CHAPTER 1.
INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

SETTING

The City and Borough of Juneau (CBJ) is located in the central portion of the Alaskan panhandle, approximately 700 miles from Anchorage and 950 miles from Seattle (Map A). Because of its mountainous terrain and great distances to other urbanized areas, Juneau is accessible only by sea and air. There are no roads to other southeastern Alaska communities or the Canadian interior.

Covering an area of more than 3,250 square miles, the CBJ is bounded on the west by Lynn Canal; on the east by the Canadian border; on the south by Point Cone; and on the north by the Haines Borough (Map B). In 1991, an approximate 150 square mile portion of Admiralty Island, encompassing the Greens Creek Mine, was annexed into the CBJ.

About 90 percent of the total area of the borough consists of water or rugged mountains and glacial ice caps located within the boundaries of the Tongass National Forest. While this remote area is more difficult to use and develop, it is still important to the well-being of the CBJ and some effort has been made to address it in this Plan. Most of the focus is more naturally aimed at the “roaded area” which is the most subject to human endeavor.

HISTORY

Juneau has developed into an important government, regional supply transportation and tourist center as a result of its location or history. The general vicinity was first inhabited by the Tlingit Indians of the Auk and Taku tribes. Although nearby waterways were explored by the Spanish and the English in the late 18th century, the first European inhabitants were Russian fur traders. Alaska remained an outpost of the Russian Empire until its sale to the United States in 1867.

In 1880, gold was discovered in Gold Creek above Last Chance Basin by two prospectors, Richard Harris and Joe Juneau. Large-scale mining activity soon was undertaken on Douglas Island and in Juneau; by 1893 the area had become the largest mining center in Alaska.
Comprehensive Plan
City & Borough of Juneau

Map A  Vicinity Map
The territorial capital was moved from Sitka to Juneau in 1906. Steady growth continued until 1944, when the last of the large gold mines closed due to the wartime manpower shortage and increasing operational costs. By that time Juneau had sufficiently diversified its economy to sustain this loss of the mining industry.

Since Alaskan statehood in 1959, a growing tourist industry and the expansion of governmental activities have provided Juneau with sustained growth. For two decades prior to the 1982 general election, the state considered relocating the state capital to a more central location, causing a high level of uncertainty about the community’s future. That election retained the capital in Juneau and the 1980s continued with buoyant state budgets, many physical and cultural improvements in Juneau and a spurt in residential and commercial development that was staggering in comparison to the pre-1982 period of economic stagnation credited in large part to the threat of the capital move. However, in 1986, the state’s revenue expectations were urgently revised with a substantial plummet in the price of oil. Several hundred state employees were laid off and many left town. Compounding this event was the effect of non-local contractors and construction workers who had arrived in earlier years to participate in the post 1982 “boom.” When the boom was over, these people also left town. A substantial vacancy in all classes of housing, especially apartments, was one of the results along with substantial loss of value in real estate since there were no buyers.

The so-called mid-eighties crash eventually came to an end as the city slowly started to grow again so that by now, eight years later, housing prices are roughly equivalent to cost of construction, there is and extremely limited supply of shelter. Additionally, three major new retail establishments have come to town and some existing local businesses are expanding and remodeling. By the end of 1994, about 275,000 square feet of new retail commercial space was added to the existing stock. There are indications that the customer base has significantly expanded to include other towns and villages in the entire Southeast Alaska region.

Also of significance in the local economy is the substantial increase in tourism, both of the cruise ship and independent traveler categories. The CBJ rehabilitated its downtown docks in the early ’90s. Over the years, ships have increased in size, number of visits and length of stay in port.

Finally, Juneau will further diversify its economy with the expected reopening of the AJ, Kensington and Greens Creek Mines within the next several years. If all three mines go into production, long-term jobs will be provided for nearly 1,000 residents and an even larger number during the construction phase. Beyond these three mines there are at least three more in or near Juneau that are under exploration now.
STUDY AREA AND FORMAT

The study area of the Comprehensive Plan, which largely corresponds with the roaded area, contains land most suitable for future development due to its proximity to existing urban uses, physical characteristics and ownership patterns. The area includes the downtown core of Juneau and Douglas, as well as more recent development in the areas of West Juneau, North Douglas, the Mendenhall Valley, Auke Bay, Tee Harbor and Lemon, Switzer, Salmon Creeks, and Thane. Generally, existing development is linear, confined to a narrow bench of land between the Gastineau Channel and the steeply rising mountains to the east and along the east and north coastline of Douglas Island. The major exception is the Mendenhall Valley, which is a broad, generally flat glacial plain.

Juneau’s Comprehensive Plan consists of seven chapters. Each chapter contains one or more subject sections and related policies. Each numbered policy is preceded by findings, which form the foundation for the policy. The policy statements are the most significant parts of the Plan. Policies are statements establishing a course of action for the CBJ providing the basis for guiding ongoing decisions related to land use and preparation of new land use regulations. Each policy statement is followed by implementing actions which are the practical means of putting each policy into effect. These include such actions as ordinance changes, map revisions, studies and financing mechanisms.

Chapter 2: Sustainability, Growth and Development, establishes the basic policies governing the general nature and location of new growth. Policies in Chapter 3, Natural Resources and Hazards, identify the areas of the CBJ in which future development is inappropriate. Policies which guide more specific growth and development decisions are found in Chapter 4: Transportation/Public Facilities and Services; and in Chapter 5: Land Use. Chapter 6: Comprehensive Land Use Plan Maps, translates the preceding policies into specific land uses for residential, commercial, industrial and other land uses on maps of 10 subareas of Juneau. Area-specific guidelines for future land use planning are also included in the discussion of each subarea. Finally, policies for the general implementation and administration of the plan are presented in Chapter 7. A glossary of terms and an index are presented in the appendix.

FUTURE DIRECTION

This Plan provides guidance to citizens of Juneau and local officials as they decide the location, intensity and timing of future public and private development. The community’s growth is affected by complex physical, economic, and social factors. For example, the size and location of a new housing development is influenced not only by community needs but also by the availability of basic services, roadway capacities, access to shopping, employment and recreational facilities, and the presence of natural hazards. In the Comprehensive Plan, the interrelationships of these factors--housing, economic development, transportation, public services and facilities, and natural resources and hazards--are considered.
The future of Juneau is inter-twined with the future of the State of Alaska. This is true, to an extent for any town in Alaska because so much of a given city’s budget is dependent on state-shared revenues and state-sponsored capital improvements. In Juneau’s case, as the capital city, the state’s fortunes are far more significant. Alaska has depended on oil for the vast bulk of its revenue and general well-being. No political/economic scenario now under discussion suggests that the state will ever again enjoy the oil revenues it experienced in the early 1980’s. All scenarios point to a continued downturn in state spending and reductions of state services. If Juneau is to grow, however modestly, or even stay in a steady state economically, there will have to be some growth in other sectors of the economy to make up for continuing reductions in services to local governments and the number of state employees based in Juneau.

Fortunately, there is reason to be optimistic. Growth is expected in mining, tourism, second home development, retirement home development, regional and even international trade and retail activity, and, interestingly, in Juneau as a place to work for people who only need access to a telephone. As the electronic and information age develops, it is generally expected that more and more Americans will be able to do their work in whatever location they wish and so the quality of the environment, the culture, the physical services, and similar features will be decision factors when a person is selecting a place to live. The aspects of Juneau that make it so significant and meaningful to current residents will surely have significance and meaning to others who are looking for a place to live and work and who have the freedom to choose. Finally, in 1994, Alaskans voted to keep Juneau as their capital city. In response to this vote, Juneau is experiencing a building boom and a spirit of optimism which is coupled with a dedication to articulate a vision of its future and to become a capital city of which all Alaskans are proud.