

FAIRBANKS: Trails in Alaska's Golden Heart



Fairbanks offers four seasons of outdoor fun, exploring vast tracts of Alaska wilderness. Left: Climbing Angel Rocks.

Source: Explore Fairbanks. Above: Snomachining in Angel Creek Valley. Source: AK State Parks

Fairbanks is a vibrant river city in the far north, and gateway to Interior Alaska. Whether it's the aurora dancing in the night sky or the midnight summer sun shining up to 24 hours a day, the Fairbanks region is an exceptional destination 365 days a year. Where else can you travel to such a remote locale and still enjoy all the amenities of a charming downtown, a thriving arts community, rich Alaska Native culture, authentic Alaskan activities and endless opportunities for outdoor adventure? Here there are pristine rivers and lakes, beckoning ridgelines, abundant wildlife, and a certain poignant solitude that is found nowhere else on earth.

Although Fairbanks boasts large expanses of public land and water suitable for recreating, and has a decent start at a trail system, many of the access points and trails are informal, and not well known outside a small group of regular users. There is a great opportunity to expand options to enjoy the region's outdoor world. This could happen by developing more and better trails, and also by getting more benefits from existing trails, through better trail signage, upgraded trail heads, and improved mapping and marketing. These conclusions are backed up by the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan which states the highest regional priority is for trail and facility upgrades or improvements.

Expanding four-season trails in and around the Golden Heart City – trails for hiking, skiing, biking, dog sleds, snowmachines and ATV's– will benefit residents and help strengthen prospects Fairbanks' economic future.

Investment Incentives

Jobs: From 2015 to 2017 the Fairbanks area visitor industry sector gained 3,500 jobs.

Tax Revenue:

Tax collections in 2019 saw another record-breaking year. The Fairbanks North Star Borough collected \$5,755,037 in hotel tax revenue, the 5th consecutive year of record-breaking of hotel/motel tax collections.

Economy:

Visitor spending estimate is \$208.8 million. The total direct and indirect economic impact is nearly \$522 million.

Data provided by the Explore Fairbanks

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDED INVESTMENTS

Fairbanks and nearby Denali National Park are the second and third most visited overnight destinations in Alaska, and opportunities for outdoor recreation are one of its key attractions. Developing better access to trails, building new trails, and improving existing routes would help attract more visitors with varying physical abilities and interests. The improvements would also cater to different travel time frames and transportation modes, from single independent travelers to organized larger groups arriving by train or motor coach.



Fairbanks has a well-deserved, and growing reputation as place for outdoor fun in the fall, winter and spring, for activities ranging from ice fishing to biking. Source: State of Alaska, Matt Hage

Projects outlined on the following pages are summarized in the table below. These projects were provided by local, state and federal agencies as well as trail organizations and businesses, and identify practical, near-term trail development projects with significant benefits.

Greater Fairbanks Area Projects Summary			
Project	Lead and Support	Estimated Cost	Priority & Status
1. Angel Rocks Trail	Alaska State Parks	\$1M	Near Term (Shovel Ready)
2. Angel/Stiles Connector	Alaska State Parks	\$150,000	Near Term (Shovel Ready)
3. Equinox Marathon Trail	FNSB	\$1.4M	Near Term (Shovel Ready)
4. Wayfinding, signage, mapping & marketing	Alaska State Parks, FNSB, Visit Fairbanks	\$500,000-\$3M	Near Term (Shovel Ready)
5. Fairbanks to Nenana "Long Trail"	DNR Division of Forestry and local trail organizations	\$500,000	Mid Term - Planning in Progress
6. Isberg All-Season Trails	FNSB	\$3.1M	Near Term (Shovel Ready)
7. Delta Junction Riverwalk Trail and Park	City of Delta Junction, Delta Junction Trails Assoc., Nat'l Park Service RTCA	\$200,000	Near Term (Shovel Ready)

SUPPORTERS AND PARTNERS¹

Partners and supporters that helped develop these recommendations include Alaska Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation staff, the Fairbanks North Star Borough Parks and Recreation Department, Explore Fairbanks, the Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Interior Trails and Parks Foundation, and a range of local trail users and outdoor businesses.

¹ See *Introduction* for discussion on partners and supporters.

1. ANGEL ROCKS TRAIL IMPROVEMENTS



The Angel Rocks Trailhead lies along the northern perimeter of Chena River State Recreation Area, a 397 square mile state park. Angel Rocks Trail is one of the top outdoor attractions in the Fairbanks area. The granite outcrops (tors) were formed millions of years ago when molten rock pushed upward, cooling before reaching the surface. The surrounding earth has slowly eroded, exposing these “angels”. The recreation area receives 150,000 visitors per year. Located just 6 miles from Chena Hot Springs resort, the trailhead provides easy access to individual users as well as motor coach tours. The \$5 parking fee currently generates \$20,000/year in user fees.

The existing trail is a 3.5-mile loop which begins on even ground along the north fork of the Chena River and then climbs sharply up 900ft to where a half dozen granite outcroppings jut from the hillside. The current alignment is steep and challenging.

The proposed class IV² trail re-route would provide easy access to the first rock outcroppings at mile 1.3. These improvements will provide visitors of all abilities access to the rock formations and stunning views of Chena River State Recreation Area.

In 2011 the Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation was awarded a grant for technical assistance from the National Park Service Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program (RTCA) to do a trail evaluation of Angel Rocks Trail in Chena River State Recreation Area. RTCA is working to identify and flag trails and estimate development costs.

At right – summer colors, the view from Angel Rocks.
Source: <https://www.viator.com/tours/Fairbanks/Hiking-Angels-Rock/d5269-5957P14>



² Trail classifications range from most primitive (Class I) to most developed (Class V). Class IV trails are trails designed for ease of uses by a wide range of users, with wide tread wide, and a relatively smooth surface with few irregularities

Project*	Lead	Benefits & Challenges	Costs	Priority & Status
1.3-mile reroute creating a better safer trail. Route is brushed and is ready for construction.	DPOR working with NPS-RTCA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Benefits tourism, expands regional economic opportunities. - Improves safety; provides new recreation opportunity for all abilities. - No significant challenges 	\$750,000 trail improvements / \$250,000 trailhead improvements to accommodate motor coach traffic	<p>Near Term (Shovel Ready)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Agency approval, public and tourist industry support; project design and quotes received to do the work

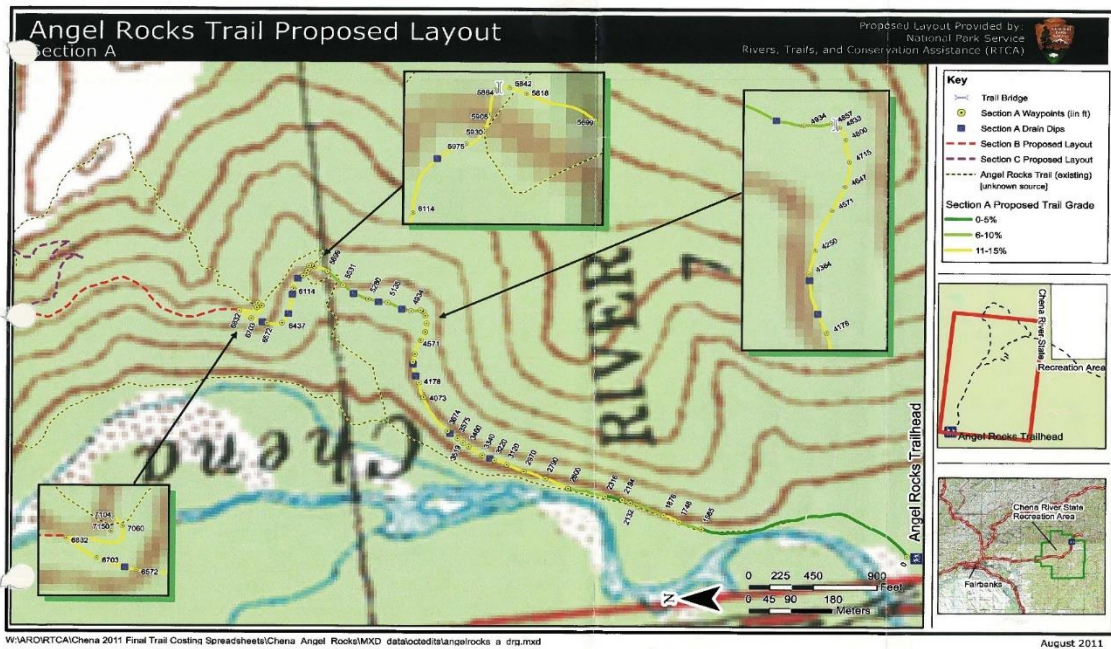
*where relevant this column includes background on status



Hiking Angel Rocks Trail.
Source: Brooke Van Poppelen



Angel Rocks to Chena Hot Springs trail. A ridgeline trail in the rugged interior Alaska hill country, connecting two major points of interest along Chena Hot Springs Road.
Source: Bryant Wright



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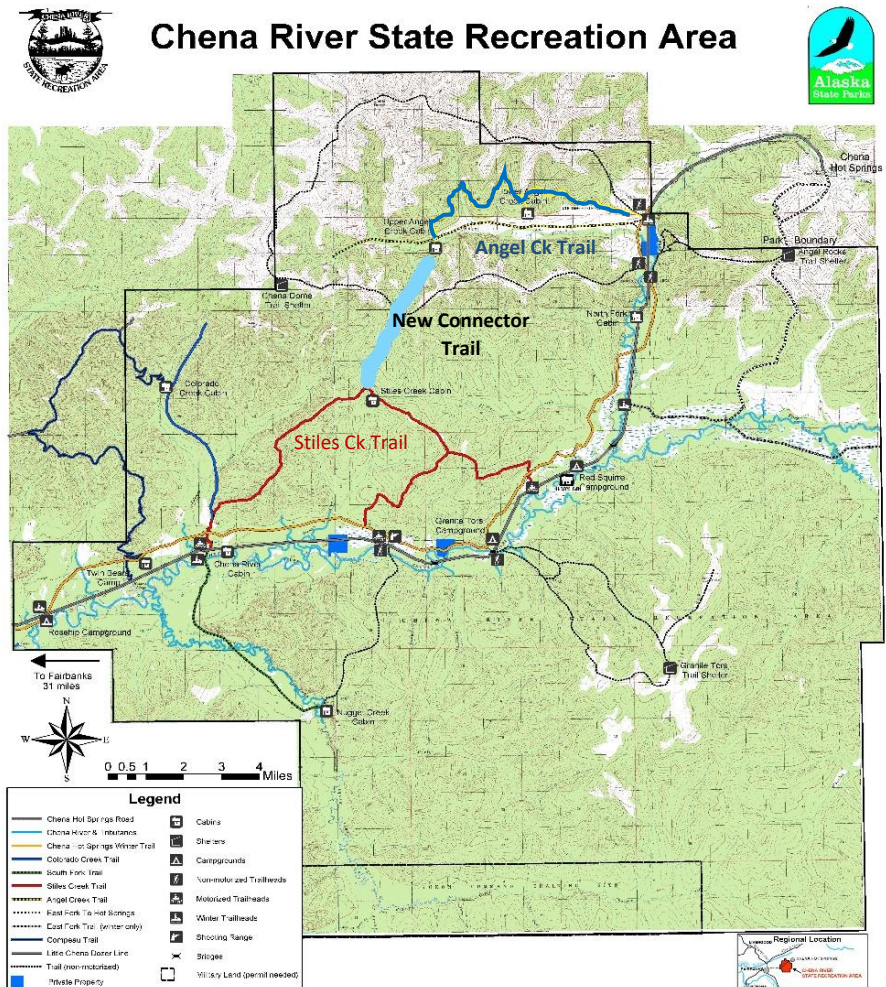
August 2011

2. STILES/ANGEL CREEK CONNECTOR TRAIL

This 6-mile connector trail will link the existing 15-mile Stiles Creek Trail to the 11-mile Angel Creek Hillside Trail, linking three public use cabins and providing a 25-mile ATV riding opportunity. Winter enthusiasts will have access to a total of 100 miles of trail and six cabins along the north side of Chena Hot Springs Road.

The connector trail will create a new recreation option for several user groups: backpackers can enjoy a 4-day cabin-to-cabin trip and ATV users receive a new opportunity for an all-day ATV ride.

The connector trail can be accessed via Stiles Creek trailheads at mile 31.6, 36.4, or 41.6-mile Chena Hot Springs Road or at the Upper Chena Dome Trailhead, mile 50.5 in Chena River State Recreation Area.



<i>Project*</i>	<i>Lead</i>	<i>Benefits</i>	<i>Challenges</i>	<i>Costs</i>	<i>Priority & Status</i>
6-mile connector between two existing trails; a trail alignment has been identified and construction quotes received.	Northern Region Office, Division of Parks & Outdoor Rec. of AK DNR	Provides a new multi-day recreation opportunity for several user groups	The new multi-use trail will cross a non-motorized trail. The crossing will need to be engineered to keep motorized traffic on the connector trail.	Bids have been in the \$150,000 range	Near Term (Shovel Ready)

*where relevant this column includes background on status

3. EQUINOX MARATHON TRAIL COMPLETION

Trail: The Equinox Marathon Trail connects several of the most popular trails through the heart of Fairbanks: The Skarland Ski Trail, the UAF Campus trails, the Ester Dome Singletrack trail, and multiple trails on Ester Dome. The route is used for the popular race and for year-round recreation. Better access and development opens this route to a wider range of users, including visitors, and offers the chance to explore several local trail systems, find impressive views, and traverse excellent single-track trail.

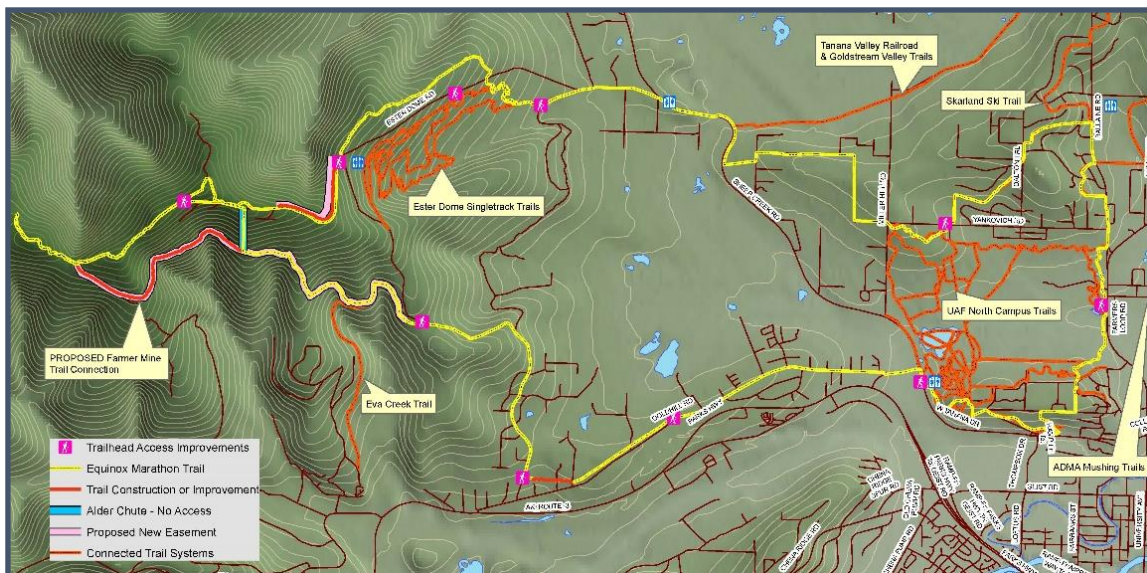
Wayfinding: The route is familiar to local runners but is less accessible to newcomers. The route needs wayfinding, trailhead improvements, maps and marketing to accommodate a wider range of experience levels.

Nearly all this route exists, though some sections lack year-round access and a new trail section needs to be built. Funds will purchase access easements, construct a new section of trail on Ester Dome, repair some damaged sections of existing trail, and improve wayfinding and trailheads along the trail system.

The lead on this project is Fairbanks North Star Borough Parks & Recreation with support and participation from Alaska DNR, Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority, UAF, Interior Alaska Trails & Parks Foundation, Fairbanks Cycling Club and Running Club North.



The Equinox Marathon is the premier running event in Interior Alaska. The entire community comes out to run, volunteer, and spectate in this big end of summer party. Source: FNSB



The Equinox Trail offers an alluring opportunity for short or longer outdoor experiences, for runners, bikers, walkers, and skiers. Map by Fairbanks North Star Borough

Equinox Marathon Trail Completion

<i>Project*</i>	<i>Lead</i>	<i>Benefits</i>	<i>Challenges</i>	<i>Costs</i>	<i>Priority & Status</i>
Filling gaps, improving wayfinding to create a more useable loop trail	FNSB Parks and Recreation with a range of user groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Creates a well-defined route suitable for hikers, bikers and skiers of all experience levels. - Connects multiple trail systems. - Creates possibility for smaller, convenient loops. 	Fundraising for trail construction.	Access / Easements: \$250K; Trail Construction : \$150K; Trailheads/ Restrooms: \$1M	Near Term (Shovel Ready)

*where relevant this column includes background on status

4. TRAIL HEADS/TRAIL SIGNAGE, WAYFINDING, MARKETING

Fairbanks has what many locations would consider an enviable problem: the region has a wide array attractive terrain, informal trails and opportunities for high quality new and improved trails, but... these resources are generating only a small portion of their potential use and value because of the lack of signage, mapping, well-marked trail heads and marketing. This situation can be labeled “enviable” because a major improvement in trail related outdoor opportunities can be generated for a relatively modest level of investment. These actions can direct users to enjoyable and safe locations, and also help reduce trespass issues by guiding most users to locations acceptable to landowners.



Trail signs don't have to be fancy to provide real value. Source: AK State Parks

This need and opportunity came through loud and clear in discussions with community organizations, user groups and land managers. An all-too-common lament among visitors, newcomers, and even long-time residents is “I hear about all these great trails, but I just don’t know where they are!” The need for this kind of investments extends over a long list of poorly identified trails and trail heads. Trailheads and wayfinding are needed for almost all the interconnected trail systems throughout Fairbanks, especially areas such as Ester Dome, the Goldstream Valley, and along Chena Hot Springs Road. Wayfinding improvements are even needed at developed recreation areas like the Chena River State Rec Area and major Borough recreation areas.

<i>Project*</i>	<i>Lead</i>	<i>Benefits</i>	<i>Challenges</i>	<i>Costs</i>	<i>Priority & Status</i>
A range of wayfinding investments: signs, maps, trailheads, marketing	Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation, FNSB, Visit Fairbanks, local trail user groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Benefits tourism, expands economic opportunities - Opens new opportunities for a wide variety of users 	Coordination with multiple agencies. Care must be taken not to encourage use of trespass trails.	\$500,000 to \$3M Project is easily phased. Small, piecemeal investments will yield substantial improvements.	Near Term (Shovel Ready) Minimal planning needed to identify highest priorities for near term action.

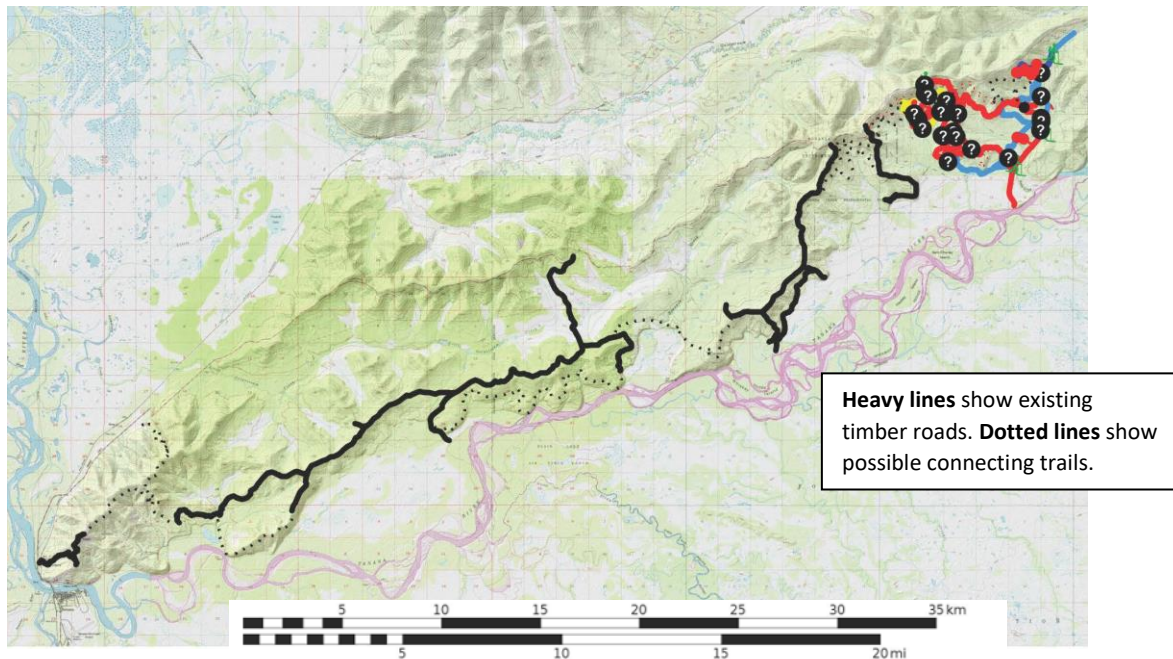
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5. FAIRBANKS TO NENANA “LONG TRAIL”

This promising project, still in the early conceptual stages, offers the possibility of a new, multi-use motorized and non-motorized “long trail” on Tanana Valley State Forest lands between Fairbanks and Nenana. This concept starts with the recognition that the project can only proceed if the results do not interfere with ongoing timber management and timber harvesting activities, and that additional routes constructed would serve both recreational users and timber harvest activities.

A large existing network of forestry roads currently runs along the north side of the Tanana River, spanning approximately 80% of the length of the possible future route. This planned route passes through beautiful, south-facing forested lands, with world-class views south over the river to the Alaska Range. As is being shown with comparable projects in Alaska, Oregon and around the world, integrating recreation and timber management can benefit both uses, for example, with roads not in active timber use being available for recreation, and money raised from recreation sources used to help maintain the roads for both uses.

The links shown on the map below are conceptual at this point and have not been field checked, with the final link to Nenana being the most tentative at this time. However, the links closest to Fairbanks might be laid out and constructed fairly quickly and have already received some public process review. If the concept proves viable, the result could be a significant, four season recreation amenity, benefitting Fairbanks residents, and drawing visitors from the US and beyond.



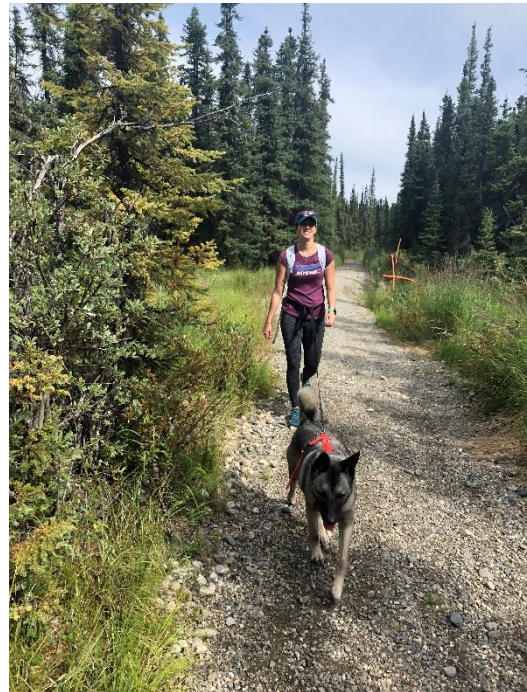
Project	Lead	Benefits & Challenges	Costs	Priority & Status
Long trail connection, building from existing timber roads.	DNR Division of Forestry with FNSB and local trail user groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Benefits tourism, expands regional economic opportunities - Creates a long trail, an opportunity that is only available in Alaska in a few locations - Open to a wide variety of users - Requires further planning to ensure compatibility with current and future timber management activities 	Not currently known; estimated at approximately \$500,000	<p>Mid Term – Planning in Progress</p> <p>Work is needed to further evaluate costs, benefits and compatibility</p>

6. ISBERG RECREATION AREA ALL-SEASON TRAILS

The Isberg Recreation Area is situated on the west side of Fairbanks, off the Parks Highway near the town of Ester. It boasts abundant natural green space and winter and summer trails. It is also a popular launch point for longer trail systems such as the 100-Mile Loop Trail, the Rosie Creek trails, and the Chena Ridge-F.E. Ditch trails. Since the Master Plan was developed in 2007, there is still a lot to accomplish.

The Master Plan calls for improvements that include trail hardening on the multi-use motorized loop, new trail construction, boardwalk trail construction, building a new trailhead, restroom installation, wayfinding, and interpretive signage.

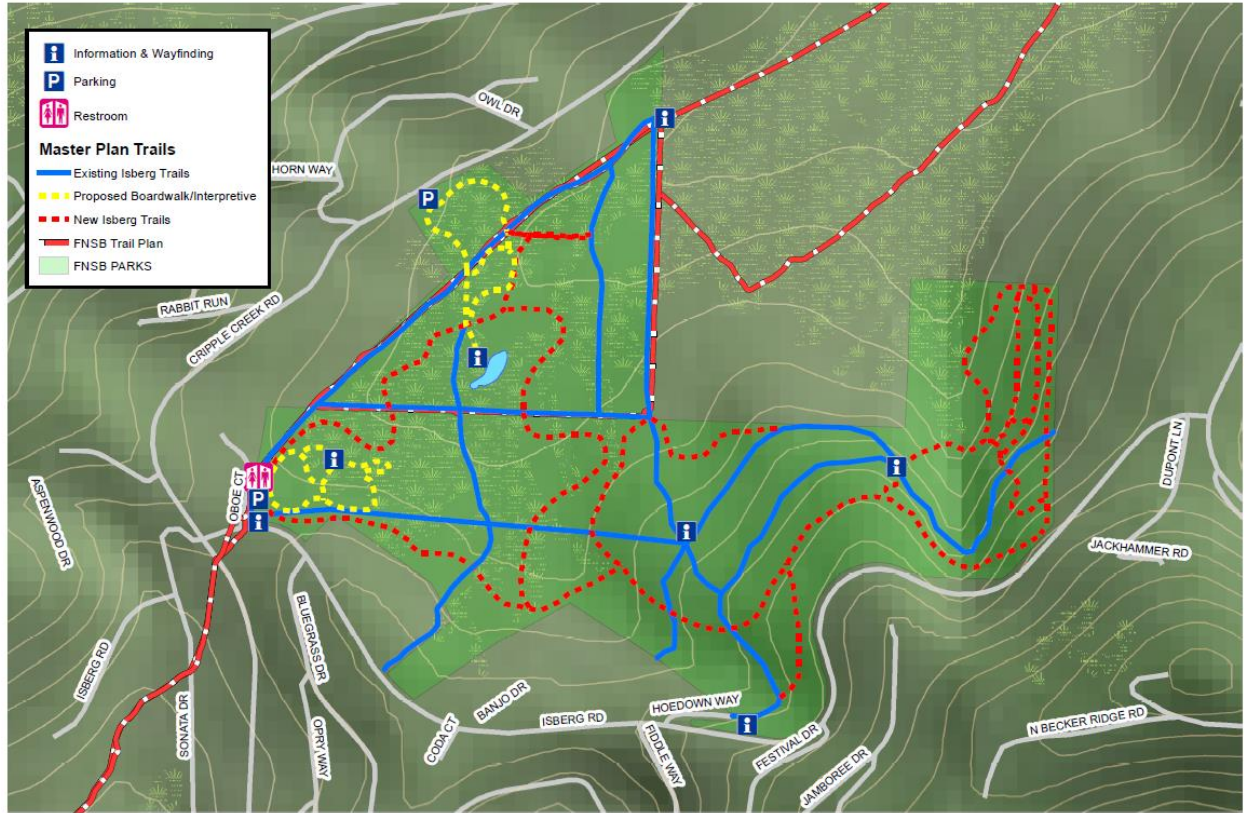
The trails are a popular draw, especially in the winter. But the area has been under-utilized in the summer due to the wet conditions. Recent grant-funded projects have hardened over a mile of previously mucky trails, but much more is needed. Trail improvements through this project promise to facilitate year-round use by making trail travel easier in all seasons. As developments continue to make this trail system more inviting, people from all over the community are coming to enjoy the trails, natural landscape, berry picking and wildlife viewing.



Walking the Isberg Trail. Source: FNSB

Project*	Lead	Benefits	Challenges	Costs	Priority & Status
Trail improvements to facilitate year-round use (address summer wet conditions)	FNSB Parks & Recreation, multiple user groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Year-round access to scenic spruce lowlands - Easy, short trail loops - Convenient day-use - High interpretive potential 	Wet, boggy areas create challenge for summer trail construction.	Trails: \$1.6M; Trailheads & Restrooms: \$1.5M.	Near Term (Shovel Ready) Master Plan completed 2007; Partially funded; Continued support from FNSB.

*where relevant this column includes background on status



Different faces of the Isberg Trail. Source: FNSB

7. DELTA RIVERWALK TRAIL AND PARK

The Delta Riverwalk Trail and Park concept is a plan for improvements to about 40 acres of combined City of Delta Junction and State of Alaska land. It provides motorized and non-motorized recreational trailhead access and creates an estimated two miles of new non-motorized trails to be used for summer and winter recreation, as well as restrooms and a shelter for picnics and outdoor education. The estimated cost of the Riverwalk Park is \$200,000 and Delta Junction Trails Association plans to write grants, fundraise, and use volunteers and partners to complete the park.



Community Clean Up day in Delta Junction, and another example of how Alaskan communities rally around trails and parks.

Source: <https://www.deltawindonline.com/sports-outdoors/outdoors>

The Riverwalk Park was identified in the 2016 Delta Junction Community Trails Plan to give residents and visitors alike an in-town park setting in which to enjoy non-motorized activities such as; biking, walking, running and skiing through the forest with intermittent views of the Delta River and Alaska Range and help make Delta Junction more of a destination for outdoor recreation. The area will also serve as a venue for community events such as bicycle, running or ski races and orienteering.

Project*	Lead	Benefits & Challenges	Cost	Priority & Status
Park with multi-purpose trail system	Delta Junction Trails Association, with RTCA, City of Delta Junction, AK DNR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Offers diverse recreational opportunities for all users, all ages, all seasons, including non-motorized options - Protects historic trail routes - Enhances community wellness & opportunities for physical activity - Attractive reason for travelers to slow down, spend time & money in Delta 	\$200,000	Near Term (Shovel Ready)

*where relevant this column includes background on status

Alaska Range view from future Riverwalk Trail and Park.

Source: Mike Downs, National Park Service, Rivers Trails Conservation Assistance Program



DELTA RIVERWALK TRAIL AND PARK



DELTA JUNCTION RIVERWALK PARK

MASTER PLAN

September 09, 2019

Delta Junction, Alaska

Scale: 3" = 100'-0"

North Arrow

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