

CITY OF SOLDOTNA
RESOLUTION 2021-051

A RESOLUTION AUTHORIZING THE CITY MANAGER TO APPLY FOR A \$360,000 GRANT FROM THE U.S. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AGENCY FOR PLANNING AND FEASIBILITY ANALYSIS RELATED TO THE DOWNTOWN RIVERFRONT REDEVELOPMENT PROJECT, AND EXPRESSING COMMITMENT TO PROVIDE A LOCAL MATCH OF \$90,000 WITH FUNDS THAT WERE PREVIOUSLY APPROPRIATED FOR THE PROJECT

WHEREAS, the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA), a bureau within the U.S. Department of Commerce (DOC) has announced a funding opportunity under the FY 2021 American Rescue Plan Act Economic Adjustment Assistance (ARPA EAA) grant program for construction and non-construction projects to help communities impacted by the coronavirus pandemic devise and implement long-term economic recovery strategies; and

WHEREAS, a wide range of technical, planning, workforce development, entrepreneurship, and public works and infrastructure projects are eligible for funding under this program; and

WHEREAS, the City of Soldotna has identified the planning and design phase of the Soldotna Riverfront Redevelopment project as an eligible activity for ARPA EAA funding as a non-construction project; and

WHEREAS, this project is listed as a priority on the City of Soldotna's FY22-FY26 5-year Capital Improvement Plan; and

WHEREAS, the proposed scope of work under the EDA grant includes: environmental review; data collection and market analysis; public engagement; conceptual planning; property appraisal; feasibility analysis; and master planning activities; and

WHEREAS, the estimated project budget is \$450,000, of which the City has previously appropriated \$90,000 (Ord. 2019-018) which is available as a local match; and

WHEREAS, it is in the best interest of the City to apply for funding under the EDA American Rescue Plan Act Economic Adjustment Assistance program to further the planning and analysis of the Riverfront Redevelopment plan;

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED BY THE CITY COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF SOLDOTNA, ALASKA:

- Section 1. The City Manager is authorized to execute all documents necessary to apply for \$360,000 under the FY 2021 American Rescue Plan Act Economic Adjustment Assistance (ARPA EAA) grant program for planning and feasibility analysis for the Soldotna Riverfront Redevelopment project.
- Section 2. \$90,000 previously appropriated via Ordinance 2019-018, is hereby committed as a local match, should the City be successful in receiving the EDA grant.
- Section 3. This resolution shall become effective immediately upon its adoption.

ADOPTED BY THE CITY COUNCIL THIS 27TH DAY OF OCTOBER, 2021.

Paul J. Whitney, Mayor

ATTEST:

Michelle M. Saner, MMC, City Clerk

Yes:
No:
Absent:



SOLDOTNA

OFFICE OF THE CITY MANAGER

MEMORANDUM

TO: MAYOR WHITNEY AND CITY COUNCIL MEMBERS
FROM: STEPHANIE QUEEN, CITY MANAGER
JOHN CZARNEZKI, DIR. OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND PLANNING
DATE: WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 20, 2021
SUBJECT: DOWNTOWN REDEVELOPMENT FUNDING REQUEST THROUGH EDA GRANT

The Soldotna Riverfront Redevelopment Project seeks to redevelop a portion of the City's downtown commercial corridor adjacent to the Kenai River, with infrastructure and amenities that will foster new private capital investment, promote job creation, and that will improve the quality of the built environment for residents and visitors. This concept was first introduced in the Downtown Improvement Plan (2015), then further described in the attached 'Soldotna Riverfront: Options and Opportunities' document (2018). The project is a priority listed in the City's current 5-year Capital Improvement Plan, and it addresses several goals in Envision Soldotna 2030, including:

- *Promote development of a "downtown area" that attracts both visitors and residents;*
- *Encourage reuse and/or redevelopment of key areas, particularly along the river and major highways;*
- *Ensure a healthy economy by supporting a diversity of local businesses and services and providing a diversity of employment opportunities to retain and attract young people to the City;*
- *Identify opportunities and plan for the Kenai River to play a prominent role in the expansion of economic development opportunities within the City; and*
- *Encourage development of off-season tourism based on outdoor recreation.*

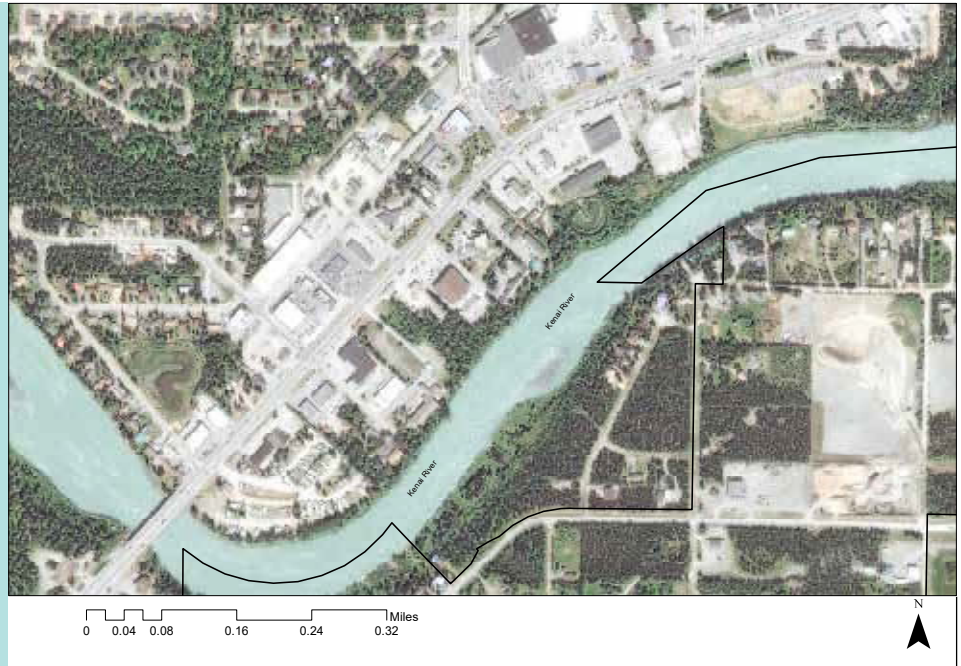
City Staff have had individual conversations with private landowners in the project area to gauge interest and the level of support for the redevelopment concept. In those meetings, there was support for gathering additional information, recognizing that further planning and analysis is necessary before the feasibility and scope of a potential redevelopment project could be fully evaluated.

We are seeking Council authorization to apply for \$360,000 in grant funds through the U.S. Economic Development Agency, to complete the master planning and feasibility phase of the project. The City Council had previously appropriated \$90,000 for this project via Ordinance 2019-018, which remains available as a local match (bringing the total project budget to \$450,000). Specific tasks proposed under the grant funding include: environmental review; data collection and market analysis; public engagement; conceptual planning; property appraisal; feasibility analysis; and master planning, with an estimated project timeline of 18 months.

Approval of the attached resolution would authorize me to file an application for EDA funds through the EDA's FY2021 American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) Economic Adjustment Assistance (EAA) grant program, for planning and related activities associated with the Downtown Riverfront Redevelopment Project. The Resolution does not commit the City to providing any additional funding, beyond what was previously appropriated for that purpose. Your consideration is appreciated.

Soldotna Riverfront Today and Future Opportunities

Riverfront ground is incredibly valuable. For example, look at the value of river and lake front property in the Kenai Borough versus alternative locations. With some planning, patience and public private partnerships, the riverfront property in downtown Soldotna might offer much greater value to the private owners along this stretch of river, and to the residents and businesses of the community as a whole.



Purpose of this Report

Many people have driven through Soldotna for years, never realizing the river was so close, and so beautiful. The goal of this short report is to begin exploring options for harnessing the value of the riverfront.

It is critical to emphasize that most of the land along the river is in private ownership. This report and any future plans have to respect the rights of private owners to use their land in their own interests. In light of that reality, this report has the modest goal of starting conversations among landowners and community leaders:

- What is the potential value of Soldotna's riverfront?
- How have other communities taken advantage of riverfront locations?
- What are some conceptual options for improvement in Soldotna?
- What role could the City play in helping to support riverfront improvements?

Background:

Evolution of Riverfront uses in America

The use of riverfronts in US cities is evolving. In the past, in many places, riverfronts were primarily used for industry, reflecting river's vital role as travel corridors (and often as sewers).



On the left is a historic photo of Soldotna from 1960. What was once a DOT/PF maintenance yard is now a well-loved park, a use that takes much greater advantage of a downtown riverfront location.

Left photo courtesy Al Hershberger

Soldotna Riverfront

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River: Kenai

City/Area Population:

Soldotna: 4,600 (2015)

Within 10 miles of Soldotna

City limits: 29,563 (2010)

Character Today:

- River: 80 miles long, turquoise waters, Alaska's best known and most heavily fished river
- Average daily vehicles on Sterling Hwy in Soldotna: 17,000; highest count in the Borough
- Riverfront area: maps at the end of this section cover:
 - Land Ownership Overview
 - Project Area Ownership
 - Topography
 - 100 foot Buffer
 - Utilities and Zoning

Potential Future Opportunities:

- Slow down pass through traffic; increase spending coming from "OMD/OMH" (one more day/hour)
- Create a clear tangible sense of community identity
- Make it more inviting for residents to be active outside
- Help create a more vital, mixed-use downtown with expanded riverfront commercial frontage

Potential Future Challenges:

- Working with the needs of private landowners/current uses
- Funding needed improvements
- Managing the desire of people to fish



Soldotna riverfront



Soldotna riverfront



Soldotna riverfront

Small Town Riverfront Revitalization

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People are drawn to waterfront locations. In recent decades many towns around the US have partnered with landowners to create lively, successful riverfront commercial settings. The City wants to explore options for Soldotna, where better access and better connections to riverfront parks and other amenities open new opportunities for private sector development.

Several informal polls by national magazines, TV networks have asked people to nominate their favorite riverside towns.¹ Answers range from big cities to small towns, and places where swimming and fishing is inviting to where the attraction is simply the sight of moving water. But despite that diversity, places that rank high follow several common themes – ideas that might apply in a place like Soldotna. These include:

- Provide safe, attractive publicly accessible spaces to see and be near the water – trails, sidewalks, roads, bridges
- Create a walkable mixed use setting near the river, with commercial uses like brewpubs, restaurants, hotels and shopping that benefit from a riverfront location.
- Provide space for and support events in an attractive public setting.
- All of these towns transformed what had been under-developed, neglected riverfront land.

Two examples of (hot summer!) riverfront success stories are shown at right. The pages that follow look at four communities that give a sense of the different approaches to taking advantage of riverfront locations, and that might offer some helpful reference points for Soldotna.

¹ <https://www.fodors.com/news/trip-ideas/americas-10-best-river-towns>; <https://www.cnn.com/travel/article/riverfront-towns/index.html> ; <https://www.outsideonline.com/1929066/best-river-towns-america>



River Walk: Truckee River, Reno NV

“The Truckee River Walk is just a few blocks from the downtown hotels and a wonderful place to spend some time. There’s plenty to do at the River Walk. You’ll find bars and taverns, restaurants where you can enjoy your meals inside or outside and shops to spend your casino winnings”.
- Visit Reno website

Photo: http://visitreno.com/parks/river_walk/index.php



River Walk: Blue River, Breckenridge CO

The Breckenridge Riverwalk anchors the heart of downtown Breckenridge, offering four season strolling, shopping and events.

<https://www.breckenridgeresortmanagers.com/breckenridge>

Photo: <https://www.summitexpress.com/2015/06/32nd-annual-july-art-festival-in-breck/>

Estes Park, Colorado



River: Big Thompson

Population: 6,362 (2016)

Context and Transformations:

A mountain town 90 minutes north of Denver, this community is the “Gateway to Rocky Mountain National Park”. Over the last 40 years a series of investments, some motivated by flood issues, transformed riverfront land and the whole town from a glitzy commercial center selling gas, T-shirts and ice cream cones, to an increasingly popular multiday visitor and second home destination.



Estes Park: Commercial corridor along river off E Elkhorn Ave



Estes Park: Looking west, bridge at Rockwell Street

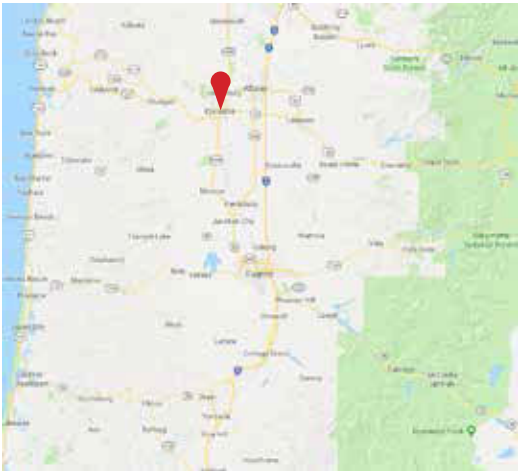


Estes Park: Big Thompson River



Estes Park: Looking east along 335 Ivy Street

Corvallis, Oregon



River: Willamette

Population: 57,110 (2016)

Context and Transformations:

Corvallis is a college town 2 hours south of Portland. City investment in a river front park, and an adjoining street with good parking, landscaping, sidewalks and art, has triggered phenomenal investment, including housing, restaurants and brewpubs, and most recently a hotel and museum.



Corvallis: Riverfront Commemorative Park



Corvallis: Riverfront Commemorative Park



Corvallis: Willamette river



Corvallis: Farmer's Market

Durango, Colorado



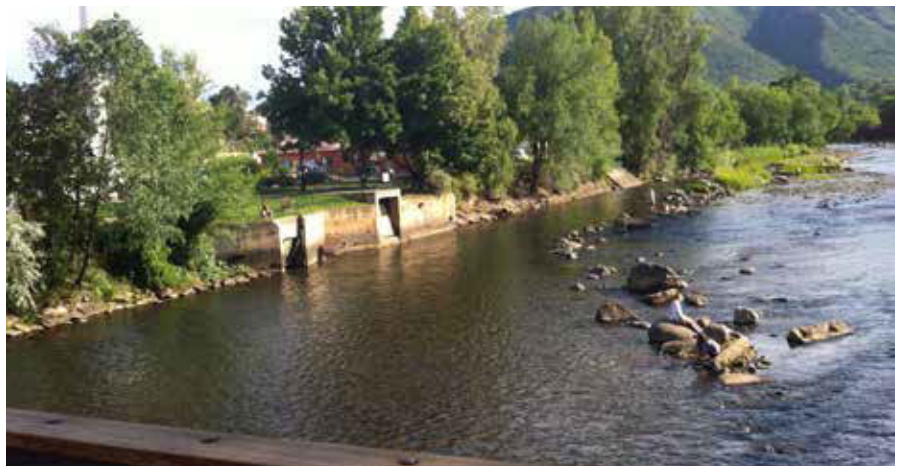
Durango: River rafting

River: Animas

Population: 18,503 (2016)

Context and Transformations:

Durango has always been a recreation-focused town, but the river was not well connected to commercial areas and had limited riverside pathways. While river-fronting commercial use is still limited, the river is now flanked by a series of popular paths and bridges, inviting strolling, floating and fishing, and helping to give the town a popular destination and a distinctive character.



Durango: River bridge overlook



Durango: Animas River



Durango: Animas River Trail - “the centerpiece of the city’s trail system” - provides easy access to parks, open spaces, the public library, downtown Durango, neighborhoods and schools

Photo: www.durangogov.org

Great Falls, Montana



Great Falls: River's Edge Trail

River: Missouri

Population: 59,178 (2016)

Context and Transformations:

Great Falls is located east of the Rocky Mountains, away from the more established destinations and tourism pathways in Montana.

The Great Falls riverfront shows the pluses and limitations of one riverfront improvement strategy. The green buffer between the river and the town's commercial areas is a well used urban amenity, but does little to enhance commercial opportunities for local business.



Great Falls: River's Edge Trail



Great Falls: Missouri River



Great Falls: River's Edge Trail

Soldotna Riverfront: Goals and Benefits 8

More work is needed with land owners and other members of the community to consider if and how the Soldotna riverfront might evolve in the future. Below, as a starting point for discussion, are some possible future goals.

Overarching Goal: take greater advantage of the river, as an economic and quality of life asset, and to give a stronger identity to Soldotna.

Specific possible goals, for discussion:

- Provide new economic opportunities, for current and future businesses, both small scale new entrepreneurs and larger established businesses
- Add value to existing lands and developments along the river
- Respect the interests and needs of existing landowners, existing businesses
- Maintain environmental quality
- Provide a valuable, accessible amenity for both residents and for visitors.
- By providing a new destination for visitors, work to lessen current conflicts with resident life that come with tourism
- Link with existing and future river front parks and walkways



Existing riverfront board walk on State and City land



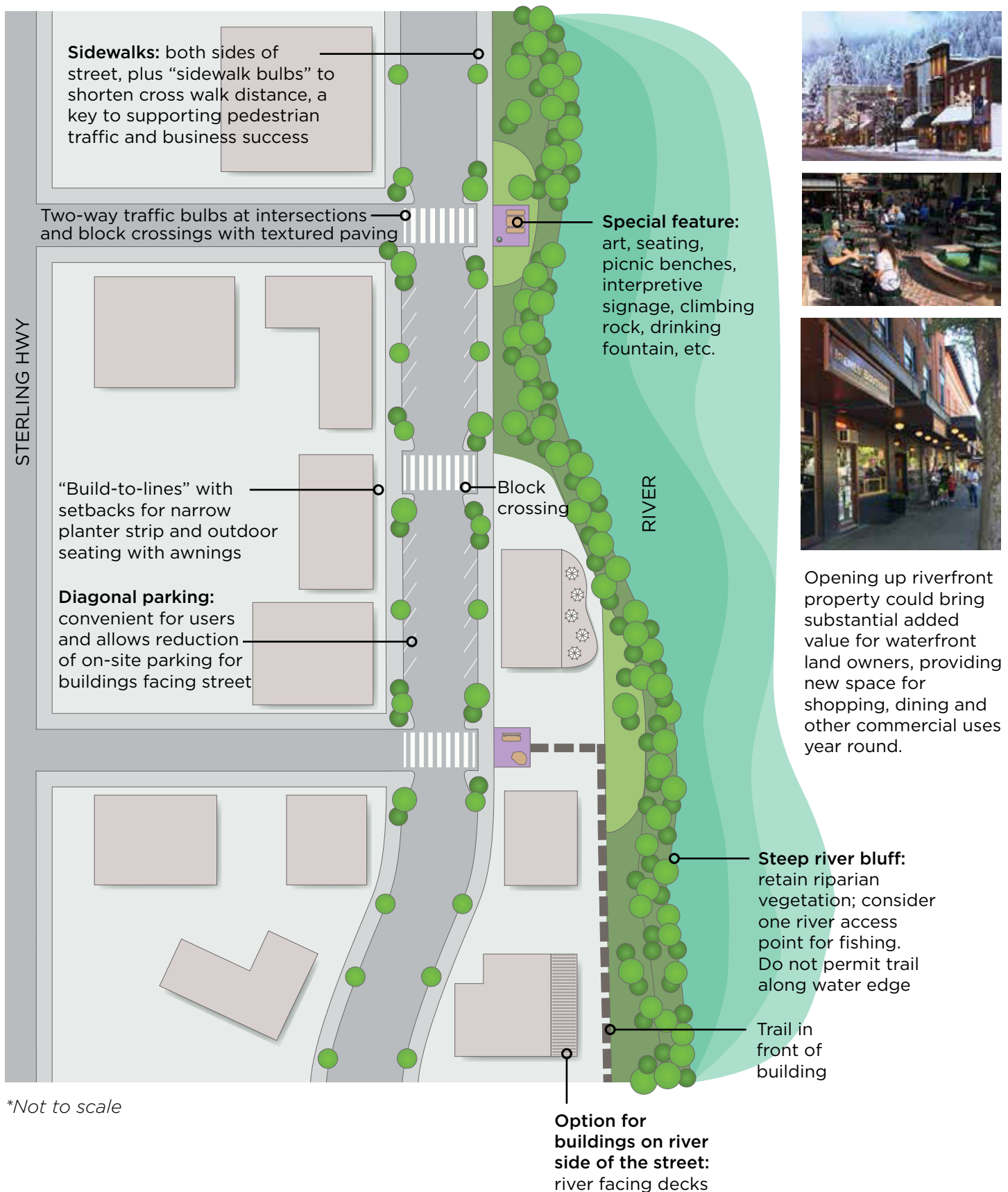
Private walkway open to use by condominium property owners and guests



The Kenai River's powerful draw as a fishing destination is a continuing opportunity and challenge.

Concepts for Soldotna

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*Not to scale

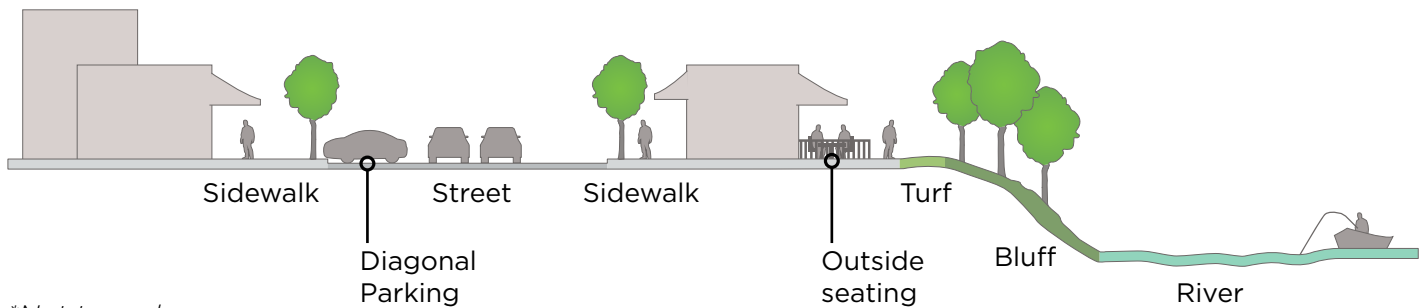
Concepts for Soldotna

10

The sketches on this and the previous page are intended to provide “generic” examples of possible river edge improvements.

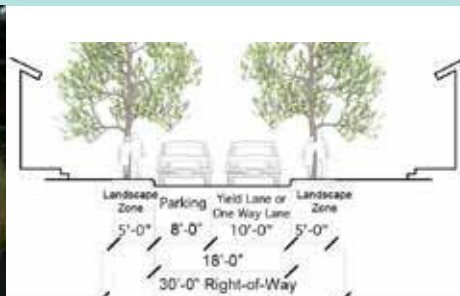
Key design issues to consider, if there is landowner interest in exploring these ideas, include:

- Options to place a new access road parallel to the river, while maintaining current uses
- Scale and function of a riverfront road, related parking solutions
- Options for connecting a river edge pathway to the city park, and commercial uses in that vicinity, such as restaurants, breweries, retail, etc.



*Not to scale

Connections: Linking Public Amenities, Private Land, and Controlled Public Access



Land owners can attract more business through well planned public access across their private properties. Retail businesses offering storefront parking and associated walkways is a near universal practice. Examples particularly relevant for the Soldotna riverfront are shown above. The streetscape photo and associated drawing illustrate an approach used in Ogden Utah, where a relatively narrow public ROW has sidewalks on adjoining private land open to public uses like outdoor dining and window shopping. Another common option is illustrated by the sign on the right, where a private landowner allows public access, but clarifies rules for that activity.

Source: City of North Ogden, Utah

Possible Next Steps

As was stated in the introduction, this short report is intended to spark thinking and discussion. No doubt some people will see things of interest, and also ideas that may be way off base.

If there is interest in further exploring these ideas, possible steps could include:

- Work more closely with individual landowners, to better understand their particular needs, concerns and interests.
- Further investigate examples from other locations, and/or learn more about the examples shared in this report, including development costs and funding sources.
- Review and refine the goals presented earlier in this report.
- Based on these discussions and research, develop a more site-specific, but still conceptual set of plan alternatives, addressing issues including
 - Vehicular access
 - Pedestrian access
 - Riverside park/open space
- Broaden the discussion to include community leaders, residents, other downtown businesses
- Refine project finances & development strategies
 - Funding options, including an array of public-private partnership redevelopment tools
 - Order of magnitude costs for improvements
 - Benefits, including likely increases spending by visitors and residents
 - Synthesis – phased development approach, with commitments by public and private partners
- Make and carry out a specific implementation and business plan

Conclusions

The proximity of the Kenai River to the Sterling Highway and the commercial core of Soldotna presents a remarkable opportunity. We hope the ideas in this report including the transformation of other riverfront communities might inspire thinking about if and how the Soldotna riverfront might evolve in the coming years and decades, both to benefit landowners and the community as a whole.



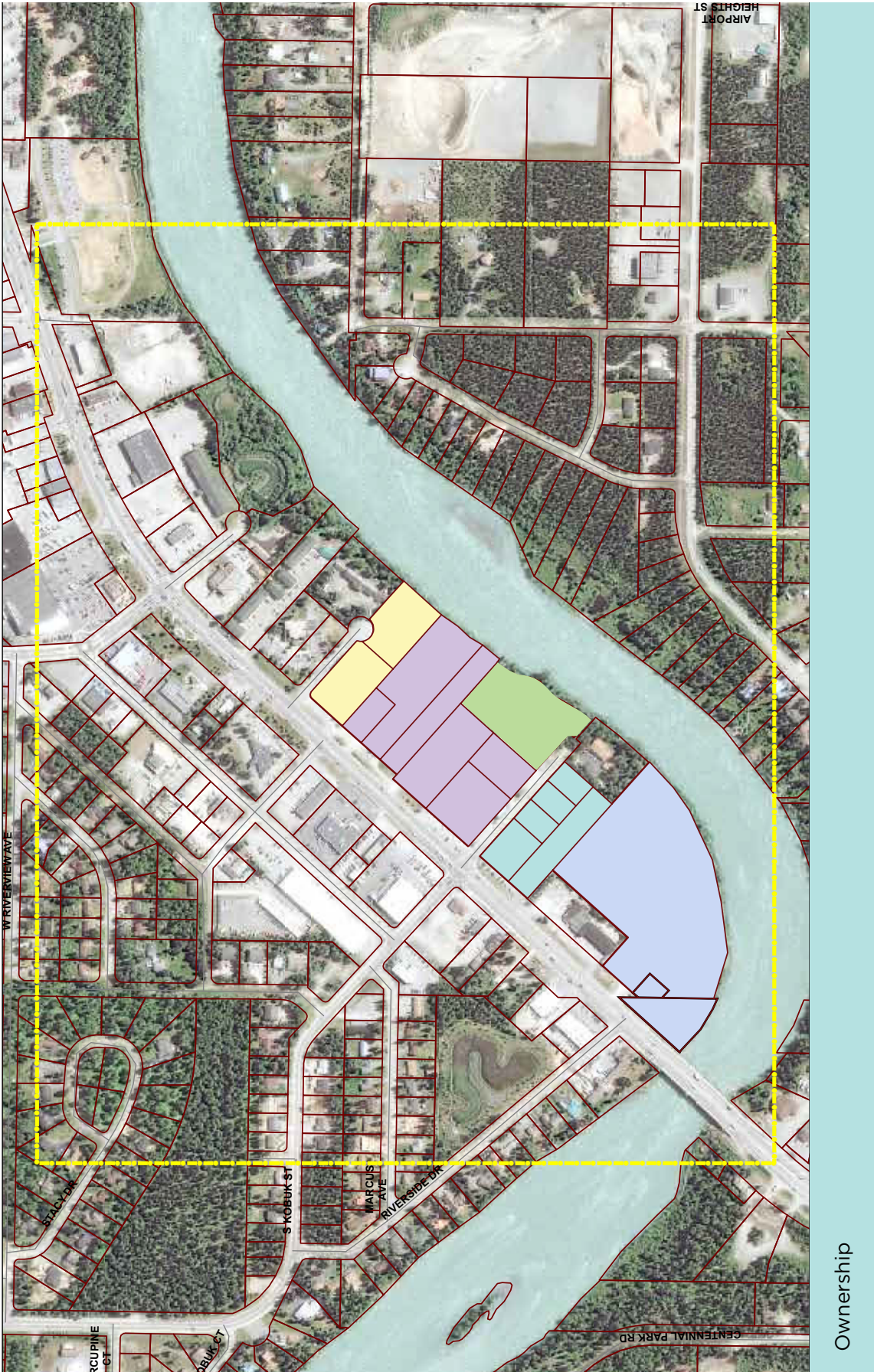
Land Ownership Overview



Issues, Opportunities, Challenges

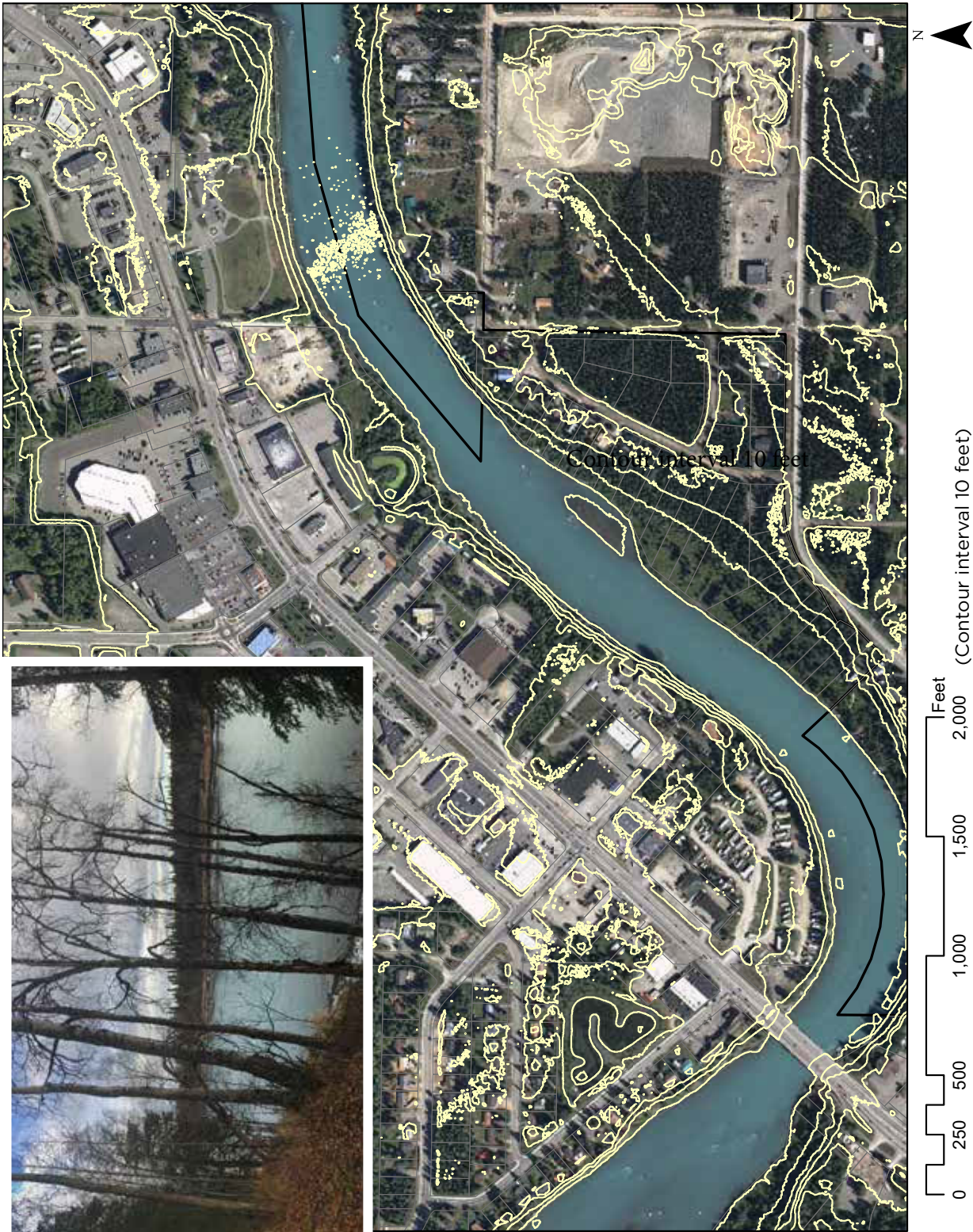
- At the upriver end of the project area are the city-owned park and an adjoining vacant parcel to be added to the park; next door is a state-owned parcel dedicated to storm water retention and related infrastructure. All the land between the Sterling Hwy Bridge and the state parcel area is in private ownership.
- Currently no road or trail provides developed public access/views of the river between the Sterling Hwy Bridge and the state land; three dead end City roads run from the Sterling towards the river. At the end of Lovers Lane is a 10 foot remnant of a right of way extending to the river.
- The large majority of uses in the Soldotna commercial core are oriented away from the river.
- Based on the number of no trespassing signs, in many places the river today is more of an attractive nuisance than an asset.

Riverfront Area Ownership



Issues, Opportunities, Challenges

- While most of the land along the water is privately held, a significant portion is held by five owners (indicated by the five colors on the map above), which may make it easier to plan and pursue collaborative riverfront projects.
- About half the land immediately above the bluff is developed, including (starting upriver): the multifamily condominiums, Kenai River Suites, Riverside Assisted Living Homes, Alaska Fishing Lodge and Soldotna B&B, and the mix of year round and short term RV's at the River Terrace RV Park. The remainder of area above the bluff is vacant or lightly used, which may provide more flexibility to consider riverfront improvements.

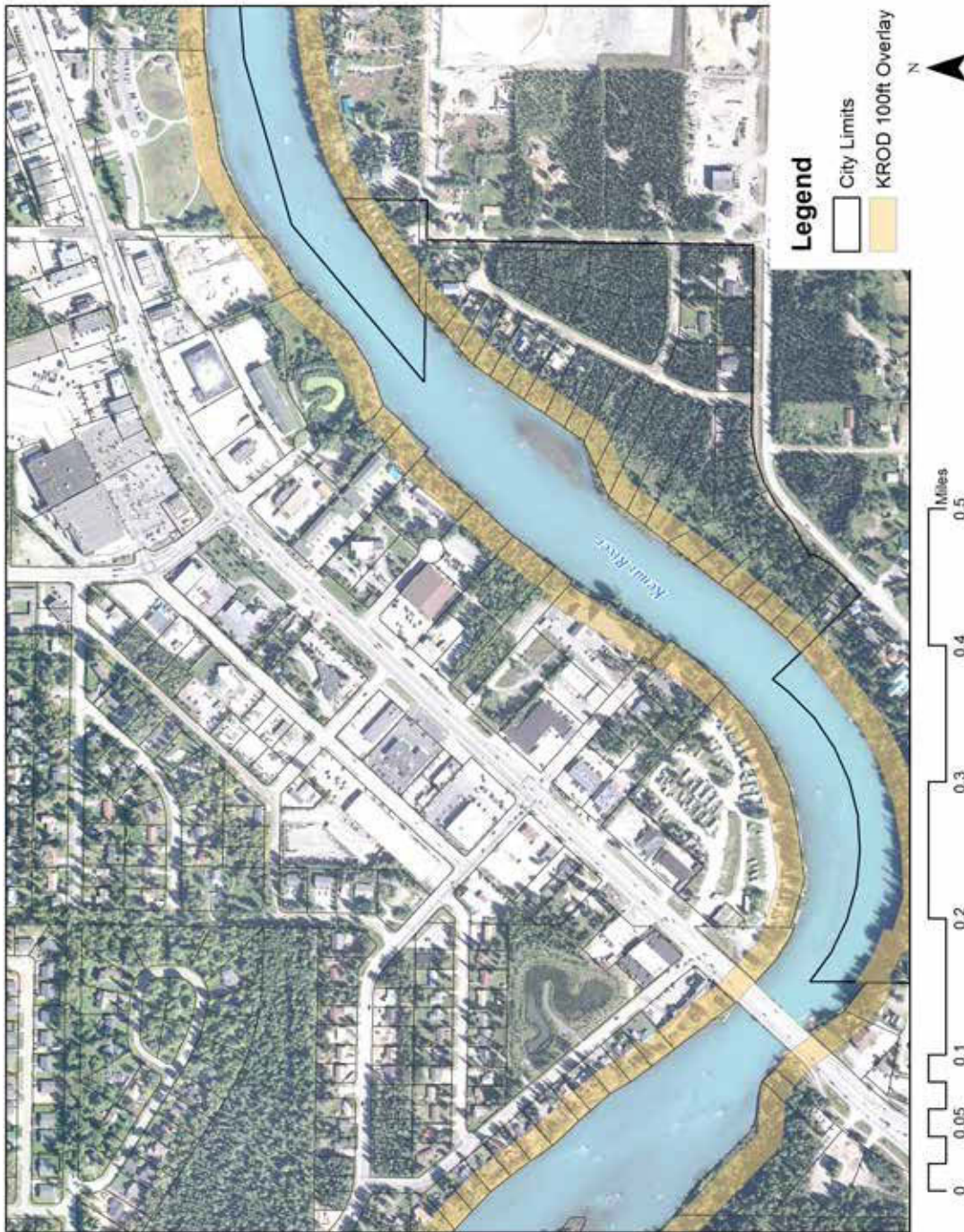


10 Foot Contours

Issues, Opportunities, Challenges

- The river is lined with a fairly steep, mostly tree covered bluff, 25-30' in height, extending approximately 50' in from the river. Beyond the bluff the land is flat, generally well drained, and presents few physical barriers to development.
- The appropriately named River Terrace RV Park has a more terraced land form and a lower bluff (about 15' high).
- Views of the river are good, but only are visible by following social trails that cross private property.

Kenai River Overlay District



Kenai River Overlay District (KROD) - extends 100' from river

Issues, Opportunities, Challenges

- The Kenai River Overlay District (KROD) is a special zoning district designed to provide opportunities for the development and use of land along the Kenai River, while also safeguarding and enhancing riparian habitat, controlling erosion, and protecting ground and surface water. The district includes all lands within 100 feet of the ordinary high water mark (OHW) of the Kenai River, or 25 feet back from a cut bank, whichever is greater. <https://soldotna.org/departments/economic-development-and-planning/zoning/kenai-river-overlay-district>
- The KROD allows for development; the type of activity/use determines the level of permit review. Habitat improvement projects and elevated light penetrating walkways usually require no permit, or only an administrative permit. Other more intensive activities require a conditional use permit.
- There are two players in the KROD. The KPB regulates all uses in the first 50' according to Borough code and the City regulates the 100' area according to City code. In the first 50', the KPB is restrictive and typically prohibits uses and structures unless you can show that they are water dependent. The City allows more flexibility from 50'-100', provided the proper precautions are taken (erosion control, habitat protection, etc.)



- The private land, as well as the state wetland area and city owned vacant parcel adjoining the park, are all zoned Commercial. This zone allows a wide range of permitted commercial activities including retail and wholesale sales, food and drinking establishments, lodging, light industry, and public uses; conditionally permitted uses include residential and heavier industrial and warehouse uses. Details are available on line in section 17:10.265 of the City Code. To guide and enhance development opportunities along the riverfront, a new or overlay district is needed, to focus on uses that take advantage of a riverfront location, reduce on-site parking requirements, bring buildings close to the road, and create a walkable, attractive setting.
- The area is well served by City water and sewer lines, which allows the concentration of uses necessary to create a walkable mixed use district.