & PRESERVE VISITOR INFORMATION CENTER**

Location: Mile 107 Richardson Highway

Description: Construction of the Wrangell-St. Elias National Park & Preserve Visitor Information Center will provide a destination for visitors to the Copper Valley region. Construction, dependent on federal legislative action, should begin in 1998 or 1999. The center will offer information relevant to further travel in the park and significant concession opportunities for residents of the region. Public support for the project has increased due to the need to diversify the region's economy. Final decisions related to construction will be made in August 1997.

C. ADDITIONAL PROPOSED PROJECTS

- Completion of Kennicott Diorama
- All American Historical Properties Trail
- Construction of bike path along Copper River Northwestern Railway route accessed through Chitina and Cordova
- Tangle Lakes and Thompson Pass Trail improvements
- Lake Louise circumnavigation trail
- Reconstruction of Copper River and Northwestern Railway route from Cordova to McCarthy
- Establish more campgrounds
- Install passing lanes and bike trails along major highways
- Develop low-cost seasonal and hostel-type housing
- Develop and increase signage and educational brochures; informational (local and emergency services), directional and interpretive
- Do land ownership status mapping with information on access and appropriate use restrictions
- Develop funding for necessary equipment acquisition and the operation of highway emergency services
- Develop alternative facilities and attractions to divert traffic from local "traditional use" sites to reduce overuse pressure and conflicts with local residents
- Develop funding sources for historic Chitina Preservation program
- Revive and implement the Chitina Dipnet Fishery Plan
- Develop evening activities for visitors
- Develop Native Cultural Center in Glennallen, Gakona or Copper Center

