



## Chapter One

### INTRODUCTION

The City of Soldotna lies in the heart of the Kenai Peninsula, located at the junction of two of the peninsula's major highways, and along the banks of the world-renown Kenai River. The City's central location and development of the oil industry on the peninsula and other parts of Alaska resulted in rapid population growth in the City's first three decades (1960 to 1990). As the City and the oil industry have matured, population growth has slowed.

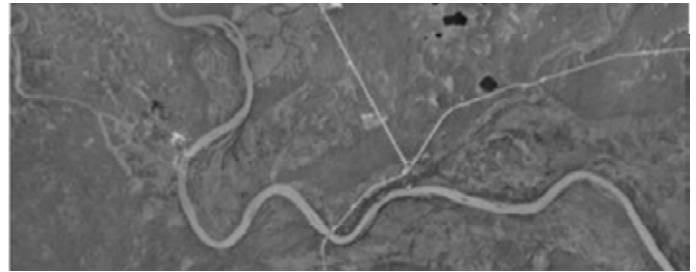
The City of Soldotna incorporated in 1960 with 332 residents and an area of 7.4 square miles (4,723.4 acres). Most of Soldotna was unsettled then, with few residents in the surrounding territory. Soldotna's population has since grown a dozen times over to 4,061 residents in 2008.

The City's pattern of growth has been confined and shaped by natural and man-made features. The Kenai River, local wetlands, and the natural terrain have concentrated development in the eastern portion of Soldotna, while the three major highways (Sterling Highway, Kenai Spur Road, Kalifornsky Beach Road) have resulted in a linear pattern of commercial development stretching out from Soldotna into the unincorporated areas.

Soldotna was mostly built up and already near its current population by the end of the early 1980s building boom. By then, most still-vacant land in the City was parklands, wetlands, or tracts with some development limitations. Homebuilding was shifting to outside the City, a trend



Progress Days



Soldotna in the 1950s

that accelerated after the 1980s. By 2008, nearly four of five residents in the Soldotna subregion lived outside the City. Many, perhaps most, persons who work and shop in Soldotna live outside the City.

Soldotna is a great place to live. It is a tight-knit community with high-quality education, health care and recreation available in a family-friendly environment. It is an ideal place for families, attracting both younger professionals and older retirees, and for businesses. Soldotna has consolidated its position as a center for trade and services, and for local government and health care for the Central Peninsula. Six of the ten largest local employers in the Kenai Peninsula Borough (KPB) are based in Soldotna. It is headquarters for the KPB, the Borough School District, Central Peninsula Hospital, and Frontier Community Services. Fred Meyer and Alaska Petroleum Contractors are large private employers. Tourism also plays an important role in the City, with visitors drawn to the area to fish on the Kenai River and experience the Alaskan outdoors, up close and personal. Soldotna is ideally situated at the intersection of the Kenai Spur Highway and the Sterling Highway, along the route between Anchorage and Homer, making it an ideal location for service and retail businesses, including large-scale retail development. However, there is increasing competition for major retail developments from Kenai and unincorporated areas of the borough along the highways. The City must face decisions on whether to continue to extend city services outside the current city boundaries where additional business and residential growth is occurring.

Given these trends in population and development, the City of Soldotna determined that a new comprehensive plan was needed to identify the City's vision and goals for the future and to develop a plan for building on the City's many strengths to move toward that vision.



Progress Days Parade

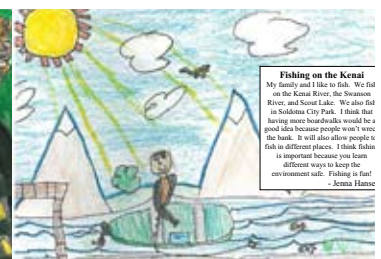
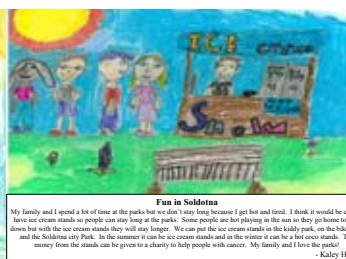
## COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING

The authority for land use regulation in Alaska is detailed in the Alaska Statutes Title 29, Municipal Government. The state requires most boroughs to implement land use regulations throughout the borough (including inside cities), but also provides for the borough’s ability to delegate these powers to cities upon request. The KPB delegated zoning to the City of Soldotna in 1985. Platting authority, or control over the subdivision of land, has not been delegated to the City of Soldotna; therefore, the KPB continues to have the final authority for subdivision of land within the City.

Chapter 40 of Title 29 provides more detail on land use regulation and specifies that land use regulations must be “in accordance with a comprehensive plan” and “in order to implement the plan.” Thus, the comprehensive plan is the basis for the City’s ability to regulate land use and development - land use regulation cannot be implemented outside the framework of a comprehensive plan. Land use regulations control the types of uses that can occur in various areas, as well as provide rules for how these areas can be developed. Land use regulations can slow or speed development, result in dense development and low costs for providing public services, or widespread low-density development with higher costs for providing public services. Land use regulations can affect traffic generation and circulation and can be used to make areas more vehicle-friendly or more pedestrian-friendly.

A comprehensive plan is a policy document that guides the long-term physical, social and economic development of a community. As suggested by the word “comprehensive” – it looks at a variety of issues that contribute to or are affected by land use development patterns. The comprehensive plan outlines the City’s vision and goals, and explores policies intended to guide decision making by the City government. The comprehensive plan is implemented every day, as the City Council decides what infrastructure to fund and construct, as the Planning Commission decides whether to approve a rezone or variance, as private developers construct new facilities in accordance with the plan and local land use regulations based upon the plan. The typical comprehensive plan is based on a 20-year horizon and is intended to be flexible enough to adjust to unanticipated changes in social or economic conditions, while providing sufficient guidance to move the community in the desired direction.

Envision Soldotna 2030, the comprehensive plan for the City of Soldotna, outlines the City’s vision for the Soldotna of the future. The goal of Envision Soldotna 2030 is to explore implementable policies – based on goals identified by the community – that will shape and direct new growth and development in a manner that promotes the health of the Kenai River, the quality of the built environment, and the operational and fiscal efficiency of providing transportation and other public infrastructure. It will not make specific decisions about individual properties or facilities, but will offer guidance on major development issues to allow the City to move toward its long-term goals.



Student Art Work and Essays

## ENVISION 2030 VISIONING PROCESS

A vision statement summarizes what the community wants to be in the future. It is the basis for the goals of the comprehensive plan and the policies adopted in the plan to regulate growth and development in a manner that moves the community toward that vision.

The City of Soldotna began work on the vision statement for Envision Soldotna 2030 in early 2009. The City established a website for the plan update, providing information on the process for visioning and other components of the plan. A survey was developed to identify those issues that the community felt most strongly about, including the top three land use/development/planning issues facing Soldotna, residents' vision of Soldotna in 20 years, and any feedback on the vision statement from the previous comprehensive plan. The survey was available online via the project website and hard copies were available for pick-up at Soldotna's City Hall. In addition, a postcard promoting the survey was sent out to over 2,000 members of the community, both inside and outside the Soldotna city limits, as well as to people who own land in Soldotna but reside elsewhere in the state. Survey results were compiled and distributed to the project team. A presentation on the comprehensive planning process was given to the local Chamber of Commerce in March 2009, encouraging business people to provide input into the planning process.

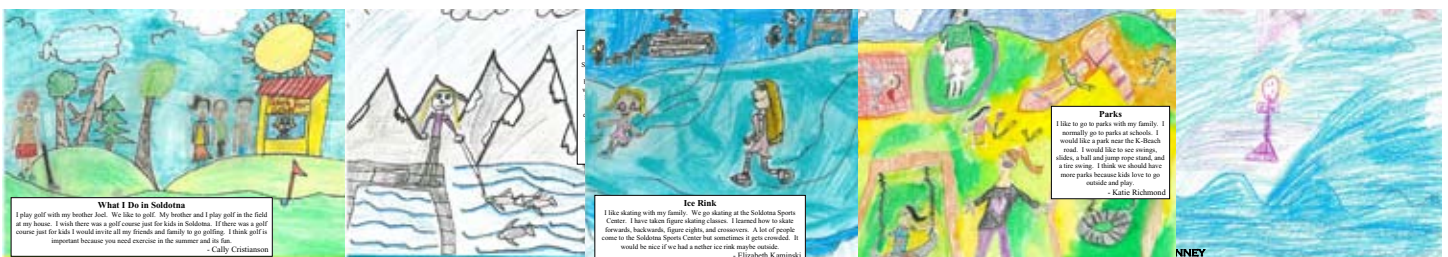
To obtain more direct and personal input, planners met one-to-one with over 50 individuals in Soldotna that play key roles in development of the City, including the Chamber of Commerce, small business owners, realtors and developers, homestead families, KPB representatives, university representatives, environmental interests, City workers, Planning Commissioners, and elected officials. Phone interviews were conducted for those who were not available for personal interviews. The issues discussed during these interviews were similar to those on the survey described above.



Vision and Goals Workshop

After gathering information via the survey and personal interviews, the project team scheduled a week of meetings and open workshops in Soldotna during the first week of May 2009. The planning team was available throughout the week for people to drop in and discuss the plan. Members of the community were also invited to attend a Friday evening Vision and Goals Workshop and a Saturday Project Open House on May 8 and 9, 2009. At the work sessions and open house, the team provided background information on the City's economy, land use and development, transportation and recreation. Additional information was gathered from the community primarily focused on the community vision, as well as planning issues to be addressed and specific goals in various areas.

These meetings were advertised via flyers mailed to all street and post office box addresses in Soldotna, via e-mail to a long list of interested parties, by paid advertising in the local newspapers, and by newspaper and radio interviews on the project. Finally, as part of the effort to promote Envision Soldotna 2030 as a community-centered project, Soldotna students from kindergarten through sixth grade were asked to participate in various classroom projects related to the comprehensive planning and visioning process. These projects involved students drawing and/or writing about their favorite places in Soldotna and/or their favorite things to do in their community. The students' work was displayed during both the Envision Soldotna 2030 Vision and Goals Workshop and the Project Open House.



Student Art Work and Essays

Following these public meetings, City staff and the Planning Commission held additional focus group meetings to supplement the information from the workshops and go into more detail on areas of interest. City planners also attended City Council meetings to update them on the input from the community. Based on the input from the community, the following vision statement was developed:

***Soldotna is a vibrant community in the heart of the Kenai Peninsula providing a high quality of life through care and attention to both the natural and built environment and cherishing its past while reaching out to the future.***

This vision statement builds on the City’s place as the major retail center and the seat of government for the KPB. It also reflects the community’s desire to remain a family-friendly community with safe recreation areas and social services for all ages. The vision acknowledges the City’s unique environmental setting on the Kenai River and reflects a desire for high-quality development that protects the natural environment.

Envision 2030 is designed to move the City toward that vision. It will document the City’s goals and outline policies designed to achieve those goals. It will serve as the basis for future land use regulations and investment of public funds in services and infrastructure. Although this plan is designed to be flexible enough to accommodate a variety of future scenarios in terms of population and economic development for the next 20 years, the plan should be reviewed and updated periodically as conditions change.

Working with the community, the Planning Commission has suggested a vision for several planning areas of interest:

- Economic Development
- Neighborhoods
- Natural Resources/Environment
- Health Care/Hospital
- Arts, Education, and Culture
- Public Infrastructure and Services
- Highways and Transportation
- Regional Growth and Development
- General Land Use

These areas of interest have been used to organize this comprehensive plan with each one addressed further in Chapter 3. The vision for each of these areas is provided below. The following sections of the plan provide

information on the City’s setting, opportunities and issues, and policies that are based on these visions.

### Economic Development

*Soldotna will encourage economic development by supporting the expansion of health care and educational opportunities; year-round tourism and recreation; quality commercial development; and by incorporating the Kenai River as a marketable asset and resource. Economic development will promote pedestrian-friendly retail opportunities and the development of a city center/square. Soldotna will strive to maintain its tax base while continuing to provide an extraordinary quality of life to its residents.*

### Neighborhoods

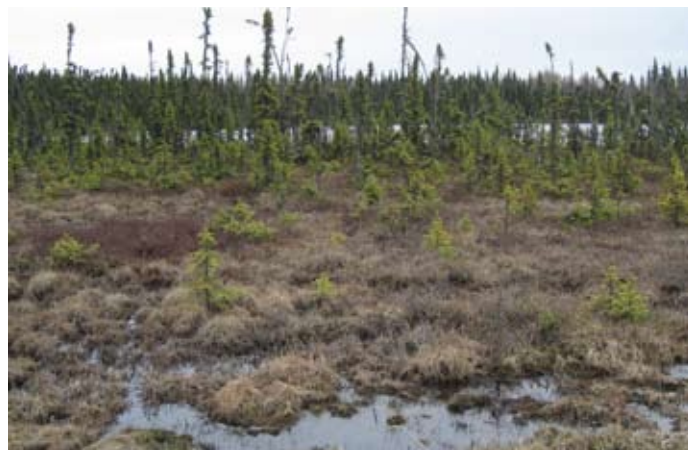
*Soldotna neighborhoods will be attractive, vibrant, clean, safe and desirable. They will be well-maintained, provide for mobility, and be well-connected to the larger community. The City will encourage neighborhood interaction and a sense of community.*



Residential

### Natural Resources/Environment

*Soldotna will protect and maintain the general health of the Kenai River while showcasing its assets to ensure a quality experience. The City will continue to invest in its parks, trails, and other recreational opportunities for both residents and visitors.*



Wetlands

## Health Care/Hospital

*Soldotna will encourage and promote the health care industry as a key component of its economic development strategy and a key contributor to our community's overall quality of life.*



Medical Facilities

## Arts, Education, and Culture

*Soldotna will develop and encourage the arts and cultural services and facilities. The City will preserve and promote the area's history and provide adequate public access to art, music, and other cultural activities.*

## Public Infrastructure and Services

*Soldotna will continue to devote resources to capital improvements which meet and anticipate the needs of our developing community. The City will continue to expand and maintain an integrated, cost-effective system of municipal improvements and public infrastructure.*

## Highways and Transportation

*Soldotna will be pedestrian-friendly and aesthetically pleasing, and will give motorists a reason to slow down and stop in the City. The City's motorized and pedestrian transportation network will be safe, efficient, and well-maintained year-round.*

## Regional Growth and Development

*Soldotna will develop a forward-looking approach to regional growth and development, and will coordinate with neighboring communities and landowners to identify common interests and goals. The City will explore opportunities to share infrastructure and public spaces with neighboring jurisdictions.*

## General Land Use

*Soldotna will promote quality development through the re-evaluation and enforcement of the City's zoning and sign codes.*