



2024 Funny River Comprehensive Plan

Adopted _____, 2024 by
Ordinance No. 2024-XX

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I. Introduction

The residents of Funny River are interested in guiding development in our community that will complement the rural character of the place we call home; will safeguard the watershed and natural areas that allow wildlife and human inhabitants to co-exist peacefully; and will promote and develop economic sustainability. To help the community achieve their goals, the Funny River Advisory Planning Commission obtained feedback from the community through a survey and developed this Comprehensive Plan to be incorporated as an appendix to the Kenai Peninsula Borough Comprehensive Plan. Once this Comprehensive Plan is formally adopted by the Borough Assembly, the community can use the adopted plan to obtain grants and develop projects in furtherance of the community goals.

II. Background

A. Plan Area

The Funny River community was designated as a Census Designated Community in the 2000 US Census.

Funny River is located on the northwestern side of the Kenai Peninsula in Alaska. It is bordered to the west by Soldotna and to the north and east by the Kenai River. The southern boundary is the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Across the Kenai River to the north is the community of Sterling. The community is approximately 29 square miles; 26.7 square miles of land and 2.2 square miles of water. The three main bodies of water in the community are the Kenai River, Funny River, and Browns Lake.

There are no bridges across the Kenai River between Funny River and Sterling. The only road access is via Funny River Road from Soldotna. The boundaries are shown in yellow below.



Figure 1. Funny River Community Boundaries. Obtained from the Kenai Peninsula Borough's online viewer.

B. History

Folks started homesteading the Funny River area as early as the 1940s. In the late 1950s, a barge was used to cross the Kenai River and transport homesteaders back and forth to Sterling in the summer months. In the winter, residents waited for the Kenai River to freeze and drove across. For a short time in the early 1960s, a three hundred foot cable was stretched across the Kenai so that year-round access was possible. The cable car was used until Funny River Road was constructed. A photo provided by the Funny River Community Association is of Bertha Moore using the original cable car.



The original road alignment was not designed or surveyed. Local residents worked with the state to find areas of gravel and used heavy equipment to construct a single lane road with occasional pull-outs for passing from the Soldotna Airport to the Funny River. The bridge over Funny River was constructed in 1961 by a handful of local residents, including Shorty Harris, Harry Moore, Bill Eylar, Jim Whitcomb, Dick Hills, Elmer Bird, and Jim Chapman. A photo of the construction was provided by the Funny River Community Association.



Sporadic improvements to the road were constructed and it was paved for the first 17 miles in 2000. A project to resurface the road was started in summer 2023 and will be completed in summer 2024.

As access improved and homesteads were subdivided, the population increased from the few homesteaders in the mid 1900s to the 636 counted in 2000 to the 1,005 in 2020.

The Funny River fire in May 2014 gained national attention. During May and June, the fire consumed almost 200,000 acres. Evacuations included all of Funny River and parts of Sterling, Kasilof, and Lower Skilak Lake.

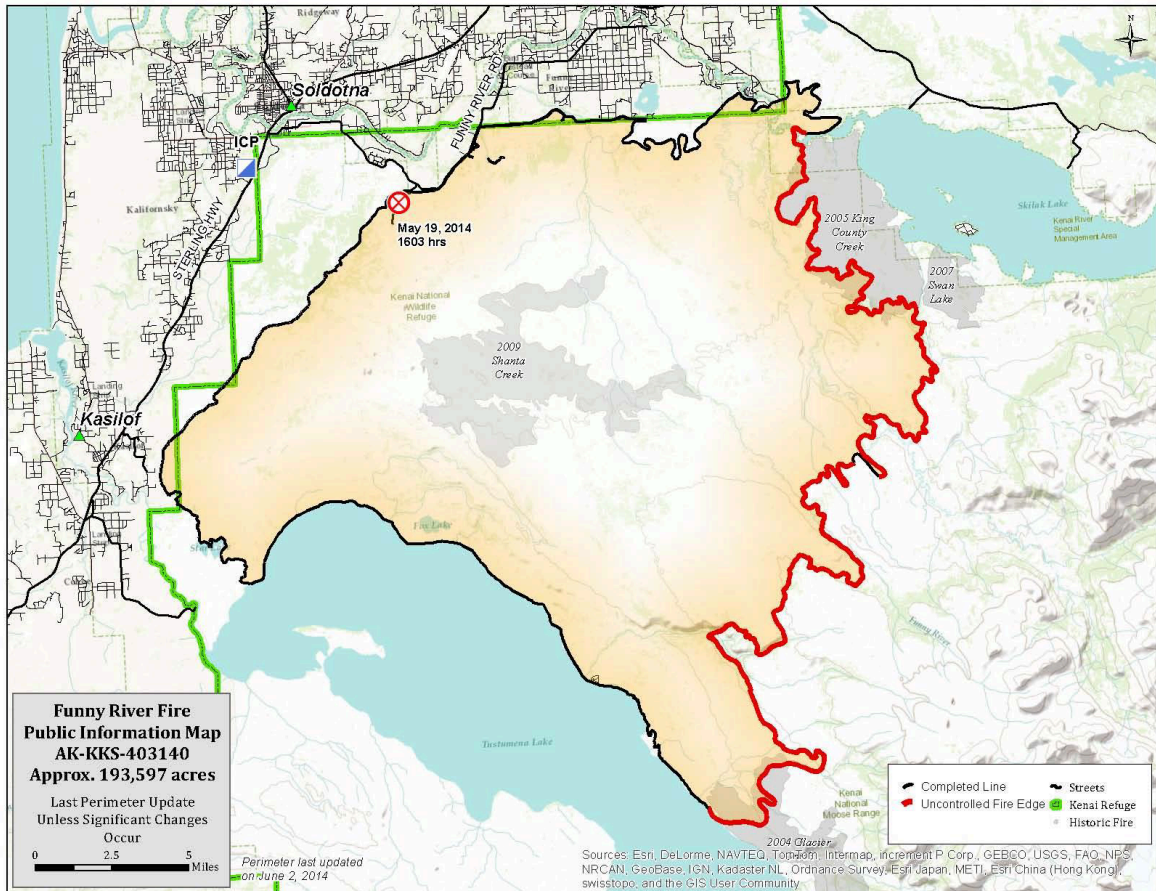


Figure 2. Funny River Fire Boundaries. Obtained from the Alaska Inter-Agency Management Team Facebook site.

C. Climate

Funny River gets an average of 22 inches of rain each year. The average temperature in July is 64° F and in January is 16° F. Seven months of the year have significant snowfall with an average accumulation through the winter of 86 inches.

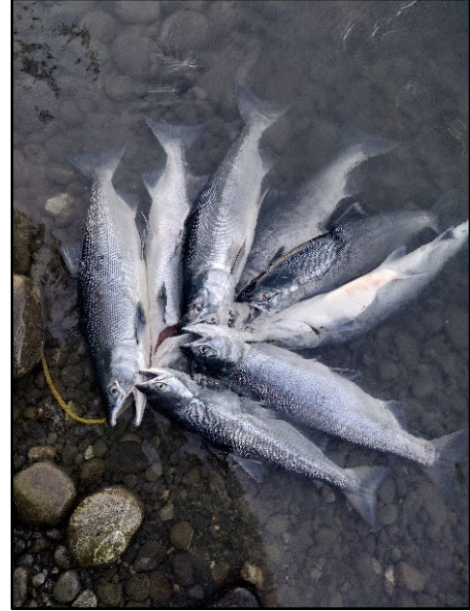
In the middle of a relatively flat area of the Kenai Peninsula, wind is common, but strong winds are rare.

On the Summer Equinox, the sun never quite sets in Funny River. The Winter Equinox provides approximately 8.5 hours of daylight. Between the Equinoxes, the daylight time changes by approximately 5 minutes per day.

D. Vegetation and Wildlife

The non-populated areas of Funny River are composed primarily of naturally growing black and white spruce. There are pockets of cottonwood, aspen, and birch trees. There are also wetland areas. Most of the vegetation is typical Alaskan vegetation including wildflowers. Sporadically, there are issues with spruce bark beetle infestations that impact swaths of mature spruce trees. In the early 2020s, a significant number of mature trees were impacted.

The Kenai River is renowned for many kinds of fish, including Chinook (king), Coho (silver), Sockeye (red), Pink, and Chum salmon; Rainbow Trout; and Dolly Varden. Coho and Chinook salmon run in the Funny River. Aurora Lake (near Browns Lake) is stocked by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. Browns Lake does not support fish because the lake is shallow and freezes solid some winters.



In addition to the fish, the Funny River area has a variety of wildlife. The wildlife species known to inhabit the area include moose, black bear, brown bear, wolves, caribou, coyote, otters, fox, marten, beaver, ermine, lynx, hare, squirrels, porcupine, ptarmigan, and spruce grouse. Additionally falcons, crows, ravens, bald eagles, golden eagles, and owls and a host of smaller birds make the Funny River area their home or a migratory stop on their way to warmer climates.

E. Demographics

According to the 2020 Census, the population of Funny River is 1,005. The density is approximately 38 people per square mile. Ratio of males to females is 50/50. The median age is 61.7 years old: 39% of the residents are over age 65, 10% are under 18 years old and 51% are between ages 18 and 65. Racial makeup is 86 % White (86%), 7% Black, 3% Hispanic, 2% Asian, and 1% Native.

The per capita income is approximately \$32,500 with a median household income of \$55,000. Approximately 12% of the residents live below the poverty line and of that 12%, the majority are over 65. No children were reported below the poverty threshold. The majority of the employed residents work in Soldotna or Kenai.

There are approximately 515 households in Funny River with an average of two persons per household. Seventy-two percent are occupied by married couples. There are 1,155 housing units, 56% of which are vacant. Of the occupied housing units, 78% are owner occupied and the bulk of the units (81%) are single-family residential homes.

F. Land Status and Ownership

The majority of land, approximately 60%, in the Funny River community is privately owned. The remaining property is divided between Native Corporations, the Kenai Peninsula Borough, the Federal Government, and the State of Alaska. The distribution is shown in the figure below.

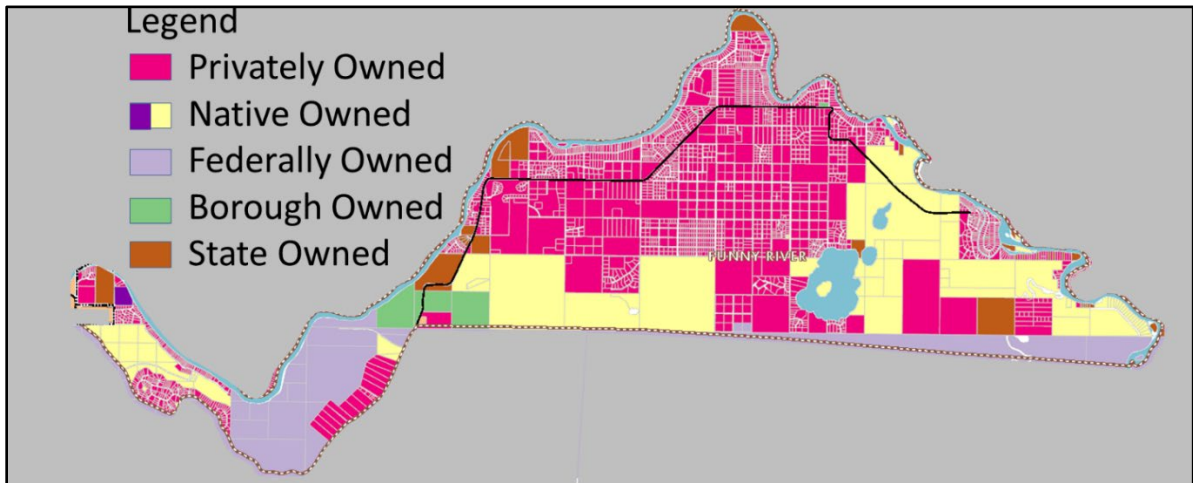


Figure 3. Funny River Land Ownership Information. Obtained from the Kenai Peninsula Borough online viewer.

G. Economy

The larger businesses in the area consist of a golf course, several gravel excavation/construction businesses, and several farming-type businesses (hay, peonies, vegetables, cannabis). Several attempts have been made at keeping a small general store afloat; the latest went out of business in January 2023 and the building/property is currently for sale.

There are many small campgrounds, cabins, lodges, and other affiliated business such as guide services in the area that profit from the abundant sport fishing opportunities on the Kenai River.

H. Local Community Organizations

Early residents wanted to help develop a thriving community, even before the US Census Bureau classified the area as an official community, and in 1987 the Funny River Chamber of Commerce & Community Association (FRCCCA) was established. In 2017, the FRCCCA Board of Directors made the decision to split the Chamber of Commerce away from the Community Association to facilitate fundraising and to reflect the actual structure of the organization more accurately. The two organizations continue to work closely together for the benefit of the residents and the businesses of Funny River and both operate out of the Community Center at 35850 Pioneer Access Drive in the Funny

River Community. The Chamber of Commerce maintains a gambling license which allows them to host bingo, raffles and such.

I. Other Planning Documents

Because Funny River is located within the Kenai Peninsula Borough (KPB), the KPB Comprehensive Plan (KPBCP) applies to our area. The purpose behind the KPBCP is to diversify and grow the KPB economy; proactively manage growth to provide economic development opportunities on the KPB while preserving what residents and visitors value about the area’s natural resources; preserve and improve quality of life in the KPB through increased access to local and regional facilities, activities, programs and services; improve access to, from and connectivity within the KPB; and create more active and engaged KPB residents, local communities, and a more effective and efficient Borough government. The KPBCP is a more global perspective of planning and land use within the Borough. The intent behind this Comprehensive Plan is to provide our area specific information for incorporation into the KPBCP. The Alaska Department of Natural Resources developed the Kenai River Comprehensive Management Plan (KRCMP). Implementation of the Goals and Objectives of this Comprehensive Plan must be consistent with any applicable parts of the KRCMP.

III. Community Goals and Recommendations

A. Survey

To better understand the wants and needs of the Funny River residents, the Funny River Advisory Planning Commission conducted a survey in 2022. The survey was made available to all residents within the Funny River Census Designated Place boundaries. Approximately 1,500 surveys were distributed and approximately 19% of recipients responded. A copy of the survey and a summary of the survey results are included in Appendix A. The survey results were used to prioritize goals and recommendations of this Comprehensive Plan.

Table 1. Funny River Survey Demographics

| | |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <u>Ages of Respondents:</u> | <u>Residency:</u> |
| 38% - Over 65 years old | 26% - More than 20 years |
| 44% - Between 51-65 years old | 22% - Between 11 & 20 years |
| 12% - Between 41-50 years old | 18% - Between 6 & 10 years |
| 7% - Between 18-40 years old | 18% - One and 5 years |

Sixty-eight percent of respondents indicated that they did not believe that building codes were needed in Funny River and 96.5% indicated that they believed that property owners should have full control of their property.

B. Land Uses

The entirety of the Funny River area falls within the rural district. There is currently only one location within the Funny River area that is zoned using the KPB Local Zoning option. It is a small subdivision off Funny River Road in the vicinity of Rabbit Run that is zoned exclusively single-family residential (R-1).

The survey provided respondents were provided with four zoning types and asked to rank whether or not they thought that requirements should be implemented. Overall, the survey responses indicated that the majority of respondents are not concerned about additional regulation or zoning for future developments. Table 2 provides a brief summary of the responses to the four regulation/zoning questions.

Table 2. Funny River Survey Regulation/Zoning Responses

| | Residential Zoning | Private Airstrips | Commercial Zoning | Sand/Gravel Pits |
|----------------|-----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| Not Concerned | 168 | 157 | 145 | 136 |
| Very Concerned | 11 | 20 | 31 | 41 |
| Average | 2.7 | 3.2 | 3.6 | 3.9 |

No Community Land Use Goals or Objectives are identified at this time. The Advisory Planning Commission requests to be informed of any proposed regulation pertaining to sand/gravel pits; private airstrips; or commercial and other non-residential development in rural areas and specifically the Funny River area so that we have an opportunity to provide input.

C. Watersheds and Water Resources

The Funny River area lies within the Kenai River watershed. The two primary tributaries in the area are the Funny River and the Killey River. There are numerous small lakes in the area, the two most notable are Browns Lake due to its size and Aurora Lake because it is stocked with trout annually.

Of the survey respondents, protection of area lakes, streams and wetlands was identified as the highest priority.

There are significant existing regulations regarding development adjacent to lakes and streams. The Donald E. Gilman River Center (the River Center), located at approximately mile two of Funny River Road, is a one-stop facility with the designated mission of implementation and enforcement of those regulations.

Watershed and Water Resources Goals and Objectives:

- Maintain a good working relationship with the River Center and assist with their mission of protecting and restoring the waters of the Borough.
- The Advisory Planning Commission will work with the appropriate agencies to provide input so that the needs of the community are considered during the development of future regulations.

D. Safety

Community safety was ranked as the next highest concern in the community.

Currently there is a Central Emergency Services Fire Station located at approximately mile 16.5 of Funny River Road. The station is manned 24/7 and provides efficient and effective medical response to our community. Continued staffing of this facility is imperative to maintaining a healthy community.

There is currently no active police presence in the Funny River area. There is an Alaska State Trooper station located essentially at the beginning of Funny River Road.

Residents are concerned about crime and safety. Many residents have started using the Funny River Facebook page as an informal neighborhood watch program. Concerns, possible crimes, and other discussions occur on a daily basis. A more formal program could be examined.

In addition to crime, another safety concern is Funny River Road, the only road access to the entire community. During the 2014 wildfire, this road was closed on several occasions because of the proximity to the fire. The Kenai Peninsula Borough has an Office of Emergency Management (OEM), but they have no specific plan in place in the event that the road is closed and ingress/egress is necessary.

The Borough is developing a Spruce Bark Beetle Forest Management Project (SBBFMP) that may provide the community opportunities to address some concerns regarding the devastation being caused by the beetle infestation. The Borough is also developing a Community Wildfire Protection Plan that will be used as a starting point for developing area specific response plans.

Safety Goals and Objectives:

- Work with the KPB OEM and Central Emergency Services to develop a Funny River Emergency Evacuation Plan that identifies possible alternatives in the event that the road is inaccessible for emergency evacuation. Some suggestions include: identifying gathering locations where boats can be used to transport people to safety or evaluating the feasibility of installing some sort of ferry or cable system to be used in the event of an emergency.

- Work with the Borough to ensure Funny River is included in the SBBFMP and the Community Wildfire Protection Plan as appropriate
- Work with the local, State and Federal law enforcement agencies to create a more formal neighborhood watch-type program and develop more of a law enforcement presence in the Funny River area.

E. Open Spaces, Forests, and Agricultural Lands

Survey respondents indicated that maintaining existing open spaces, forests, and agricultural lands was a high priority. However, the community specified a desire to minimize regulation and zoning, which hampers the ability to maintain the nature of those spaces. Because there are minimal regulation or zoning constraints (primarily the Borough Rural District and some environmental requirements), the most reasonable way to maintain the desired spaces is to ensure that the properties in which the desired places exist are owned by entities that are willing to keep them as open spaces, native forest, and agricultural lands.

The Funny River Community Association currently owns the land around the Community Center. As opportunities arise, they could choose to purchase additional properties and control any development on those properties. The Community Association could also investigate the opportunity to provide some sort of incentive to owners of properties that are open or forested or agricultural in nature to maintain those properties as they currently exist.

The community could also explore environmentally conscious grant programs to purchase property or get property designated as park land. The Borough, State, and Federal government all own properties in the Funny River area. The community could work with those governmental entities to expand their ownership and/or open space designations.

One final opportunity may be the many parcels owned by Native Corporations. The community could work with those Native Corporations to have portions of their property designated as preserves or open spaces.

No Open Space, Forests, and Agricultural Land Goals or Objectives are identified at this time. As opportunities arise, the Community Association should explore the opportunity to either purchase additional properties or work with governmental or native organizations to maintain open spaces in the community.

F. Transportation

Funny River Road

Funny River Road is a vital and integral component of this community. As the only road access in and out of the community, maintenance and improvements to the road are of huge concern to all residents. Funny River Road and other streets and roads in the community are owned and maintained by the State of Alaska while the remaining ones are Borough or privately maintained.



There is an Alaska Department of Transportation (ADOT) project scheduled to resurface Funny River Road in summer 2023. This resurfacing project should eliminate the majority of resident complaints about the rutting and heaving on the road surface. The project will not include any safety improvements, upgrades, or bridge repair.

Interest has been expressed by residents in several road upgrades for Funny River Road. Those upgrades include passing lanes, additional pull-outs, larger shoulders, possible bike lanes, a new bridge over Funny River, and a separated multi-use path. Passing lanes and additional pull-outs would improve driver safety by eliminating the miles of being stuck behind a tourist going 20 miles per hour under the posted speed during fishing season. Larger shoulders would increase safety by providing a safe parking area when a disabled vehicle has to pull off the side of the road. Bike lanes would improve bicyclist safety on the road and a separated multi-use path would significantly increase safety for pedestrians, bicyclists, horse riders, and other non-vehicular users.

Local Roads

There does not appear to be concern about construction or maintenance of other roads within the area.

New Bridge Across Kenai River to Sterling

A bridge connecting Funny River to Sterling has been discussed since the day after they tore down the old cable connection. Some residents want the connection as they believe that it will improve access to the rest of Alaska, cut down on travel time to the store and employment opportunities in Sterling, and resolve the safety concern of only having one road access point in and out of the community. Others fear that it will

generate even more tourist traffic and that the influx of outsiders will be detrimental to the community in general.

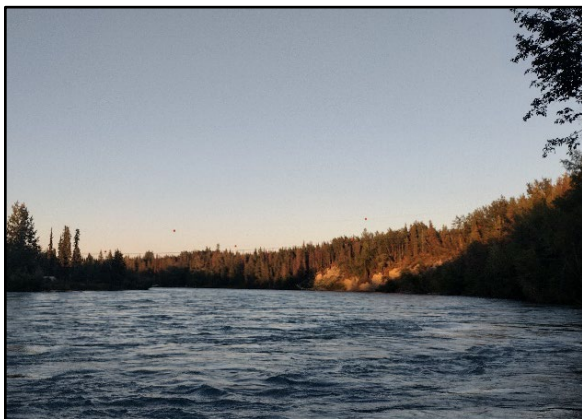
There are pros and cons to the discussion that are far more detailed than can be conveyed in this document. Another study should be conducted to see if it is finally time to build the bridge or if the community access should stay as-is.

Transportation Goals and Objectives:

- Work with ADOT to have a new bridge constructed over Funny River.
- Work with KPB and ADOT to find funding to construct improvements to Funny River Road.
- Work with KPB to conduct a study of the feasibility of constructing a bridge across the Kenai River to connect Funny River to Sterling. The study should include locations; possible funding sources; and a projection of economic, safety, and development impacts of the construction at a minimum.
- Obtain more information from community to see if a ride-share program or some sort of carpool communication program would be beneficial.

G. Public Boat Launch

Currently there is no public boat launch in the Funny River community. There are several private boat launches. Since the mid-1980s the community has been lobbying for the construction of a public boat launch.



Attached as Appendix B is a copy of KPB Resolution 2019-42 that shows Kenai Peninsula Borough support of the boat launch. The most current activity in the development of a public boat launch was a 2020 committee to study the feasibility of a public boat launch and evaluate possible locations, formed by the Kenai River Special Management Area Advisory Board (KRSMAAB).

Their recommendations were provided to the KRSMAAB in November 2020 and are attached to this document as Appendix C.

To our knowledge, the project has not progressed since the 2020 recommendations. The community would like to resurrect the project.

Public Boat Launch Goals and Objectives:

- Work with the Kenai River Special Management Area Advisory Board and the Alaska Department of Natural resources to have a public boat launch constructed at an appropriate location in the Funny River area.

H. Transfer Station

In the summer of 2020, the Solid Waste Department of the Kenai Peninsula Borough opened the new Funny River Transfer Site. The improvements were consistent with other KPB Transfer Sites including: entrance gates, site fencing, bulk head installation, lighting, and surveillance connectivity improvements. While the new Transfer Station is safer (because of access and lighting) and has better capacity than the previous location, the residents still have some concerns about the Transfer Station.

Issues such as improper disposal of garbage, vandalism, people climbing into and on the dumpsters have been identified as concerns by both the Solid Waste Department and the community. Capacity and use of the facilities by commercial businesses in an attempt to circumvent the dump fees, are issues raised routinely by residents on the Funny River Facebook page. The Transfer Station also occasionally exceeds capacity during peak fishing times in the summer due to the influx of tourists.

Transfer Station Goals and Objectives:

- Work with KPB personnel and more specifically the Solid Waste Department to address resident concerns about safety at and misuse of the Transfer Station.

I. Post Office

Currently mail is delivered to individual and group mailboxes posted on major routes within the Funny River community by a Contractor. The United States Postal Service (USPS) manages the contract with no community input. Complaints are logged weekly about lost mail and packages delivered to the wrong address.

Several members of the community have been attempting to get Funny River designated as a separate community from Soldotna by the US Postal Service. The majority of communities on the Kenai Peninsula have their own post offices, such as Nikiski, Kasilof, Clam Gulch, and Ninilchik. Many of those communities have fewer residents than Funny River.

Benefits to having a separate designation include a separate zip code, elimination of the contract carrier, and dedicated postal service staff to our community. The designation also comes with costs, primarily associated with construction of a Post Office. There is sufficient space at the current Community Center to accommodate a designated Post Office, but specific information about the requirements is unknown.

Post Office Goals and Objectives:

- Obtain a grant to fund a study to evaluate the pros, cons, and costs of designating Funny River as a separate community by the US Postal Service. The study would be presented to the community and if a positive vote is recorded, a committee would be formed to process the application and work with the US Postal Service to implement the new designation.

J. Livability

Because of the diverse nature of the residents, there are multi-million properties in close proximity to properties that are covered in abandoned vehicles and other debris that might be considered trash. The community is trying to find balance between maintaining autonomy on personal property and keeping the community clean and safe. However, there is concern about between half a dozen and a dozen properties that are covered in materials that could be detrimental to the environment and are visually unpleasant.

Livability Goals and Objectives:

- Work with the Kenai Peninsula Borough personnel to determine what laws are applicable to the situation and what enforcement opportunities are available to clean up the couple of properties that are creating hazard concerns in the community.

K. Recreational Opportunities

There are many recreational opportunities available to residents and visitors alike in the Funny River area, a majority of which are affiliated with the Kenai River. There is a public access at the junction of Funny River and the Kenai River. There is a public boat launch access to Browns Lake with a small grass area off to the side. The Bird Homestead Golf Course is a nine-hole course that is open from mid-May through the end of August.

In addition to the opportunities available to the general public, there are also privately owned and operated activities in the area such as camping areas, lodges, and private airstrips.

Funny River Community Center

The Center is used for community events such as parties, quilting/sewing clubs, food bank, card games, bingo, bi-monthly breakfast and soup, book exchange, free exercise classes offered a couple of days a week, and holiday celebrations. The building has a commercial kitchen, a meeting/dining area, office spaces and restrooms. Located on the grounds is a communal garden, play area for kids, pavilion for outdoor events,

horseshoe pits, and large open field area. The Center is available to residents to rent for a nominal fee that includes full use of the facilities.

Funny River Festival

Each year the Funny River Community Association hosts the Funny River Festival as their primary fundraising activity. The Festival includes a hosted dinner, area vendor booths, children's games, card and golf tournaments, a quilt and other raffles, and a silent/live auction.

Directory of Services

While the Community Association publishes a newsletter monthly that includes a lot of the activities scheduled that month, there is no comprehensive list of services available in the area. Residents indicated an interest in developing a more comprehensive list of recreational opportunities and services available in the area.

Purchase additional Land for Community Use

There has been discussion by the Community Association about the possibility of purchasing additional property for use of the Community. While the concept appears to be beneficial to the community, the decision to purchase the property will be made by the Community Association and based on the current needs of the community.

Other

The survey included items such as a public library, exercise facilities, and public transportation as possible wants of the community. These items ranked very low on the scale and as such will not be pursued as part of this Comprehensive Plan.

L. Utilities

Electric

Currently most properties in the Funny River area have access to electricity. The Homer Electric Association (HEA) provides power to the entire area.

Phone/Internet

The only company that provides land-line service to the Funny River area is Alaska Communications (ACS). Pretty much all cellular carriers provide service to the Funny River area. There are several dedicated internet providers including ACS, SpitwSpots, and Starlink. Other than a slowdown in service during peak fishing season due to the volume of users registered with the system, there appears to be sufficient service in the area.

Heat

There are a multitude of heating options available in the Funny River area. Many homes rely almost exclusively on wood stoves to heat their homes. Some supplement their heat with electricity. Both oil and propane tanks are also common sources of heat. In 2016 ENSTAR constructed a line across the Kenai River to provide service to some of the northern subdivisions at approximately milepost 16.2 of Funny River Road. Gas service is limited to those adjacent to a gas line unless the property owner is willing to pay the cost to extend the gas main to their property.

Water/Sewer

Wells and septic systems are regulated by the State of Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation (ADEC). Well and septic are one of the only components of development in the Funny River area that is regulated. New development must meet their standards, which preserves the integrity of the water supply in the area and allows additional development to occur.

Utilities Goals and Objectives:

- Reliable, affordable heat is extremely important to future development in the Funny River community. It might be beneficial to the community to work with ENSTAR to see if additional main lines can be constructed allowing more of the residents to have affordable, accessible heating options available.
- Some residents have expressed an interest in promoting a local renewable energy source. If grant funding is available, a study of local opportunities for renewable energy could be beneficial to the community.

IV. Comprehensive Plan Revisions

Revisions to the Comprehensive Plan will be necessary as new development takes place in the Funny River area and the needs of the community change. The Comprehensive Plan should be reviewed at least once every five years or more frequently upon Advisory Planning Commission or Borough Assembly initiative.

V. Implementation

Once the Public Review process is completed and the Final Comprehensive Plan is adopted by the Kenai Peninsula Borough Assembly, Funny River community members will work with the Funny River Community Association, the Funny River Advisory Planning Commission, Borough staff, and appropriate state and federal agencies to obtain funding for studies and implementation of the Comprehensive Plan.