

DOWNTOWN IMPROVEMENT PLAN



SOLDOTNA
City of Soldotna, Alaska



Downtown streetscape concept

PHASE I

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Kenai River Festival, courtesy The Redoubt Reporter

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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 Kenai River. The City is at the center of one of the most densely populated areas on the peninsula and is home to the administrative offices of the Kenai Peninsula Borough, the Borough School District, and the Central Peninsula Hospital. The City also hosts a variety of state and federal government offices, the Kenai Peninsula College, multiple health and human services organizations, and a diverse and thriving retail sector.



The City of Soldotna has recognized the need to play a role in supporting and marketing Soldotna's role as a regional administrative, retail, and service center. Additionally, the City's Comprehensive Plan, written in consultation with hundreds of community members in 2010-2011, grounds this project, with the following goals informing the framework of the Downtown Improvement plan:

- **Economic Development Goal #1:** *Promote downtown development for visitors and residents; identify key focus areas to concentrate commercial/retail activity to create commercial synergy.*
- **Highways and Transportation Goal #1.B:** *Improve the streetscape along the highways through the city; develop highway entrances into the City as gateways; establish a sense of place. Development along the highway corridors should have interesting signage.*
- **Parks and Recreation Goals #7 and #10:** *Incorporate recreation facilities into the City's economy through providing better signage directing visitors to river access, local attractions, recreational opportunities, and other sites; encourage residents to use the existing City parks.*

During a survey with business owners at the Soldotna Chamber Breakfast, the nearly unanimous message was that the City has an important role to play in creating and enhancing the image of downtown. The Downtown Improvement Plan Phase I was initiated to fulfill some of these expectations by designing new community gateway signs, utility pole banners, and wayfinding signage throughout downtown. The Plan also includes an initial survey of land use in the downtown area, including areas for landscaping enhancements and opportunities for more robust transportation connectivity and parking options.

Stakeholder Involvement

The first step of this planning effort was to identify the geography of "downtown." Our team consulted with various stakeholders in the community, some of whom expressed difficulty in defining and/or visualizing one specific "center" of the city. At the same time, many expressed a desire for a walkable, defined mixed-use area for shopping and services.

Opinions on how to achieve this goal varied. Some folks said that existing centers of activity should be utilized to create anchor spaces to revitalize and reimagine downtown Soldotna. These locations included: areas surrounding the "Y" intersection, the Kobuk/Sterling Hwy intersection area, and the Safeway/PC Mall area. While interviewees mentioned Soldotna Creek Park as an important central point for downtown, the lack of commercial infrastructure to support and draw people to the park was noted.

As a result, this project has identified both highway corridors as the major downtown area for Soldotna, with specific ideas for key intersections and areas of commerce. This plan supports a focused effort to identify, connect, and support existing commercial nodes of activity through infrastructure improvements, signage/wayfinding efforts, and landscaping enhancements.

At the same time, this plan casts an eye towards the future with some concepts presented as long-term development objectives. The Downtown Improvement Planning team recognizes that development occurs with the blessing, cooperation, and work of willing landowners and developers, and as such, some concepts will be changed and modified from the generalizations presented here, and some concepts may never be implemented.

Visioning Process

The City and its consultants worked over an eight month period to produce Phase I of the Downtown Improvement Plan. The consultant group first conducted a series of stakeholder interviews to gather community input. The group then engaged a Planning Team, made up of 14 individuals representing a wide variety of community interests, during two input meetings. The concepts and designs in this plan were also presented to the Soldotna Planning & Zoning Commission during a work session.

The following steps were undertaken during this process:

1. Background information gathering & stakeholder interviews (Fall 2014)
2. Internal Charrette with City of Soldotna Staff (Fall 2014)
3. Community Case Study Research (Fall 2014)
4. Developing Initial Ideas & Designs (Winter 2014)
5. Presentation to Planning Team (December 2014)
6. Refinement of Concepts / Incorporating Feedback (January—March 2015)
7. Second Presentation to Planning Team Meeting & Planning & Zoning Commission (March 2015)
8. Second Round of Refinement / Incorporation of Feedback—**Finalization of Plan & Designs** (Summer/Fall 2015)

Planning Team Members

Pegge Erkeneff

KPB School District
Economic Development Council

Steve Stenga

Realtor, Developer

Rick Malley

Independent Living Center

Steve Manley

Banker
Economic Development Council

Colleen Denbrock

Planning & Zoning Commission

Keith Baxter

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Tammy Davis

Business Owner

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Kenai Peninsula Borough

Scott Sundberg

City Roads/Maintenance Dep't

Andrew Carmichael

City Parks & Recreation Dep't

Alice Kerkvliet

Business Owner

Michelle Graves &

Tami Murray

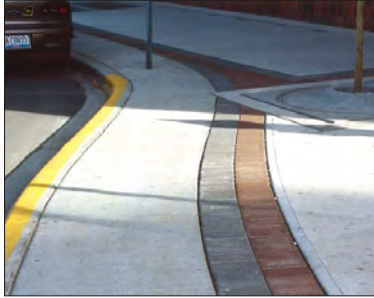
Chamber of Commerce

Jackson Blackwell

Student

Case Studies

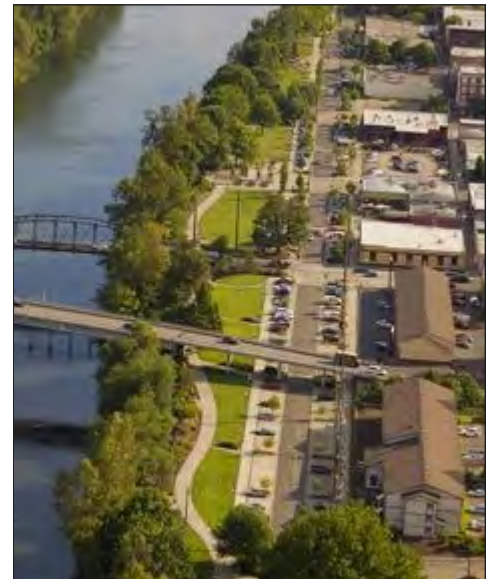
Whitehorse, Yukon Whitehorse is geographically similar to Soldotna, with development paralleling the Yukon River and 2nd Avenue / Lewes Boulevard acting as the primary thoroughfare through town similar to the Sterling Highway. The city has addressed its riverfront by investing in multimodal transportation opportunities and consistent/orderly development. Whitehorse offers on-street parking, sidewalks, and pedestrian-scale amenities such as benches and trash cans. Banners, stylized pavement selections, and art murals provide important branding opportunities.



Bend, Oregon The Deschutes River runs directly through downtown Bend, and the city has embraced this natural asset through responsible development and the promotion of people-centered events and activities around the waterfront. A collection of riverfront walks not dissimilar to Soldotna's boardwalks have been linked and packaged as a collective River Walk experience.

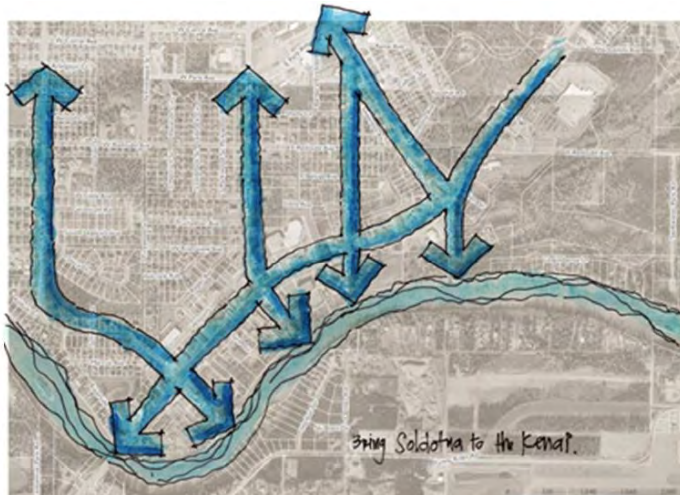


Corvallis, Oregon The Willamette River runs parallel to a Corvallis, similar to the configuration found in Soldotna. Downtown Willamette contends with multiple state and national highways; yet its development pattern still addresses the river through building placement and establishment of greenways along the banks. Effective landscaping and pedestrian areas create a sense of balance and place.



Guiding Principles

The consulting team used initial interviews with stakeholders in the community to craft these guiding principles that have been used to anchor and inform the Downtown Improvement Plan's efforts.



Focus on land use: Develop projects that increase the ability and desire of people to spend time in, and navigate around, Soldotna. Break up long blocks into manageable portions through increased connections to foster bike and pedestrian activity.



Build on greenway connections and amenities: Support, sign, and market a connected greenway trail system that links downtown with the river, parks, and residential areas; provide for safe, enjoyable ways to move around without a car, away from the busy highways. This focus includes linking surrounding areas (Centennial, residential neighborhoods, etc.) to Downtown.

Bring Soldotna to the River: Understand, plan for, and increase the long-term viability of Kenai River to play a role in economic development opportunities for the city. Increase its prominence in the further development and enhancement of downtown for both visitors and residents. Integrate the river into recreational opportunities such as a linked river boardwalk system, bike/pedestrian paved pathways, etc.



Focus on established centers: Build on the success of a few well-defined existing parts of Downtown. Intensify a mix of uses near downtown. Promote mixed use areas with a range of uses including commercial, civic, residential, and recreational. Draw attention to these areas through signage, focused and consistent landscaping, functionally and visually consistent streetscapes, and gateway entry/exit points.





Project Area Map

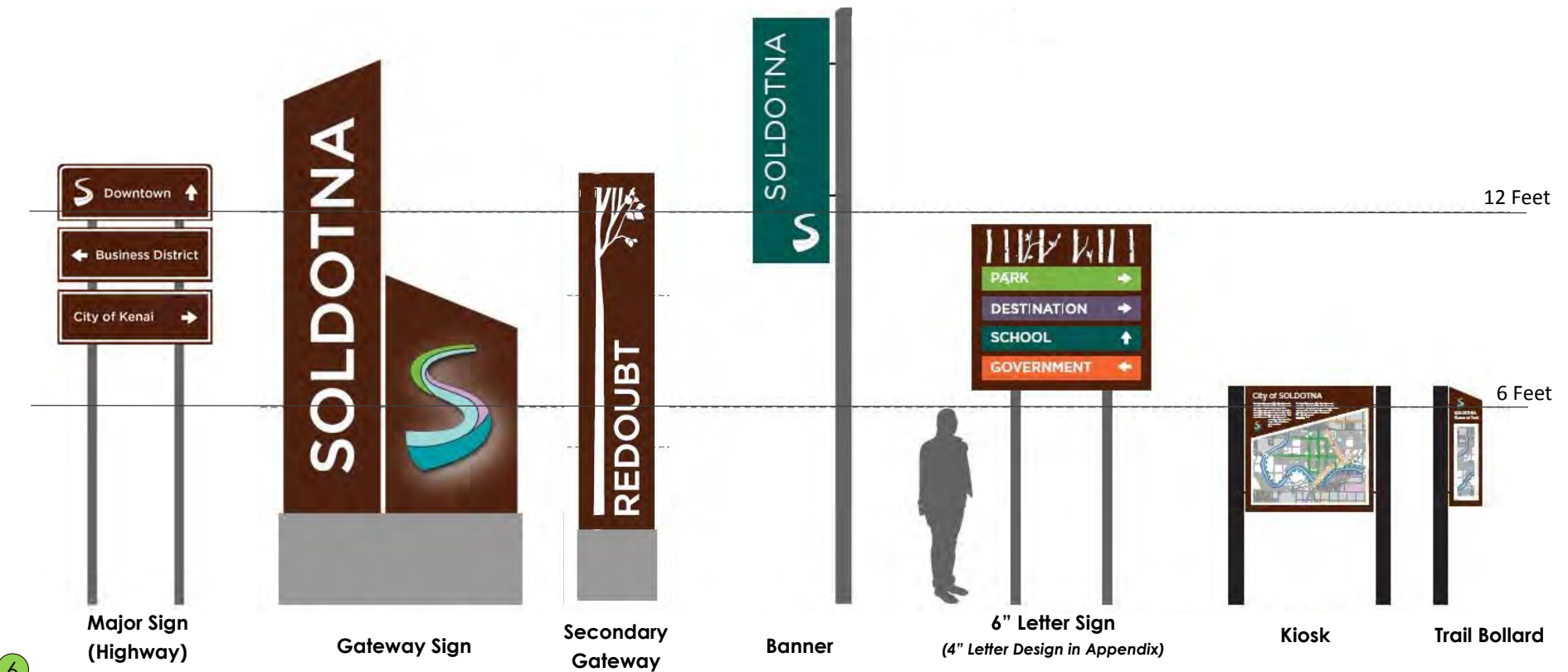
Signage

Existing signage in Soldotna includes one welcome sign (near Mackey Lake Road), older utility pole banners, and a variety of other wayfinding signs, mostly erected through AK DOT&PF. This plan recognizes the need to design and install a family of signs throughout the City that relate to each other through common elements such as color, font, and style/design.

While all signage will not be erected at any given time, the gradual replacement of signage at the end of its functional lifespan, as well as targeted investment over the next years will produce a cohesive and comprehensive approach to communicating with area residents as well as tourists. Gateway signs will announce the presence of Soldotna and create a dramatic instance of place-making and branding. Destination signage will steer the public towards City assets (such as campgrounds and parks) and commonly visited places (such as schools, City Hall, or the library). Pole banners will reinforce the message that Soldotna is a welcoming and beautiful community.

Additional signage is proposed which adds an additional layer of messaging and communication invite pedestrians out of their cars and into the transportation network as primary users. These include secondary gateways, which draw emphasis to key intersections around town; kiosks, which could include parks information or general City maps, and trail bollards, to mark the eventual greenways and trail system proposed to connect and traverse downtown Soldotna.

Further descriptions of each of these sign types is included on the following pages.



Gateway Signs

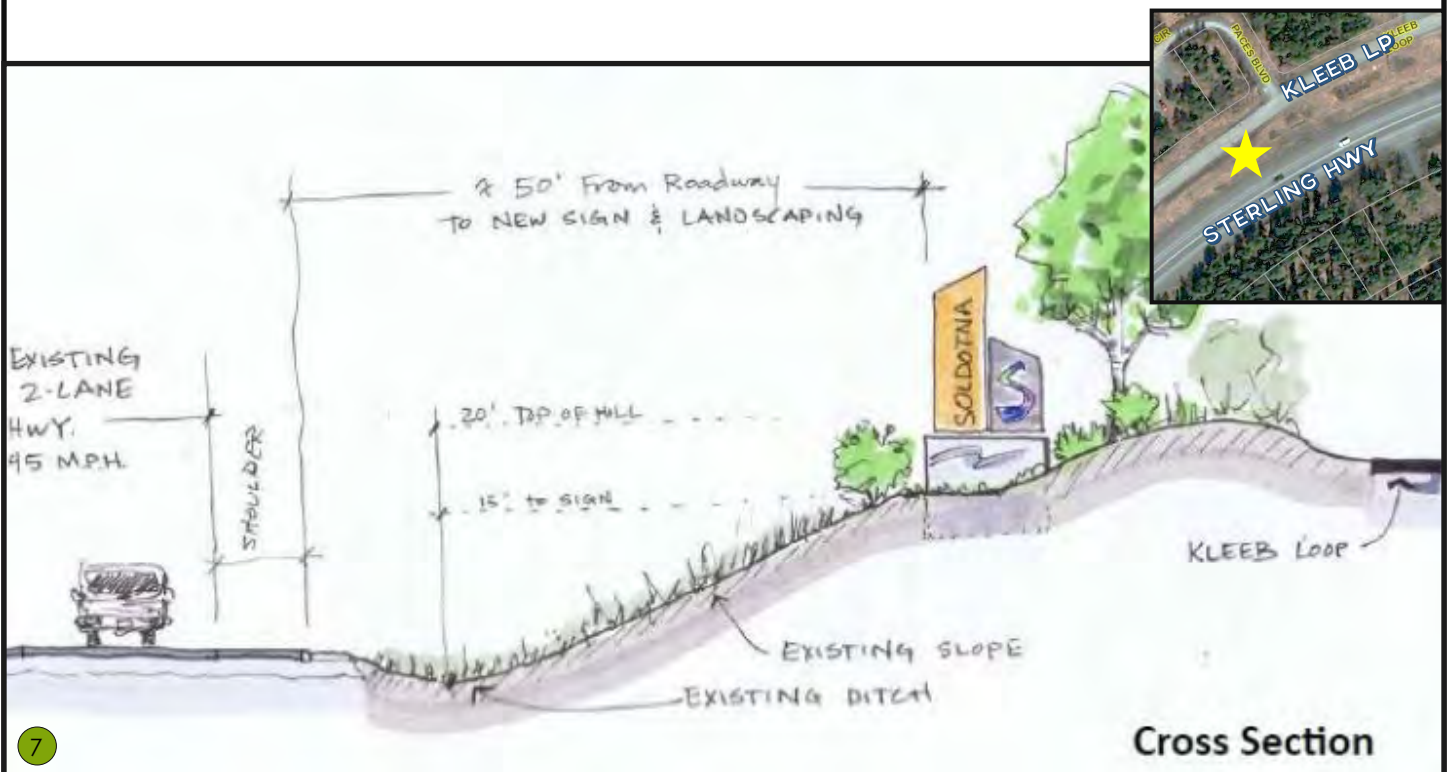
Soldotna has one existing gateway sign—on the Sterling Highway near Mackey Lake Road. This sign is at the end of its functional lifespan. New gateway signs are a critical component of branding, marketing, and visual enhancement in downtown Soldotna.

Throughout the visioning process with the Downtown Planning Team, the design and locations of three new gateway signs were defined. Two signs (on the Sterling Highway) are proposed for construction within the State of Alaska right-of-way, subject to review and approval by the Department of Transportation + Public Facilities and other agencies as appropriate. The third sign (on the Kenai Spur Highway) is proposed for construction on land owned by the Kenai Peninsula Borough, subject to their review and approval as appropriate.



Gateway Sign #1: Sterling Highway / Kleeb Loop

This monument sign will replace the existing welcome signage at Mackey Lake Road with a new sign between the Sterling Highway and Kleeb Loop, approximately across from the latter's intersection with Pace's Boulevard. The sign will alert travelers from Anchorage, Seward, Cooper Landing and Sterling of their arrival in downtown Soldotna. The proposed location is subject to DOT approval through an encroachment permit.



Gateway Sign #2: Sterling Highway / Kenai River

This monument is located on the Sterling Highway at the Kenai River, on the southeast side of the bridge crossing. The sign will alert travelers from Homer, Kalifornsky Beach, and Funny River of their arrival in downtown Soldotna.



Kenai Spur Highway / Knight Drive

This monument sign is located on an undeveloped, vegetated lot owned by the Kenai Peninsula Borough, near the northwest corner of the Knight Drive & Kenai Spur Highway intersection. The sign will alert travelers from Nikiski, Kenai, and the region's primary airport of their arrival in downtown Soldotna. The proposed location is subject to KPB approval.



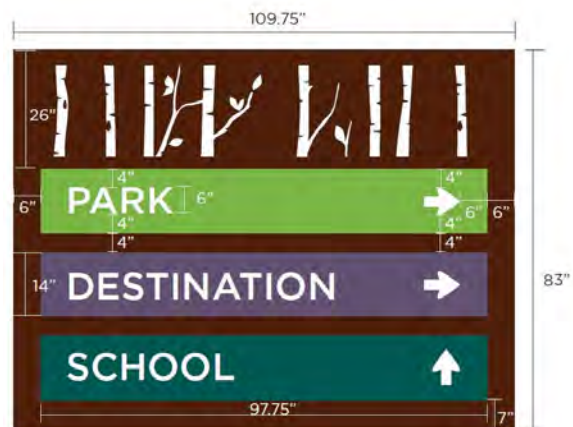
Wayfinding Signs

A suite of possible wayfinding signs has been designed for use in various locations. The design at the right can be used at locations to showcase regional destinations (the airport, directions to Kenai or Homer, Captain Cook State Park, etc.), while the signs below can be used for more local destinations such as schools, shopping, or parks.

A map of suggested wayfinding sign locations is included on the following page. This map should be reviewed and finalized prior to design, funding and installation of wayfinding signage in the future. A rubric of local destinations is included on page twelve and should similarly be finalized at a future date to ensure accuracy at time of completion.

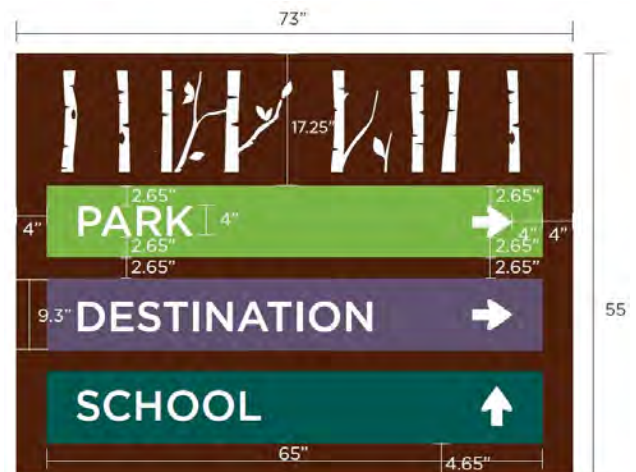
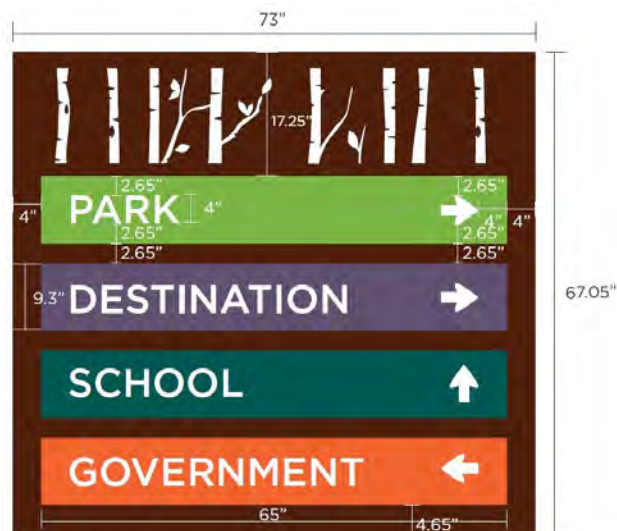


6 Inch Letter Signs (For Use at 35 MPH or Higher)

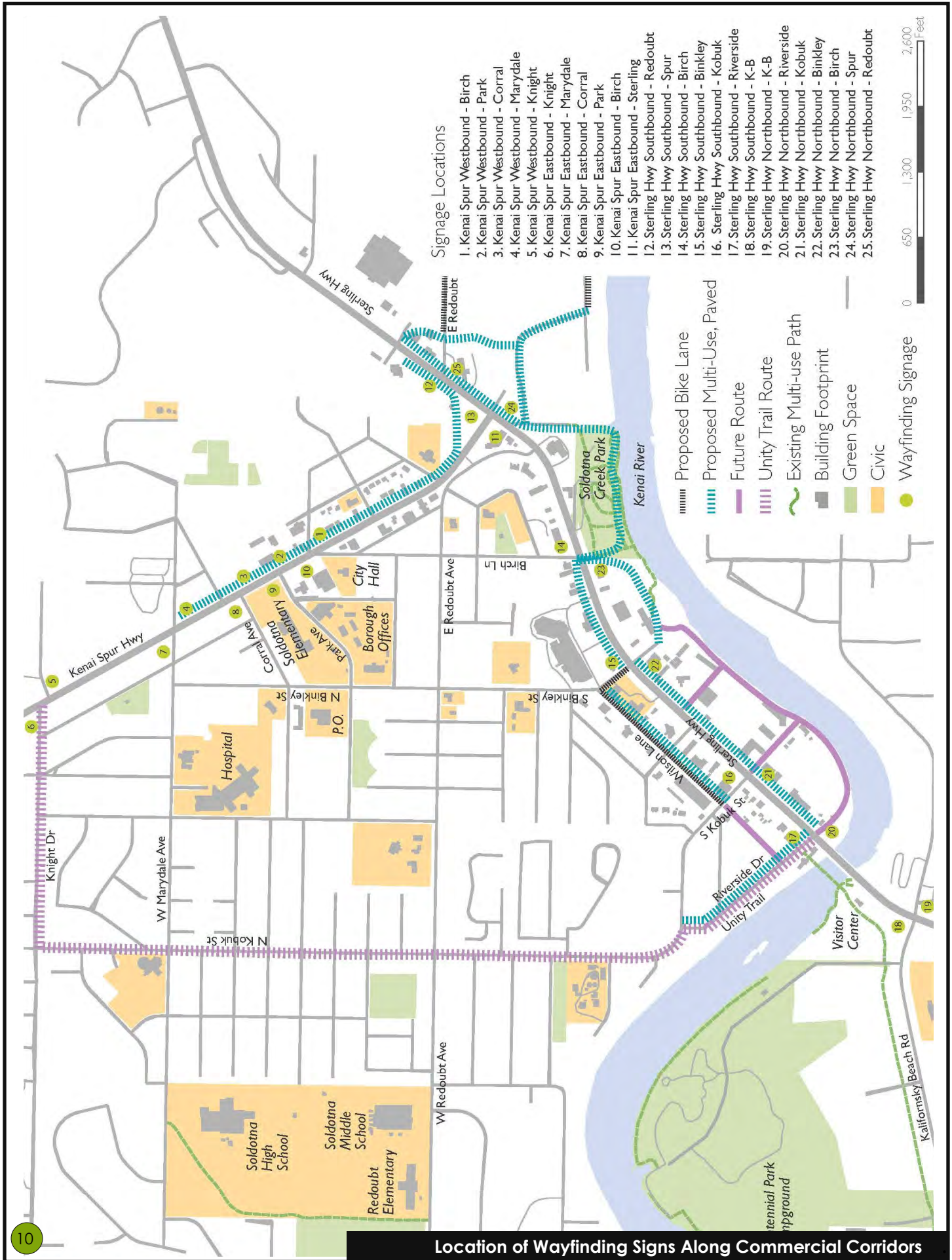


Font for 6" panel is Gotham Medium at 600 pt.

4 Inch Letter Signs (For Use at 30 MPH or Lower)



Font for 4" panel is Gotham Medium at 398.82 pt.



Location of Wayfinding Signs Along Commercial Corridors

	Kenai Spur Hwy - Westbound							Kenai Spur Hwy - Eastbound						
Sign Cluster # & Cross Street	1	2	3	4	5			6	7	8	9	10	11	
	Birch	Park	Corral	Mary	Knight			Knight	Mary	Corral	Park	Birch	Sterling	
Soldotna Public Library			←						→	→				
Soldotna Senior Center		←									→			
Soldotna City Hall	←											→		
Soldotna Visitor Center														
Soldotna Cemetery													→	
Post Office			←							→				
Kenai Peninsula Borough		←									→			
Peninsula Comm Health Services				→					←					
City of Kenai					↑									
River Center														
Hospital	↑			←					→					
Soldotna Elementary		←									→			
Soldotna High School														
Soldotna High / Prep Schools				←					→					
Soldotna Prep School														
Redoubt Elementary														
Soldotna Creek Park												→		
Farnsworth Park												→		
Soldotna Regional Sports Complex													→	
Swiftwater Park													←	
Unity Trail Route					←			→						
Kenai Watershed Forum														
	Sterling Highway - Southbound							Sterling Highway - Northbound						
	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25
	Redbt	Spur	Birch	Binkley	Kobuk	River S	K-B	K-B	River S	Kobuk	Binkley	Birch	Spur	Redbt
Soldotna Public Library				→							←			
Soldotna City Hall			→									←		
Soldotna Visitor Center	↑													
Soldotna Cemetery					→					←				
Post Office				→							←			
Kenai Peninsula Borough				→							←			
City of Kenai		→											←	
River Center				↑			←	→						
Hospital		→									←		←	
Soldotna High School														
Soldotna High & Prep Schools					→					←				
Soldotna Prep School														
Redoubt Elementary					→					←				
Soldotna Middle School					↑									
Soldotna Creek Park	↑								↑					
Farnsworth Park			→									←		
Centennial Park	↑						→	←						
Karen Street Park													←	
Soldotna Regional Sports Complex		↑					→	←						
Swiftwater Park	←													→
Tsalteshi - Main Trailhead						↑								
Tsalteshi - Wolverine Trailhead							→	←						
Unity Trail Route						→			←					
Kenai Watershed Forum			←									→		

Utility Pole Banners

The existing banners erected on utility or light poles throughout downtown are aged and nearing the end of their functional lifespan. Additionally, the existing banners are non-standard industry sized, making piecemeal replacement due to damage more difficult and expensive. New banners will adopt the City's design standards and aesthetically enhance the area.

Final photo selection is ongoing for the banner project, but the general design has been set through this process: a full-length photo of a Soldotna-area activity (with people, if appropriate) or geographic feature. The watermark "S" logo, with "SOLDOTNA" across the center of the logo, will appear center-bottom of the banner photo.

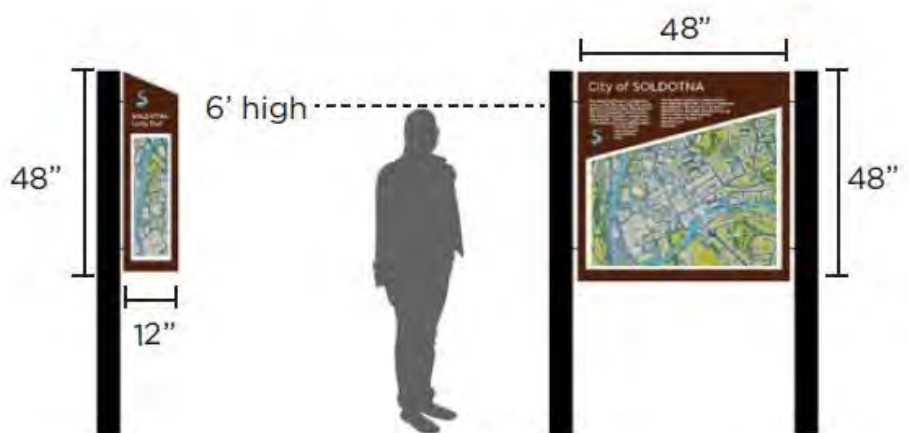


In the future, secondary banners may be ordered and installed as desired by elected officials, administration, or the community. These banners could be installed on major streets (Redoubt, Marydale, Kobuk, Binkley, and Birch)



Other Signage Considerations

Future signage for other needs should coordinate with and carry on the common style and design elements seen in this section. For instance, trail bollards (left) or markers and pedestrian-scale informational kiosks (right) can be designed in a similar manner.



Streetscapes

One of the major themes recurring throughout stakeholder interviews was the enhancement of streetscapes. This concept began with the *Main Street* plan in 1995 and is strongly supported by the existing comprehensive plan and the business community (Chamber of Commerce Business Owner Survey, 2014 & 2015). The following streetscape enhancement ideas combine existing work done in planning documents with concepts created by the consultants along with the Downtown Planning Team.

These ideas can be applied to existing streets, concept plans, or engineering drawings for new streets in a context specific approach, depending on a variety of factors, including capital budget, right-of-way constraints or opportunities, travel demands, land use development patterns, etc.

Intersection Improvements

Intersections provide the punctuation to the urban form of the city; they provide travelers time to stop and examine their surroundings, and provide important cross-travel connections for pedestrians, cyclists and other motorists. The City could work to improve its intersections in a uniform manner through a singular design language, including landscape elements, enhanced pedestrian/bicycle "plazas," and even pillars marking the cross streets. The sample design for Binkley/Sterling (below) illustrates these concepts, and includes some continuity of improvements along the side street.



Example pillars from Anchorage, and a potential design form for Soldotna.



Strategic Landscaping Enhancements

Landscaping enhancements could be designed for city or state-owned right-of-way (through coordination with DOT+PF as appropriate), for private property during the permitting of development projects, or simply as willing landowners come to the table. Landscaping enhancement concepts shown below represent areas of maximum impact, where strategic plantings could achieve a cohesive design language throughout downtown. This is in contrast to strip planting the entire right-of-way throughout town.

Landscape enhancement on private property should follow design standards from the City's landscape section of the Zoning Code and are encouraged to include plantings from the Appendices of this plan.



As illustrated above, where state right-of-way is available, property owners may consider removing existing parking located within the right-of-way to allow for landscape enhancements and/or a separated walkway. Such improvements are often a benefit to the private landowner (curb appeal) as well as the entire downtown.



Improving visual continuity is a primary goal along the highway corridors. The illustration shows how the adjacent private property can be tied in to the streetscape by wrapping the retaining wall along the driveway, adding a hedge along the top of the wall, and accenting the entrance with trees.

Existing lawns offer easy enhancement opportunities. Planting hedge or trees contributes to streetscape continuity and draws attention to existing businesses. Careful consideration should be given to the location of plantings to avoid blocking sightlines from existing business storefronts/signage to the highway. This can often be achieved by clustering trees into one or two groups, as shown in the above design.



Parking, Circulation, and Connectivity

In the figure below, existing configuration to a typical group of businesses along a major street in downtown Soldotna presents multiple access points for vehicles and no clear pathways for pedestrians, as each parcel/business contains dedicated parking and ingress/egress. A possible solution for this situation is a re-engineered common parking area and shared parking agreement, with fewer access points, dedicated pedestrian pathways, and increased landscaping along the highway. This typical solution could be applied where appropriate in the downtown area, during development or redevelopment projects, or during major road projects.

In certain situations, the ingress and egress for a development may become part of the strategic landscape enhancement. In this rendering, the entrance/exit for the property has been more clearly defined through the closure of one access point and planting of a hedgerow along the right-of-way. Additional landscaping draws attention to the existing signage for the businesses.



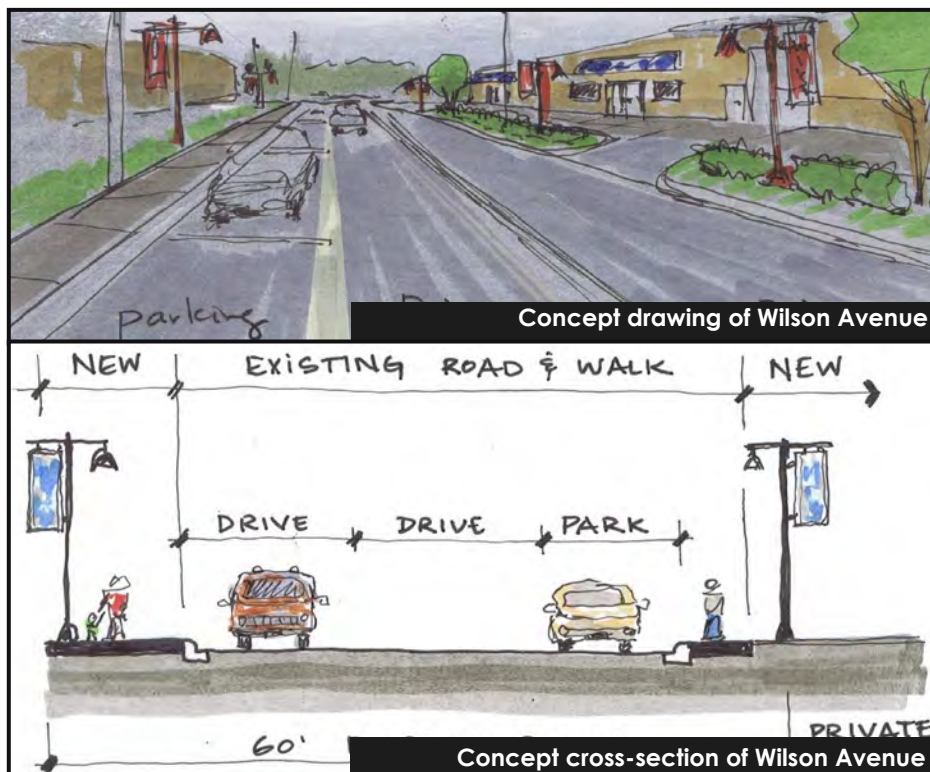
Sidewalk Reconfiguration

The City could consider relocating sidewalks back off the highway, especially during adjacent redevelopment projects. Many of those surveyed felt unsafe using the sidewalks in their present configuration due to maintenance issues (the accumulation of snow/sand plowed off the highways ends up largely on the sidewalks) as well as because of their proximity to high-speed traffic.



On Street Parking

On street parking may be an appropriate inclusion when downtown streets are built or redeveloped. Parking offers many benefits, including the functional separation of uses (pedestrians, bikes, and vehicles), slower traffic speeds and reduction in severity of crashes. If on street parking were available, on-site parking requirements for surrounding businesses could potentially be lowered through an analysis of the requirements in the City's parking standards in the zoning code.



Future Concepts & Considerations

The overarching strategy behind these recommendations is to give Soldotna the look, feel, and functionality of a proper downtown—one in which multiple commercial and/or mixed-use streets are logically interconnected to serve pedestrians, cyclists, and automobile traffic. Non-motorized paths serve a variety of users and connect them with logical destinations and streets.

These recommendations and ideas can serve as long-term strategies for development, redevelopment, and revitalization as needed. The materials presented below are designed to work together, but may be implemented separately or piece-meal whenever appropriate, given synergy with other projects and funding realities. The planning team recognizes that development occurs with the blessing, cooperation, and work of willing landowners and developers, and as such, some concepts will be changed and modified from the generalizations presented here, and some concepts may never be implemented.

Soldotna Avenue and Robin Place Extension

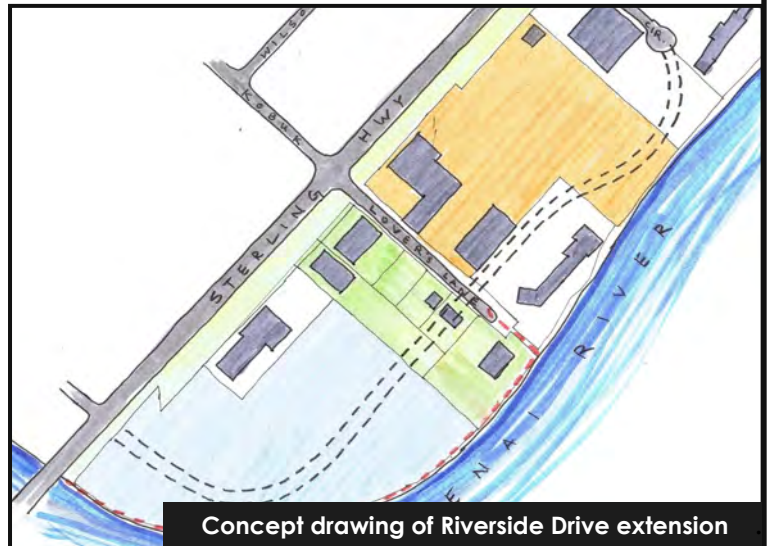


Concept drawing of Soldotna Avenue extension

Soldotna Avenue is currently a small, disused street in the heart of the city. Extension of Soldotna Avenue to the west has the potential to encourage development of vacant parcels, intensify land uses and provide alternate connections for many downtown businesses off the busy Sterling Highway. A fully developed connection would allow multi-modal travel from Kobuk, on the west end of downtown, to the Soldotna “Y” intersection, on the east end of downtown. Robin Place is a short street serving mixed use-zoned parcels extending south from Redoubt Avenue. The existing right-of-way extends to the Peninsula Center Mall parcel, but the construction of the street stops short of making this connection. If extended down the hill and connected with the proposed Soldotna Avenue, Robin Place could provide connectivity between the new development area and Redoubt Avenue. This is an important and logical connection, given the land development opportunities in this section of Soldotna.

Riverside Drive

Emphasizing the connection between the Kenai River, physical development patterns, and people (residents and tourists) is an important part of building a strong downtown. The existing land use development patterns between the Sterling Highway and the Kenai River have resulted in long, narrow parcels, which are difficult to develop to their full capacity/density. Creating a new mid-block right-of-way could become a tool for increasing the development opportunities in downtown. New businesses or residents would have street frontage as well as views and pedestrian access to the Kenai River, while protecting the functional integrity of the riverbank through the Kenai River Overlay District zoning tool. The street could be developed in sections (for example, connecting Lover's Lane to Tern Circle) as opportunity arises.



Concept drawing of Riverside Drive extension



Concept land use pattern along Riverside Drive

Multimodal Connections

Soldotna's transportation infrastructure includes a variety of multimodal options, including bicycle lanes, separated trails, sidewalks, and riverfront walkways. The City of Soldotna's Recreation and Trails Master Plan has highlighted opportunities to connect this infrastructure with the following new multimodal paths also supported by this plan.

The **Unity Trail** is an existing paved, separated trail along K-Beach Road. The Recreation and Trails Master Plan (p. 38) calls for the extension and completion of the Unity Trail using Riverside Drive and Kobuk Street. This trail could be officially sanctioned and signed using the concepts presented in this plan.

Wilson Trail (figure at right) is a proposed pedestrian route between Riverside Drive and Kobuk Avenue. For in-town destinations, it will offer a safe and pleasant alternative to walking or biking along the Sterling Highway. Wilson Trail was first proposed in the Recreation and Trails Master Plan (p. 38) as an extension of a trail along Wilson Lane between Kobuk and Binkley Streets.

Lingonberry Trail or the River Park Trail is a planned multi-modal connection between Soldotna Creek Park and Swiftwater Park. Routes and construction plans will likely determined as properties are developed. An existing trail easement includes a bridge over Soldotna Creek closed to vehicular access. The Recreation and Trails Master Plan (p. 39) also calls for the connection of these two well-used parks via multimodal trail access.



Concept drawing of Wilson Trail

Implementation

Project Timelines

Step One (2015 — 2016) - Utility pole banners (page 12) will be ordered/printed (fall/winter 2015) and erected along the commercial corridors for the spring/summer 2016 season. Gateway monument signs (pages 7-8) will be fully developed in a design/build request for proposals process during fall/winter 2015 and erected in the three specified locations in spring/summer 2016.

Step Two (2017-2019) - Directional wayfinding signage (page 9) may partially be funded through remaining funds after construction of gateway signs. The quantity of sign development versus remaining funds could be considered during City budget-setting exercises.

Ongoing Considerations - Strategic landscape improvements (page 14) should be at the forefront of any development which could create a synergy between proposed construction activities and enhanced landscapes. Examples include: road construction or reconstruction, new commercial, industrial, or mixed-use developments, or water/sewer infrastructure projects.

Roadway extensions (Soldotna Ave, Riverside Drive, Robin Place) should form part of a comprehensive plan to guide the city's infrastructure development in the coming years and decades. Robin Place could be included in any forthcoming development of Beluga Avenue.

Funding Strategies

Utility Pole Banners - Design and purchase funded in the fiscal year 2015 budget for the City of Soldotna.

Monument Signage - Design and construction funded in the fiscal year 2016 budget for the City of Soldotna.

Directional wayfinding Signage - This signage likely will be a City-funded investment as decided by the Capital Improvement Program and/or other budgetary mechanisms through City Council.

Landscape Improvements - A variety of funding mechanisms are possible, including direct City funding in the right-of-way for City projects such as roads or development agreements. Private property owners could potentially access indirect City funding for landscaping both in the state right-of-way (through a beautification permit from AK DOT&PF) or on private property by leveraging the Storefront Improvement Program dollars if they continue to be provided. Direct private investment can occur to the standards set forth in this plan during normal development and redevelopment of properties through the City's existing landscaping standards as set forth in Title 17 (the Zoning Code). Other organizations or groups may have access to different revenue streams, such as environmental groups or US Fish and Wildlife for bioswales/rain gardens.

Next Steps

The proposed improvements outlined in this document are a solid step in the right direction — a comprehensive examination of downtown signage and streetscapes will support and bolster community identity and brand awareness, while also encouraging locals and visitors to engage in downtown and the local economy. These steps are only one piece of a larger puzzle that can be arranged methodically by Soldotna residents, City administration and elected officials, and other groups and organizations to create a more walkable, vibrant commercial core.

Throughout the visioning exercises, multiple community charrettes, and interviews for multiple Soldotna area plans, including the comprehensive master plan and DIP Phase I, many residents expressed a desire to see Soldotna grow and develop into what may be best described as a “traditional downtown,” with walkable streets, well-managed parking and access, high quality landscaping, and high-quality public spaces. During the creation of this plan, the City and the consultants recognized this desire to further engage the momentum created.

Downtown Improvement Plan Phase II

Phase II will create implementable policies and codes that address downtown redevelopment and a downtown overlay district. Specifically, Phase II will result in a comprehensive set of land use guidelines and code recommendations for the downtown overlay area (determined in Phase I), and a package of redevelopment policies that may be considered by the Soldotna Planning and Zoning Commission and City Council. The scope of work for Phase II consists of the following activities:

Code Analysis: Downtown Overlay

The analysis will develop a framework for a downtown overlay district, prepare land use guidelines, and author draft-level code to encourage a broader range of uses, increase density through modifications to setbacks and on-site parking requirements, and examine and push forward pedestrian connectivity.

Redevelopment Policies

The consultant team will gather, analyze, and recommend options to incentivize improvements to underutilized downtown parcels and/or buildings, such as tax abatement or public private partnerships for infrastructure improvements. This includes an exploration of the appropriate tools and recommendations to the city for flexible, phased approaches to encourage redevelopment.

Storefront Improvement Program

Another important feature of streetscapes that is not addressed in the DIP is storefronts, or facades. Architectural regulations were deemed inappropriate for the approach of this plan; however, architectural continuity and quality aesthetics of buildings is still important in creating a sense of place and in complementing the other efforts presented here.

One great way that business owners can modify their existing storefronts is through the City's award-winning Storefront Improvement Program, which has been recognized by the American Planning Association AK Chapter and by Smart Growth America, a leading place-based urban design advocacy organization.

The program is currently configured as a matching grant for up to \$7,500 for specific upgrades to storefronts. The City should consider continuation of this program as funds allow, and could encourage qualifying landscape improvements projects

through this program as well.



Appendix—Materials

Parklex: for use as exterior cover on civic buildings as appropriate (see existing buildings, such as the library) and on downtown signage as appropriate (monument signs).

Metal: for use in signage where Parklex proves too susceptible to weather-related distress or too expensive for large quantity signage (e.g., wayfinding signs). Color should match the dark brown used on Parklex for signage.

Concrete or rock bases: for use on monument signage and other projects as a base material.



Appendix—Existing Branding

The City has created design language for future projects. This language has been incorporated into the recommendations in this project, including colors, fonts, and building materials. For the entire list of colors, and more instructions on the use of file types, logo variations, and sizes, please see the City of Soldotna Graphic Standards Manual.

Logo



SOLDOTNA
City of Soldotna, Alaska



SOLDOTNA
City of Soldotna, Alaska

Colors

	Hex: 7AC143
	Hex: BA9DCA
	Hex: B5E1E1
	Hex: 00A0AF

Fonts

Gotham Bold
Gotham Book
Gotham Light

Century Gothic Bold
Century Gothic Regular

Garamond Regular

Appendix—Landscape planting suggestions

TREES

	DESCRIPTION	HEIGHT X SPREAD	SPECIAL NEEDS	CAN TOLERATE	MOOSE RESISTANT?	OK UNDER POWERLINES?
White Paper Birch <i>Betula papyrifera</i>	Large native tree, white bark, medium-fast growing. Golden fall color.	50' x 20'	Needs root space		NO	NO
Quaking Aspen <i>Populus tremuloides</i>	Native deciduous tree. Turns gold in fall. Leaves tremble with a breeze. Can spread by roots - keep distance from foundations and pavement.	75' x 12'	Works best in groupings		Somewhat (fence when young)	NO
Amur Chokecherry <i>Prunus maackii</i>	Ornamental tree, rounded form. Rust-orange bark. Gold fall color. Non-significant flowers/fruits	20' x 20'	Pruning	Small areas	Mostly	YES
Canada Red Cherry <i>Prunus virginiana</i>	Medium sized tree with rounded form. Dark red leaves.	20' x 20'	Pruning	Small areas		YES
Siberian / European Larch <i>Larix siberica</i> or <i>Larix decidua</i>	Deciduous conifer. Soft needles that turn golden in the fall. Fast growing. Conical form.	60' x 20'			Somewhat (fence when young)	NO
White or Colorado Green Spruce <i>Picea glauca</i> or <i>Picea pungens</i>	Evergreen, medium-slow growing. Dark green foliage	60' x 12'	Best in Sun	Drought	YES	NO



White Paper Birch



Quaking Aspen



Amur Chokecherry (Fall color)



Larch (fall color)



Canada Red Cherry



Colorado Spruce

Appendix—Landscape planting suggestions

SHRUBS

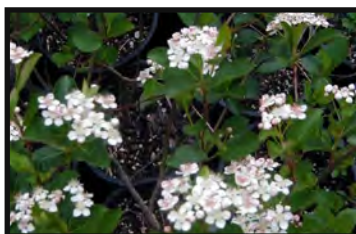
	DESCRIPTION	HEIGHT X SPREAD	SPECIAL NEEDS	CAN TOLERATE	MOOSE RESISTANT?	GOOD FOR HEDGE?
Lilac (Canadian) <i>Syringa prestoniae</i>	Large shrub. Flowers mid summer. Very fragrant.	12' x 10'	Full SUN for best appearance		YES	
False Spirea <i>Sorbaria sorbifolia</i>	Medium shrub, feathery white blossom. Winter interest (seed head). Red fall color.	5' x 5'	Grooming to stay attractive	Drought	YES	
Rugosa Roses <i>Rosa rugose</i>	Very hardy. Nice foliage. Several varieties of size and flower color. Spreads via roots	3'-5' tall spreading		Drought	YES	
Black Chokeberry 'Autumn Magic' <i>Aronia melanocarpa</i>	Dark green foliage. White flowers, black berries, red fall color	5' x 5'	Full SUN for best appearance	Part Shade	Somewhat	YES. 3-4 plants per 10 l.f.
Alpine Currant <i>Ribes alpinum</i>	Medium green foliage. Gold fall color.	4' x 4'		Sun or Shade	YES	YES 4-5 plants per 10 l.f.
Hedge Cotoneaster <i>Cotoneaster lucidus</i>	Dark green foliage. Red fall color if in full sun.	6' x 4'	Full SUN for best appearance	Drought	YES	YES 4-5 plants per 10 l.f.
American Cranberrybush <i>Viburnum trilobum</i>	Hardy shrub with lobed leaves. White flowers, red berries, deep red fall foliage.	6'-10' high x 4'-6' wide	Full SUN for best color		NO	YES



'Donald Wyman' Lilac (pink)



False Spirea (in bloom)



Black Chokeberry

Rugosa Rose



Alpine Currant

Alpine Currant (fall color)



Hedge Cotoneaster

Hedge Cotoneaster (fall color)



OPTIONS FOR DOWNTOWN REDEVELOPMENT

PHASE II



September 23, 2015

John Czarnezki and Stephanie Queen
Economic Development and Planning Department
177 N. Birch Street, Soldotna, AK 99669

by email

Dear John and Stephanie,

This letter and the attached report present recommendations and options for downtown Soldotna redevelopment. This revised version builds from the initial draft we sent to you May 11, 2015 and incorporates comments you and your staff shared when we talked June 11.

The purpose of the attached report is to: 1) provide an overview of common small town redevelopment strategies; and, 2) to assess the near and longer term applicability of these options for Soldotna, and make recommendations for the strategies that appear most appropriate. As we discussed, we are not proposing specific changes in your regulatory code comparable to what we developed for the overlay district. Instead this report provides a menu of potentially valuable redevelopment strategies, some of which we suggest for implementation in the near term, and others that are worthy of further discussion and refinement by the City.

A point made in our the May 11th letter, but worth repeating, the challenges of implementing any specific redevelopment strategy vary considerably, and require quite different levels of financial, staff, legal and political support. Gaining support for a more proactive package of Soldotna redevelopment strategies will likely take a patient, phased process, including developing a more fleshed out physical plan for downtown, in particular for improvements in circulation.

Thank you for the chance to work on this interesting assignment.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Chris Beck".

Chris Beck, Principal
Anchorage, AK

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Adam Smith".

Adam Smith, Senior Associate
Boise, ID

OPTIONS FOR DOWNTOWN REDEVELOPMENT

This report presents an overview of downtown redevelopment strategies and an assessment of the appropriateness of these redevelopment strategies for Soldotna. Conclusions reflect discussions with City staff, our experience in other communities, and judgements about the regulatory and political climate of the City. Our assessment includes recommendations for redevelopment strategies that we believe would be helpful in Soldotna in the near and longer term. We suggest, however, that these conclusions not be taken as a definitive recommended course of action, but rather an identification of those strategies that merit further discussion and refinement by City staff, the Planning and Zoning Commission and City Council, and by affected community interests.

I. Plan, Organize, Advocate, Support & Lead

Redevelopment can be challenging because it requires proactive, nimble public-private partnerships. The city has to have an entrepreneurial mindset not always found in government. Redevelopment can stir up political controversy as some people feel they are being forced to do things they do not support, or others complain that public resources are directly benefitting individual private land owners and businesses.

Solutions to these challenges include creating a clear, detailed, publically approved downtown master plan (see Section 11, *Plan First, Then Implement*, below for more information), developing downtown leadership that can actively advocate for downtown business and property owners, and ensuring city leadership actively supports quality downtown development, while still respecting the interests of the full community. Options to create this type of leadership are outlined below:

CREATE A REDEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY. A common redevelopment strategy in larger cities is to create a redevelopment authority. Redevelopment authorities are public administrative units with responsibility for the renovation of deteriorated areas, typically older downtowns. They are commonly part of local municipal government, but have a significant degree of autonomy, including the ability to set redevelopment strategies, raise and spend money, and negotiate development agreements with private land owners and developers. In cities using tax increment financing (see below) the money generated by this tool is typically managed by the redevelopment authority, consistent with a city-approved redevelopment master plan.

Redevelopment agencies are given special authority, for example the ability to redirect tax revenues that would otherwise go to the city as a whole. This capability is customarily tied to the requirement that redevelopment activities are limited to places explicitly designated as “blighted” or “deteriorated”.

Assessment: The creation of a redevelopment authority is more ambitious than is currently needed in Soldotna. Other options, discussed below, can provide some of the benefits associated with a formal redevelopment authority.

CREATE A DOWNTOWN ADVOCACY ORGANIZATION – A downtown organization can be a membership-supported entity, working to benefit downtown through marketing and events and by providing a forum for downtown issues and advocating for downtown improvements. There are many examples of this type of organization around the US, including Main Street organizations¹ and Chambers of Commerce.

A more formal alternative is a “Downtown Improvement District” (DID) which has the authority to raise funds through property tax assessments, comparable to service districts that pay for roads or drainage. Establishing a DID requires a vote within the affected area. Anchorage’s Downtown Partnership is one successful Alaskan example of downtown improvement district. That organization raises 50-60% of its funding through assessing property owners, with the remainder coming from membership fees and other sources. Anchorage Downtown Partnership is an active advocate for downtown redevelopment, a sponsor of events through the year, and a provider of services like snow removal, litter clean-up, and solutions to problems associated with downtown public inebriates.

Assessment:

- Creating an organization that would focus on Soldotna’s downtown is feasible and worth investigation by downtown stakeholders and the City. At a minimum this could be an informal downtown advocacy group; more discussion is needed to assess the desirability of creating a DID.
- City staff will work with the Chamber of Commerce in the hopes that the Chamber could help form the appropriate downtown organization. We understand from City staff that the Chamber is in transition, and that now might be an ideal time to work with the new leadership toward this end.

CREATE A DOWNTOWN ADVOCATE POSITION WITHIN THE CITY. Successful downtowns and downtown redevelopment programs typically feature an active partnership between a downtown organization and the local city government. Most cities, including Soldotna,

¹ <http://www.preservationnation.org/main-street/about-main-street/the-approach/#.VV-cf09Viko> The national Main Street Program puts forward 4 principles for revitalizing small downtowns; one is organization: “Organization establishes consensus and cooperation by building partnerships among the various groups that have a stake in the commercial district. The most effective Main Street programs get everyone working toward the same goal. With this level of collaboration, your Main Street program can provide effective, ongoing management and advocacy for your downtown or neighborhood business district. Through volunteer recruitment and collaboration with partners representing a broad cross section of the community, your program can incorporate a wide range of perspectives into its efforts. A governing board of directors and standing committees make up the fundamental organizational structure of volunteer-driven revitalization programs. Volunteers are coordinated and supported by a paid program director. This structure not only divides the workload and clearly delineates responsibilities, but also builds consensus and cooperation among the various stakeholders.”

have a planning department responsible for guiding downtown development; the critical issue is whether the department and the rules it enforces support – or create obstacles – for development. One good solution is to hire or assign a city staff person to be an active downtown development advocate. The defining feature of this position is the need to be an active, entrepreneurial advocate for downtown development, while at the same time acknowledging the interests of the full community. This position could have the following responsibilities:

- Oversee the development and implementation of the downtown master plan and of specific redevelopment strategies, working directly with current and prospective business owners, land owners and developers
- Assist where needed in replatting of parcels
- Prepare and help administer downtown-specific zoning regulations (in progress through this project)
- Advocate and find funding for needed downtown capital projects
- Work with a downtown business organization to promote the area's unique characteristics, services, and activities to shoppers, investors, potential business and property owners, and visitors
- Monitor the impact and effectiveness of redevelopment strategies, and report to the senior City staff and the City Council
- Help developers successfully navigate the entitlement process for individual projects; potentially including working as an advocate for the project with the Planning and Zoning Commission and City Council.

Assessment:

- Creating a downtown advocate position within the City is feasible and worth further discussion and consideration by the City.
- The City is unlikely to create a new position specifically to play this role. A realistic two part solution therefore is for the existing Economic Development and Planning Department to take a generally pro-development perspective, and then to explicitly assign one staff person on a case-by-case basis for specific larger scale downtown projects, to work as a liaison/advocate with the business owner or developer.

BOLSTER THE EXISTING *BUSINESS FIRST FOR GREATER SOLDOTNA*

PROGRAM – This program is a collaborative effort between the City and the Soldotna Chamber of Commerce to understand business owner and property owners' needs and opportunities and learn how we can make Soldotna a better place to work and run a business.

Assessment: Making the *Business First for Greater Soldotna* program more robust is a great place to focus. For example, the program can be a way business and property owners' issues are inventoried, then periodically reported to Mayor and Council with recommendations on potential remedies. As a result, issues can be addressed more comprehensively and coherently, rather than on a piecemeal

approach. It would also be a good opportunity to inform the public about the program and all that has been accomplished so far.

2. Public Investment into Downtown Capital Improvement Projects

Improvements to downtown public infrastructure are powerful drivers of downtown development and new private investment. Investing public funds to construct or upgrade physical infrastructure, particularly strategically-located roads and trails, and associated water, wastewater and power utilities, can open new areas for development and reduce private development costs. These investments also communicate to the business community that the City is willing “to put its money where its mouth is.” This in turn helps attract further private development and investment to the area, which creates greater property and sales tax revenue.

Infrastructure improvements can be funded several different ways. Until recently, special appropriations from the state or federal governments were a common capital project funding mechanism in Alaska. Direct state or federal legislative appropriations are less likely in the future. While this true, the large majority of funding for improvements to state-administered transportation projects comes from federal funds, through the state’s STIP program. The City should continue to press for its share of funding from this federal/state source.

In the future Alaska cities will need to be increasingly self-reliant for capital project funding; several options are described below:

- City-wide municipal bonds – Municipal bonds can be directed to a wide range of projects, including downtown infrastructure. Anchorage is an example of a city that regularly uses voter-approved capital bonds for a variety of public projects.
- Downtown-specific service area – uses a local increase in property tax revenues to support specific public projects, such as roads, sewers, drainage, parks
- Revenue bonds – Revenue bonds are used for facilities like structured parking, where up-front bond funds provide construction funding, and the bond is paid back through revenue from operation of the parking structure, or other revenue-generating public facility.
- Tax increment finance (TIF) district – under a TIF approach, property tax revenues that result from redevelopment activities (the new “increment” of taxes that would otherwise be distributed city-wide) are directed to support improvements within a specified redevelopment area.
- City of Soldotna internal funding – The City recently adopted the Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) for Fiscal Years 2015 – 2019. Included in the CIP is \$100,000 for downtown improvements. The CIP is reviewed and updated every year, which carries the potential for additional downtown improvement funds in the future

City-wide municipal bonds, revenue bonds, service areas, and TIF's all are funding mechanisms that can create an upfront "bankable" revenue stream. With assurance of this revenue stream, a city or redevelopment agency can borrow funds for near term capital investments. With the exception of TIFs (see notes below) all these tools are available to the City today, and do not require formation of a redevelopment agency. A locally-approved downtown master plan, which could be focused on specific infrastructure needs, such as circulation, is an important starting point for generating funds from any of the sources outlined above.

Assessment:

- Tax increment financing is a powerful and successful funding tool, widely used around the lower 48. Alaska lacks explicit statewide enabling legislation supporting tax increment financing, and opinions are split on the legal ability of cities to use this tool in the absence of such legislation. Anchorage and Juneau are currently investigating strategies for using TIF in those communities. Regardless, a TIF is challenging in Soldotna as 94% of downtown property taxes go to the Kenai Peninsula Borough. For example, in FY 2014, the portion of local property tax revenue collected by the City of Soldotna was only \$267,742. This conclusion could change if the City and Borough working together could conclude the full Borough would ultimately benefit from the use of a TIF, and allow funds that would otherwise be spread Borough wide go to tax-producing activities that would otherwise not happen.
- Service areas and general obligation municipal bonds are likely the most readily feasible and effective capital tools, in part, because the City Council and residents are familiar with this type of funding mechanism. The KPB uses a tax abatement incentive for habitat protection, but not for capital projects; the City has not to-date issued revenue bonds.

3. Tools to Incentivize Private Investment: Tax Abatement

Tax incentives can be one helpful tool to encourage desired private investments that might otherwise not be economically viable. A tax abatement is a tax reduction, exemption or deferral that eliminates or temporarily eases tax burdens on individual landowners or developers, or other parties taxed by the federal, state, or local government. Tax abatements can be used in a number of different ways:

- Incentivizing particularly important uses the private market struggles to deliver on its own. Downtown housing, particularly affordable housing, is a common example. Several communities in Washington State, for example, reduce property taxes to the extent downtown projects incorporate housing, with a tiered system that gives greater tax reductions for affordable housing.
- To incentivize pioneering, catalytic projects, that spur new development on surrounding properties, including vacant or underutilized parcels, or rehabilitation of deteriorated

buildings. Anchorage is currently working on a downtown redevelopment project that would use this mechanism.

- Offsetting the cost to private developers of specific types of investment, for example, investment to upgrade substandard public utilities, or remediate pre-existing soil contamination

Alaska State Statute AS 29.45.050 (o) sets the legal framework for local jurisdictions to grant tax abatements. Receiving such as designation requires an initial, formal determination that a property or area is deteriorated. A second test requires a finding that redevelopment is not financially feasible “but for” proposed tax relief and that the tax relief is commensurate with benefits to the public. The existing state statute is less than clear. A team of Anchorage-based partners introduced legislation which was approved this last session to correct several problems with the statute

If Soldotna wants to add tax abatement as a local redevelopment tool a new code section is needed, building from the state statute.

Assessment:

- Tax abatements are likely not needed at present in Soldotna, but perhaps could provide a useful tool in the future. Tax abatements provide many of the benefits of a TIF, but can be applied to a single property or small area. But, like a TIF, tax abatement would require a partnership with the Borough. To be eligible for tax abatement under state/local law requires a formal finding that a property is “deteriorated”. Currently there appear to be few properties in the downtown area that would qualify under State statute’s definition as deteriorated, but this is not a fixed, objective standard.
- If and when the City considers offering a tax abatement, it is imperative to educate the public and the City Council on what exactly a tax abatement is and isn’t, and the short-term “cost” versus the long-term benefits of approving a tax abatement. For example, a tax abatement results in capping property tax revenues to the borough and City at pre-development levels in the short term, but yield considerably more tax dollars in the future because the site would then be much improved. The key decision regarding the use of the tax abatement approach is the judgement that a desired project or projects would not be possible without tax incentives, and that the public benefits generated equal or exceed the taxes foregone.

4. Incentivizing Private Investment: Expand Storefront Improvement Project’s Services

Created in 2012, the City’s *Storefront Improvement Project (SIP)* provides a municipal matching grant for exterior business remodels in the City’s commercial districts through a competitive selection process. Increasing funding to and marketing of this program, and expanding the scope of the

program to offer low interest loans or matching grants to make compliance with code requirements easier, are two ways of enhancing the *SIP*.

Assessment:

- Expanding the SIP's services as described would be problematic primarily because the City would be reluctant to financially assist property/business owners to come into compliance with applicable code requirements. It is the property/business owner's responsibility for rehabilitating her/his building to comply with building and zone code requirements. With that said, the City is investigating ways the zoning and building codes could be amended to remove barriers and obstacles to changes of use in nonconforming structures without compromising health and safety.

5. Tools to Incentivize Private Investment: Catalytic Public or Private Projects

Cities and/or redevelopment authorities frequently support the development of a landmark project in downtown areas as a catalyst for attracting additional investment and development. Examples of large scale landmark projects built in other downtowns include convention centers, museums, sports arenas/stadiums and aquariums.

Such projects can be developed purely by the local government, or in partnership with the private sector. While some of these illustrative examples are primarily relevant in large cities, smaller communities can successfully use this strategy, through more modest investments, such as plazas and parks, trail systems, sidewalk art and related pedestrian amenities, or community event spaces and associated programmed activities (such as a farmers market, fishing derby or craft fair).

Assessment: This redevelopment strategy has potential, and, in fact, is currently being pursued by the City of Soldotna. For example, the City is presently considering an expansion to the existing sports center to include convention space (although not in downtown). Another potential site for a landmark project is the Davis Block property (the City-owned vacant lot next to Soldotna Creek Park). The City has “frozen” redevelopment of the site to allow the Kenai Visitor and Convention Bureau time to prepare a plan for the site.

6. Tools to Incentivize Private Investment: Negotiated Agreements/Development Agreements

Cities can enter into contracts/agreements with developers that allow for formal, legally-binding agreement on specific issues of mutual concern. A broad range of development topics can be covered, from the timing and scale of development, to special incentives, project approvals and agreements on infrastructure investments. Two particular forms of these arrangements are “negotiated agreements” and “development agreements”, discussed below.

Negotiated agreements are simply contracts that are created between City administrative staff and a developer. Depending on the particulars these may or may not require formal City Council review

and approval. City Council review and approval typically comes into play when the agreement includes incentives such as fee waivers, tax abatements, or property acquisition.

Large scale projects typically require significant investments, an active public-private partnership, complex approvals, and often a multi-year timeframe. As a result, such projects benefit from or even require a clear and binding contract between the city and the developer. In many states rules are established at the state and local level that allow creating a “development agreement” that sets terms of these types of agreements. Development agreements provide a formal tool to define a clear, explicit set of commitments, by both the city and the developer. This provides critical certainty and predictability, for both parties, so that multi-year projects can continue with the same set of expectations, even if there are changes in the leadership on either side of the contract. Development agreements typically include a degree of commitment that requires a formal approved by the City Council.

Assessment

- Agreements are an effective and efficient way to agree to limited, specific actions by a developer related to improvements on or near a site, such as dedication of a road right of way and construction of improved access. For example, the City did a direct, negotiated agreement with Walgreens for their store at Sterling Highway and Kenai Spur, which proved very successful.
- The current negotiated agreement process could be improved if the City developed a set of explicit, legal and fair policy guidelines that guide City staff when negotiating with a property owner.
- Negotiated agreements are more readily used in Soldotna in the interim vs. more extensive development agreements. If/when larger scale projects come forward a development agreement may provide the appropriate tool. Anchorage and Juneau are currently working locally and at the state level to create capacity for Development Agreements in Alaskan cities. An issue to resolve is to clarify that a local legislative body (Assembly, City Council) can put in place rules that carry over to the decision making authority of subsequent Councils.

7. Code Amendments & Streamlined Entitlement Procedures

One critical element of the “advocacy role” the City can play is to create a pro-development zoning and project approval process. The challenge of this strategy is the need to meet two potentially conflicting intentions. One is the need to promote a compact, walkable, lively, attractive and diverse downtown; the second is to ensure that zoning and building code requirements do not create rigid barriers that stop acceptable development.

Overlay District. The overlay zoning portion of this current AB project is directed at balancing these potentially conflicting intentions. Broad goals of the new overlay zone include encouraging a wider range of uses, increasing density, improving pedestrian connectivity, and addressing the appearance of the area including signage and building heights. Some of the ways to balance these two intentions and meet these goals, include:

- Creating a zoning overlay district that sets design guidelines, but provides flexibility in how these guidelines are achieved for specific sites and projects.
- Using the spirit of “form-based” code requirements to allow greater flexibility in uses.
- Making local amendments to the City’s adopted Building Code to facilitate the rehabilitation of existing buildings (without compromising health, safety, and welfare, of course).
- Creating a “development advocate” role in the planning department
- Streamlining the review and approval process,
 - Providing the option to waive development application and processing fees.
 - Combining individual applications currently required from different departments, into a single development application that is instead circulated among the different entities. This would reduce redundancy, and the need for an applicant to fill out the same information multiple times on separate forms, while also sometimes paying separately for the various approvals (building permit, zoning permit, utility connection permits, driveway permit, etc.).
 - Explore a single point-of contact at City Hall for development review. This would require cross-training among departments about the requirements of the various sections of code, and the commitment of the departments to share staff resources (mostly time) in this way.
- Prepare easy-to-understand guides to help people understand our development review process. These guides could be specific to a type of development (for example, Single-family or duplex; multi-family; commercial; mobile vendor; temporary use; etc.). Each one could include a flow-chart of the review process checklist of required permits (city and potentially other agencies such as DEC, KPB sales tax, State of AK licensing) with estimated review/approval times and critical path items clearly highlighted; checklist of items and information necessary to complete the various applications; comprehensive list of any possible fees; and contact information for relevant city officials.
- Encourage or even require pre-application meetings with Building Department, Utility Department, and Zoning Department at a minimum, but including other agencies/departments (fire code review, streets/maintenance, etc.) when appropriate. Schedule pre-app meetings for all commercial and multi-family projects, including both new construction and significant remodels.
- Reinstate weekly coordination meetings between Zoning and Building Departments, to provide updates on progress of ongoing projects, and discuss coordination required on any new projects seeking entitlements.
- Current zoning and building code requirements may make changes of use in nonconforming buildings financially prohibitive. As a result, buildings remain vacant and

are more likely to fall into disrepair. Amendments to these codes are needed, to facilitate changes of use without compromising community health and safety.

Assessment:

- As noted above, the challenge in promoting downtown redevelopment is finding a balance point that encourages private investment, but at the same time guides that investment so individual projects contribute to the overall goals of a walkable, attractive, concentrated downtown. All the above suggestions appear to be sensible, practical ways to find that balance point.

8. Design Standards & Public Amenities

A successful downtown area depends on getting and keeping the area in “top physical shape” (source: www.mainstreet.org) and creating a safe and inviting environment for residents and visitors, for shopping, dining, working, strolling, living. Investment in design and public amenities is one way of reaching this objective. This topic is addressed in this section; the section that follows addresses maintenance and operations.

There are numerous strategies and means to reach this objective, most of which are addressed in the work done in the first phase of this Agnew::Beck project. The overall theme of all these strategies is giving downtown a set of subjective, but very important qualities – a “sense of care”, a sense of personality, and the presence of people in the downtown. Specific possible strategies include:

- Landscaping in public right-of-ways
- Sign requirements.
- Branding of the downtown area.
- Public art.
- Street furniture.
- Public spaces for residents and visitors to congregate and where organized events can occur.
- Wayfinding.

Assessment:

- Phase 1 of the Soldotna Downtown Improvement Plan addresses many of the illustrative public improvements provided above. In pursuing funding to implement these ideas, it is helpful to reinforce the economic values these types of improvements bring.
- The proposed downtown overlay district currently under development presents a set of design standards for private development. The current proposal is that these should be advisory only for smaller developments, and required – but still flexible – objectives for larger scale private projects.

9. Enforcement, Maintenance & Safety

The redevelopment or revitalization of a downtown area is only successful if it is well maintained. When buildings, streetscapes and other public spaces show a sense of care this tells visitors and potential investors that business owners and local jurisdiction take pride in the area, which in turn increases property values, increases spending and attracts private investment in the area.

Good maintenance starts with quality management of public spaces and public buildings. This can be done through a combination of City services, the work of a downtown organization or downtown improvement district, and a partnership with State DOT/PF. A “sense of care” about the district's appearance extends to the responsibilities of private land owners. A downtown business organization can be the cheerleader on this point; cajoling and/or incentivizing local business owners to rehabilitate older buildings, encourage quality construction and regular maintenance.

The following are not redevelopment strategies, per se, but are important contributing factors to maintaining a healthy, vibrant downtown and should be considered for implementation concurrent with the redevelopment strategies.

Enforcement of regulations – Enforcement of nuisance-related laws, especially as it pertains to vacant, unoccupied, or abandoned properties is crucial. The current City of Soldotna’s Municipal Code includes prohibitions against activities and ill-maintained buildings that create nuisances to surrounding business owners and residents (see Sections 9.04.020 [Public nuisances prohibited] and 9.04.050 [Unsightly premises]).

Maintenance crews – Personnel responsible for litter pickup, graffiti abatement, and landscaping maintenance in the downtown area should be hired. Oversight and funding of maintenance crews is typically through the City or redevelopment authority.

Public safety & security patrols – Residents and visitors will be reluctant to go downtown if it’s not safe, whether in perception or actuality. Many cities supplement police presence in downtown area with non-sworn, foot and bike public safety and security patrols.

Assessment:

- The City’s evaluation of ways to improve the code enforcement process are “on the back burner” for the time being, but there is a recognition that improvements are possible and would be beneficial.
- Maintenance of the key commercial corridors can be done by the City, or, ideally sparked to action by local business owners through the creation of a downtown business association or the existing Chamber of Commerce.

- Crime is relatively low in Soldotna and not to the level of concern to justify creating a separate, distinct security patrol for the downtown area, as is helpful in downtown Anchorage.
- A coordinated City response that includes buy-in from the City Council, City Manager, and all City departments is required for effective code enforcement, and, especially maintenance, to occur.

10. Relocation of Industrial Uses, Government Services

A compact walkable downtown needs to have as few “dead spaces” or “dead buildings” as possible. Some government activities – a post office, library, a museum, a school – attract people and life to downtown. Other government services in the downtown area, such as emergency and public safety-related services, can detract from a lively, walkable downtown. Strategies to address this issue include moving certain government services to non-downtown locations, to open up new space for more active uses. Another option is to “soften” the deadening impact via landscaping, seating areas or modest public plazas and/or conversion of the first floor of such buildings with retail.

Assessment: This strategy is worthy of further discussion and consideration by the City, particularly in light of the upcoming sale of City-owned property. Of particular concern is the proposed expansion of the fire station located near the Sterling Highway – Kenai Spur intersection on one of the properties for sale. This runs counter to the objective of “activating” the downtown area. In this specific instance, the City would have to discuss with Central Emergency Services about reconsidering their plans, including the option to relocate the station outside the downtown area. The locating or relocating of industrial uses or governmental services should consider the property’s location and compliance with comprehensive and specific plans, not just the size of the property. Relocation of targeted uses may also provide opportunities for land trades or exchanges, development or negotiated agreements, and public/private partnerships at former sites.

11. Plan First, Then Implement

Prior to implementing most redevelopment strategies it is very helpful, and on some topics probably imperative, for the City to develop a downtown master plan. This plan would provide an ongoing reference point for redevelopment and zoning, for downtown as a whole and for individual projects. A physical plan for what downtown could become, even if illustrative and conceptual, is a powerful tool for sparking community interest. Such a plan also provides a necessary tool to guide access improvements, development standards, urban design policy, public spaces and other elements of a successful downtown.

A downtown master plan, produced in collaboration with businesses, property owners and other major stakeholders, can get everyone to agree on goals, which makes it much easier to then get

support for specific strategies that implement those goals. The plan should clarify: 1) a vision for the area; 2) a guiding physical plan setting out the locations, character and intensity of growth and redevelopment; 3) projected demand and locations of needed public infrastructure improvements, particularly new roads; 4) a fiscal strategy to pay for public investments and the anticipated net fiscal and public benefits 5) an implementation schedule.

The Envision Soldotna 2030's goals and policies provides a foundation for any downtown master plan that would be developed; Phase 1 of Agnew::Beck's work on the downtown plan builds on the Comp Plan and provides a helpful starting point for the physical/infrastructure portions of a downtown master plan.

Assessment:

- A downtown master plan is worthy of further discussion and consideration by the City. Ideally such a plan would be comprehensive, but for budget and expediency reasons, it could focus on particular topics, such as circulation and redevelopment of the riverfront.
- As the City moves forward with plans for infrastructure improvements, e.g. plans for water and sewer, or for roadway improvements, these projects should be seen as possible vehicles for launching at least a partial downtown plan. The City's current work on a *Street Inventory and Management Plan* is one plausible example.

Summary of Redevelopment Recommendations

Plan, Organize, Advocate, Support & Lead

- Create an organization that would focus on and advocate for Soldotna's downtown. One obvious option is the Chamber of Commerce; a new, downtown-specific organization is another possibility.
- Assign existing City staff member(s) to work as a liaison/advocate for important private sector projects, to help the business owner or developer move through the review and approval process.
- Adopt a generally pro-development perspective within the City; see developers as partners in creating a more vital, dense, diverse, walkable downtown.
- Promote the *Business First for Greater Soldotna* program to the public and inform the community about what the program has accomplished so far.

Public Investment into Downtown Projects

- Develop new tools for funding downtown improvements; plan for the reality that Alaska communities will need to pay a growing share of local roads and other infrastructure, public buildings, parks, trails.
- Using the downtown master plan as a guide (see below); begin work to implement priority projects.

Incentivize Private Investment

- Amend zoning and building codes to remove barriers and obstacles to development, while promoting quality development that contributes to the ongoing vitality of downtown
- Amend the zoning and building code to allow use and expansions to nonconforming structures, where this can be done without compromising health and safety.
- Promote public and private “catalytic” projects in downtown to create momentum for other high quality, private investments. Potential projects include redevelopment of City-owned Davis Block.
- Expand the City’s Storefront Improvement Project.
- Use development and/or negotiated agreements to reduce private investment uncertainty and facilitate high-quality public private partnerships.
- Streamline the development review process.
- Investigate and implement ways to improve the code enforcement process to ensure code violations are effectively and expeditiously addressed.

Encourage High Quality Development

- Invest in a range of public improvements that demonstrate a “sense of care” in downtown, including public landscaping, street amenities like seating, wayfinding signage.
- Support a level of maintenance of public spaces; create a downtown business association comprised of local business owners to assist the City in the maintenance of key commercial corridors.
- Relocate industrial and certain government services outside the downtown area to allow those sites to be redeveloped with uses that “activate” the downtown area.

Create a Downtown Master Plan

- Develop a downtown master plan that includes circulation and redevelopment of the riverfront.