WASILLA COMPREHENSIVE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

REPORT

JUNE 2023

PREPARED FOR:
City of Wasilla

McKINLEY RESEARCH
GROUP, LLC

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments **1**
Acronyms and Abbreviations **2**
Overview **3**
Introduction and Process **5**
What is a CEDS? 5
Definition of Region 5
CEDS Process 6
Summary Background **10**
Population and Demographics 10
Education and Income 17
Employment and Housing 22
Community Wellness 27
Economic Clusters 33
Infrastructure Related to Economic Development 41
SWOT Analysis **48**
Community Responses 48
Strategic Initiatives **51**
CEDS Vision Statement 51
Strategic Plan 51
Evaluation Framework **57**
Economic Resiliency **61**
Appendix A: Spring Summit Breakout Group Results **62**
Appendix B: Community Interviews **64**
Appendix C: Primary Documents **65**

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Components of Population Change, Mat-Su Borough, July 2013-July 2022 14
Table 2. Household Incomes: Alaska, Anchorage, Mat-Su Borough, and GWEA, 2021 20
Table 3. Regional Price Parity, Anchorage Metropolitan Statistical Area, 2017 and 2021 27
Table 4. Overall Quality of Life, Mat-Su Borough Survey Findings 28
Table 5. Access to Health Care, Mat-Su Borough and Alaska, 2018 – 2020 29
Table 6. Inadequate Access to Food, Mat-Su Borough Subgroups, 2022 31

Table 7. Top Offenses by Number of Arrests, Wasilla and Alaska, 2017 – 2021 29
Table 8. Health Care and Social Assistance Sector Jobs, Select Areas, 2017 and 2021 35
Table 9. Average Construction Sector Employment, Select Areas, 2017 and 2021 40
Table 10. Wasilla Strengths 48
Table 11. Wasilla Weaknesses 49
Table 12. Wasilla Opportunities 50
Table 13. Wasilla Threats 50

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Map of the Greater Wasilla Economic Area (GWEA) with Census Designated Places .6
Figure 2. Median Household Income: Anchorage, GWEA, Alaska, and Mat-Su, 2021 11
Figure 3. GWEA Population Growth, 2000-2022 11
Figure 4. Population Change, Select Areas, 2013 to 2022 12
Figure 5. Population Distribution Among GWEA Areas, 2022 13
Figure 6. Population Growth, GWEA Areas, 2013 to 2022 13
Figure 7. GWEA Population, 2021 Actual, 2025-2050 Forecast 14
Figure 8. Net GWEA and Anchorage Migration, 2012-2021 15
Figure 9. Median Age: GWEA Communities, Mat-Su Borough, Anchorage, Alaska, 2022 15
Figure 10. Age Distribution, GWEA, 2013 and 2022 16
Figure 11. Working Age Population Change in Select Regions, 2013 to 2022 16
Figure 12. Population Change by Age Group, GWEA, 2013 and 2022 17
Figure 13. Pre-K to 12th Grade Enrollment, Wasilla & MSBSD, 2013 and 2022 18
Figure 14. Educational Attainment: US, Alaska, Anchorage, MSB, GWEA, 2021 18
Figure 15. Highest Level of Education Completed in GWEA, 2012 and 2021 19
Figure 16. Per-Capita Personal Income by Component, Select Areas, 2021 20
Figure 17. Proportion of Cost-Burdened Owners and Renters, Select Areas, 2021 21
Figure 18. Poverty Levels, Alaska, Anchorage, Mat-Su Borough, and GWEA, 2021 22
Figure 19. Mat-Su Borough Resident Commuters by Place of Work, 2021 22
Figure 20. Total Wage and Salary Employment, Mat-Su Borough, 2012 – 2021 23
Figure 21. Employment by Sector, GWEA, 2021 23
Figure 22. Employment Share, Wage & Salary and Sole Proprietors, Select Areas, 2021 24
Figure 23. State of Alaska Active Business Licenses by Sector, GWEA 25
Figure 24. Occupied Housing Units by Tenure, Select Areas, 2021 25
Figure 25. Residential Units Sold, GWEA, 2015 – 2022 26
Figure 26. Average Home Sale Prices, GWEA and Anchorage, 2015 and 2022 27
Figure 27. Physically Active Adults, Mat-Su Borough and Alaska, Percent, 2018 – 2020 28
Figure 28. Reported and Cleared Crimes, Wasilla Police Department, 2012 – 2021 30
Figure 29. Property Crime Reports by Type, Wasilla and Alaska, 2011 – 2020 30
Figure 30. Mat-Su Borough Criminal Incidents, Crimes Against Persons, 2017 – 2021 31
Figure 31. Free and Reduced-Price Lunch Eligibility, Mat-Su Borough School District 32
Figure 32. Food Environment Index Scores, Mat-Su Borough, Alaska, and U.S. 32

Figure 33. City of Wasilla Business Licenses by Sector, 2023 33
Figure 34. Retail Sector and Total Jobs, Mat-Su Borough, 2019-2021 Annual Averages 34
Figure 35. Average Cost of Hospital Stay, Select Areas, 2020 35
Figure 36. City of Wasilla Sales Tax Revenue, 2012-2022 (in millions) 37
Figure 37. City of Wasilla General Fund Account Balances, 2012-2022 (in millions) 37
Figure 38. City of Wasilla Budget Expenditures, 2012 and 2022 38
Figure 39. Annual Average Leisure and Hospitality Employment 39
Figure 40. City of Wasilla New Residential Construction Permits, 2013-2022 41
Figure 41. Map of Wasilla Municipal Airport Location 44
Figure 42. Water Utility Metered Customers, City of Wasilla, 2014-2023 46

Acknowledgments

We would like to acknowledge the U.S. Economic Development Administration for funding support for this project. We thank the Wasilla Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) Steering Committee members and City of Wasilla staff listed below for their contributions and guidance to this Wasilla CEDS process.

We are grateful to those in the Wasilla community who enthusiastically participated in surveys and interviews and attended events to discuss the vision for their city. Members of city, borough, and state government have all been essential to forming an economic development strategy with broad input and support.

Wasilla CEDS Steering Committee

- Jeremiah Benson, Real Estate Broker, Signature Real Estate
- Mike Brown, Mat-Su Borough
- Simon Brown, Wasilla City Council
- Stacey Coy, Owner, Northern Dame Construction
- Terry Ellis, Real Estate Broker, RE/MAX
- Dimitri Fonov, General Contractor
- Kibe Lucas, Realtor, Keller Williams
- Doug Miller, Wostmann & Associates
- Ina Mueller, Lakeshore Entertaining
- Todd Smolden, Office of Governor Mike Dunleavy
- Sami Spies, Collins Construction
- Berkley Tilton, Owns Rentals
- Jessica Viera, Wasilla Chamber of Commerce
- Jenny Willardson, Commercial Real Estate Broker, Elevate Alaska Realty

City of Wasilla

- Mayor Glenda Ledford
- Crystal Nygard, Deputy Administrator

Acronyms and Abbreviations

ADEC – Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation

AFL-CIO – American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations

AHFC – Alaska Housing Finance Corporation

AKRR – Alaska Railroad

ARPA – American Rescue Plan Act

ARRC – Alaska Rural Rehabilitation Corporation

CARES Act – Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act

CIHA – Cook Inlet Housing Authority

DCCED – Alaska Department of Commerce, Community, & Economic Development

DOLWD – Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development

DOTPF – Alaska Department of Transportation & Public Facilities

DUI – Driving Under the Influence

EDA – U.S. Economic Development Administration

EPA – U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

FAA – Federal Aviation Administration

FEMA – Federal Emergency Management Agency

FERC – Federal Energy Regulatory Commission

FY – Fiscal Year

HUD – Housing and Urban Development

MPO – Metropolitan Planning Organization

MSB – Matanuska-Susitna Borough

MSBSD – Matanuska-Susitna Borough School District

MSCVB – Mat-Su Convention & Visitors Bureau

MSTPF – Mat-Su Trails and Parks Foundation

MTA – Matanuska Telecom Association, Inc.

NIT – Northern Industrial Training, Inc.

RPP – Regional Price Parities

SOA – State of Alaska

USDOT – U.S. Department of Transportation

Overview

The City of Wasilla is in Southcentral Alaska, 44 road miles north of Alaska's largest city, Anchorage. Wasilla is part of the Matanuska-Susitna Borough (MSB), an area larger than the state of West Virginia. As the largest urban and commercial center in the Borough, Wasilla provides businesses and services to residents throughout the Borough and to thousands of visitors who pass through. Wasilla is a connection point between Interior Alaska and Southcentral, and the area surrounding the community is popular for outdoor recreation year-round.

Population growth in Wasilla has outpaced that of the rest of the state for more than two decades. New arrivals to Alaska as well as residents of Anchorage and other communities are drawn to Wasilla for its comparatively lower cost of living, larger homes and lot sizes, and easier access to outdoor recreation. A significant percentage of the Wasilla population commutes to Anchorage for work.

Growth brings challenges along with benefits. Road and water infrastructure in the Wasilla area is strained. The pace of new home construction and business development has made it difficult for the City of Wasilla and MSB to keep up with infrastructure demand. Planning has also been a challenge, as it has been difficult to forecast growth and to identify funding for the types of large capital projects required to meet growing population needs.

Population growth, building supply cost, and supply chain challenges in the last few years have caused home prices in the Wasilla area to rise, reducing the gap with Anchorage home prices. This may pose future challenges for Wasilla in continuing to attract working-age population.

The City of Wasilla has a unique relationship with the MSB. The borough provides key public safety services such as police and fire. Some of the most significant assets for the City of Wasilla, such as Port MacKenzie, are outside the city limits. Because development of those areas falls under the purview of the Borough government, cooperation and partnership between the city and borough are critical.

To address economic development effectively, the City of Wasilla initiated development of a five-year (2023-2028) Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS). The City of Wasilla and the Wasilla CEDS Strategy Committee developed a vision statement, provided input on regional Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT), developed three overarching goals with 11 priority objectives, and produced an action plan, including priority actions, timeline, responsibilities, expected costs, and potential funding sources. McKinley Research Group, with subconsultant support from Huddle Inc., was contracted to support this process.

Wasilla CEDS Vision Statement

Wasilla is a resilient community with future-ready infrastructure that supports a strong business hub, quality job growth, and unparalleled opportunities to explore the outdoors and raise a family.

Goal A: Improve Infrastructure to Support Economic Resiliency	
Goal: Improve regional connections and attract new business opportunities with modern infrastructure that meets the needs of residents, visitors, and businesses.	**Objective 1:** Upgrade water, wastewater, and stormwater infrastructure **Objective 2:** Develop regional transportation infrastructure **Objective 3:** Upgrade and improve broadband access **Objective 4:** Increase housing development within city limits **Objective 5:** Develop initiatives around resiliency in emergency / food security / agriculture
Goal B: Diversify Local Economy	
Goal: Attract new businesses and industries to boost economic resilience and availability of high-quality jobs.	**Objective 1:** Attract new industries, e.g., manufacturing, logistics, and "value-added" **Objective 2:** Provide increased workforce training **Objective 3:** Become a visitor and recreation hub
Goal C: Improve Community Connections to Promote Resident Well-Being	
Goal: Foster a community that has continuous opportunities for resident connection and engagement with the natural environment.	**Objective 1:** Build an attractive Main Street District **Objective 2:** Increase year-round events **Objective 3:** Improve upon existing recreation assets

Introduction and Process

What is a CEDS?

A Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) is a strategic blueprint for economic development and collaboration in a given region. According to the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA):

> A CEDS is a strategy-driven plan for regional economic development. A CEDS is the result of a regionally-owned planning process designed to build capacity and guide the economic prosperity and resiliency of an area or region.

A CEDS outlines the strategic objectives of a community of region to advance specific economic development goals, along with action steps and timelines to help accomplish them. The EDA requires communities to develop or update a CEDS at least every five years to qualify for assistance under Public Works and Economic Adjustment Assistance programs and for designation as an Economic Development District.

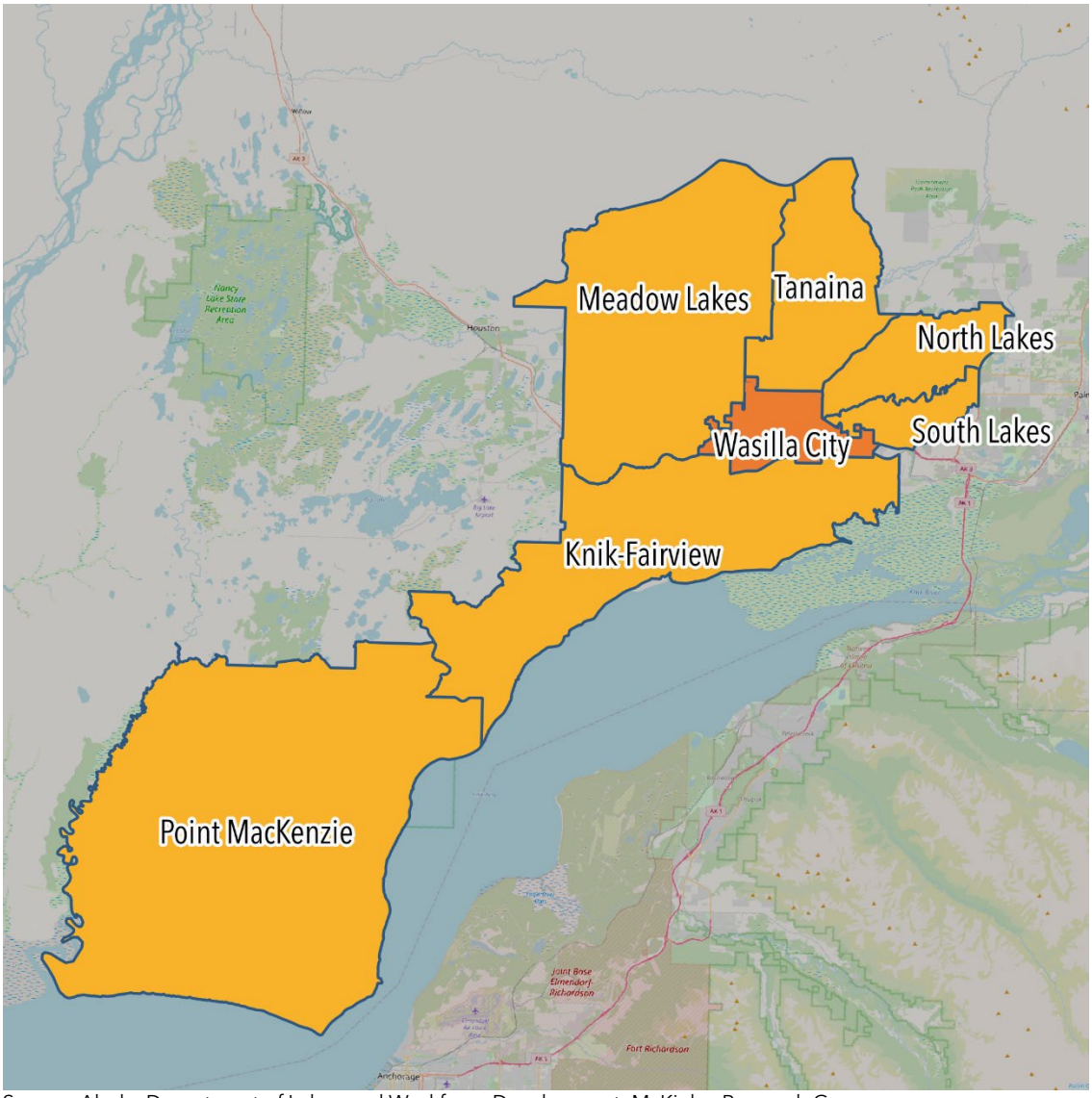
In the fall of 2022, the City of Wasilla contracted with McKinley Research Group and its subcontractor, Huddle Inc., to begin its first-ever CEDS process. The process was locally driven, guided by a steering committee comprised of representatives of significant industries in the region. A robust community engagement process included public meetings, an online survey, and individual stakeholder interviews. The process was also informed by data collection and analysis as well as review of relevant documents.

Definition of Region

While this CEDS centers on the City of Wasilla, the commercial hub of the Matanusk-Susitna Borough (MSB), it was recognized that the broader region would be impacted by a Wasilla CEDS. Therefore, a broader geographic area was defined for the purpose of this CEDS; it is referred to here as the Greater Wasilla Economic Area (GWEA). The GWEA encompasses all zip codes with a Wasilla address (99654, 99623, 99629, and 99687).

The GWEA is home to 65,457 residents as of 2022, accounting for 59% of the MSB population and about 9% of Alaska's population.

Figure 1. Map of the Greater Wasilla Economic Area (GWEA) with Census Designated Places (CDPs)



Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development; McKinley Research Group

CEDS Process

In September 2022, the City of Wasilla solicited proposals for a contractor to prepare the CEDS. McKinley Research Group was selected and initiated work in October 2022. McKinley Research Group staff worked with City of Wasilla staff to develop a project schedule, identify background documents and data, and develop a public engagement process.

Steering Committee

To ensure that the CEDS process and outcome is truly community driven, a committee comprised of local residents was established to help guide the process. The Wasilla CEDS Steering Committee is made up of 16 individuals representing private- and public-sector entities in the Wasilla area; individuals were selected based on expressed interest and City of Wasilla suggestions. A list of Wasilla CEDS Steering Committee members can be found in the Acknowledgements.

McKinley Research Group facilitated three Steering Committee work sessions (in November 2022, March 2023, and April 2023). At these sessions, Steering Committee members provided input on the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis and advised on development of the CEDS vision statement and overarching goal statements. They also participated in a series of exercises to prioritize objectives for each of the overarching goals. Action plans for each objective were developed, including action items, timeline, responsibility, expected costs, and potential funding sources.

Community Engagement

In addition to the Steering Committee, broader public input was collected through multiple channels. These efforts included a public meeting, presentations at community organization meetings, interviews, and an online survey.

Participants at the Economic Development Summit in November

In November 2022, the project hosted the *Charting Wasilla's Economic Development Future Summit*, a participatory meeting open to all members of the public. About 80 people attended, including the city and borough mayors, other local officials, state legislators, EDA and other federal and state government officials, residents, and business community members. U.S. Senator Lisa Murkowski and Governor Mike Dunleavy welcomed participants in-person and via pre-recorded video statements, respectively.

The November Summit agenda included an overview of the region's economic situation and description of the CEDS process. As a community kick-off to the CEDS process, participants worked together to inventory the region's SWOT.

To collect additional community input for the SWOT analysis and to review the draft CEDS, presentations were made at municipal and community organization meetings, including:

- Wasilla City Council, January and April 2023
- Mat-Su Business Coalition, January 2023
- Greater Wasilla Chamber of Commerce, February 2023
- Susitna Rotary Club of Alaska, March 2023
- Valley Board of Realtors, March 2023
- Wasilla Spring into Action Economic Development Summit, May 2023

During the *Wasilla Spring into Action Economic Development Summit: Planting the Seeds of Possibilities and Opportunities for Wasilla's Future*, about 80 people attended, many of the same people who participated in the November Summit. During the Spring Summit, a presentation on the CEDS was made, unveiling the draft vision statement, strategic goals and priority objectives. A panel discussion about moving the CEDS into action was led by Shirley Kelly, Economic Development Representative for the US EDA, Mike Brown, MSB Borough Manager, and Erich Schaal, Public Works Director, City of Wasilla. Attendees participated in a breakout activity to answer three questions:

Participants at the Spring Economic Summit

- *What excites you the most about the Wasilla CEDS?*
- *How should the community measure success of the CEDS?*
- *How can the community remove roadblocks to ensure success of the CEDS?*

Responses to these questions can be found in Appendix A.

Executive interviews were conducted by telephone with 13 community stakeholders throughout the GWEA. The purpose of the interviews was to gather feedback on the SWOT and to learn about economic development initiatives and expectations from the CEDS process. A list of stakeholders interviewed can be found in Appendix B.

Located on the city's website, an online survey was designed to capture regional residents' feedback on the GWEA's top three SWOT focus areas related to the regional economy. Residents were encouraged to complete the survey through social media postings, CEDS Steering Committee member outreach, and other communications. The survey was fielded from

November 2022 to March 2023. Responses to the online survey were incorporated into the findings from SWOT exercises conducted during various public meetings.

Data Collection and Analysis

A situational analysis, including demographic and socioeconomic information about the GWEA, was developed. Data sources included federal government agencies, (i.e., U.S. Census, Bureau of Economic Analysis), state agencies, (i.e., Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development (DOLWD), Alaska Department of Revenue), and local government. By request, DOLWD provided GWEA employment data. Interviews with officials and others provided additional insight into data collected, including work currently underway for a new Wasilla Municipal Airport Master Plan. McKinley Research Group reviewed existing plans and documents to assess overlap and alignment in economic development strategies related to Wasilla infrastructure, transportation, and community planning. These reviews, along with broader reference sources, helped inform the CEDS process. A list of documents reviewed can be found in Appendix C.

Report Development and Review Process

A review draft of the CEDS document was submitted to the City of Wasilla for internal review. Feedback was incorporated into a final draft. Photographs used in this document help to illustrate topic areas and visually identify areas of interest. Photo credits include: Glenn Arowits, Roger Jett, Judy Patrick, Patty Sullivan, and the Anchorage Press.

Summary Background

This section analyzes factors that affect the economy in Wasilla and the GWEA and have implications for economic development planning.

Population and Demographics

The MSB has seen the largest increase in population of any borough or census area in Alaska. The population of the GWEA increased by 18% in the last decade, surpassing the greater MSB's 17% growth rate. The largest concentration of GWEA residents live in Knik-Fairview, followed by North Lakes and Meadow Lakes.

The population of the GWEA has aged over the last decade. From 2013 to 2022, the proportion of the population over age 60 increased by 61%, while the proportion under 60 increased by 11%.

Downtown Wasilla and Wasilla Lake.

The GWEA region experiences high net in-migration from Anchorage. From 2020 to 2021, about 1,700 Anchorage residents moved to the GWEA while 900 GWEA residents moved to Anchorage for a net gain of 800 residents from Anchorage.

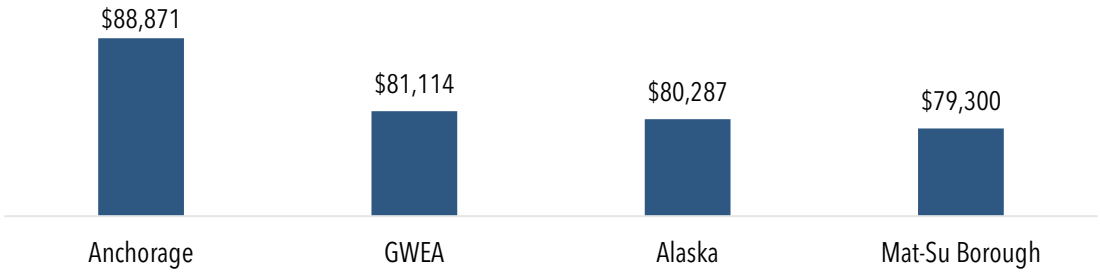
One factor residents may consider when moving to the MSB is the cost of living. The most recent data indicate that the cost of living in the MSB is 6% lower than in Anchorage, driven primarily by lower housing costs (21% lower than Anchorage). Lower housing prices in the MSB and higher wages in Anchorage make the 1.5-hour commute worth it for many GWEA residents. In 2021, about a third of the borough's resident workers commuted to Anchorage for work.

Employment has also grown, though more slowly than population. Between 2017 and 2021, GWEA employment increased by 12%; MSB employment increased by 14%. In the GWEA, sectors with the largest employment increases over this period were health care and social assistance (+25%), construction (+21%), and government (+21%). In 2021, GWEA employment accounted for 54% of all employment in the borough.

According to American Community Survey's five-year estimates, more people in the GWEA are getting college degrees and completing high school than in years past. The region still lags state and national average high school graduation rates and postsecondary attainment.

The 2021 median income in the GWEA was slightly higher than state and borough median incomes and lower than Anchorage's by 10%.

Figure 2. Median Household Income: Anchorage, GWEA, Alaska, and Mat-Su, 2021

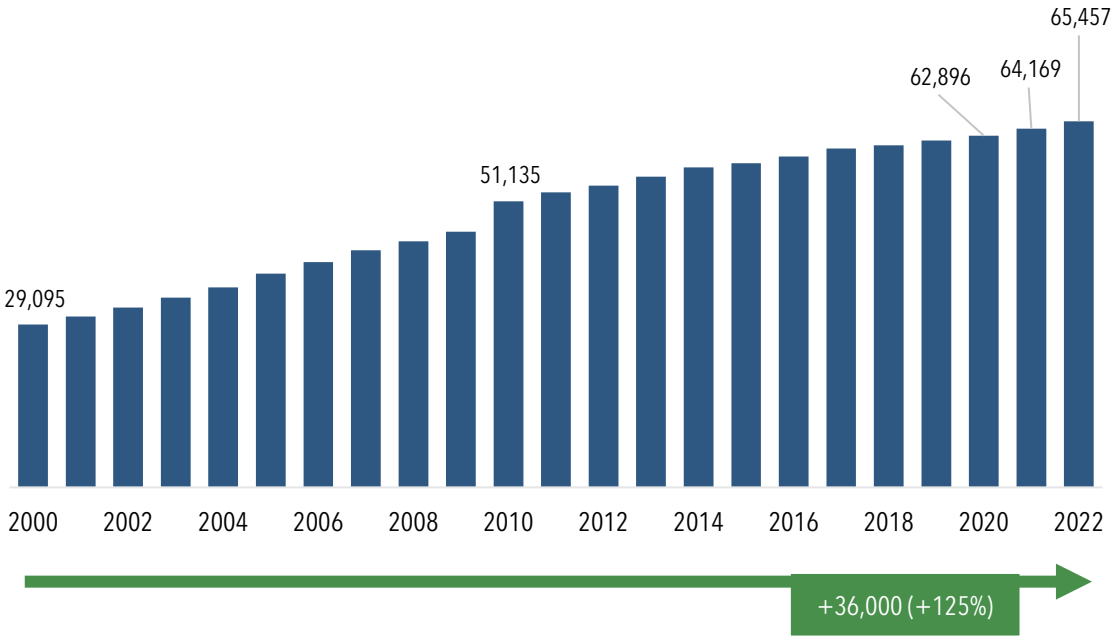


Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2021 5-year Estimates; McKinley Research Group estimates

Population

The GWEA has grown by 125% since 2000, adding 36,000 residents. Between 2000 and 2010, the population of the GWEA increased by 76% (+22,000 residents). Population growth slowed between 2010 and 2022, increasing by 28% (+14,000 residents).

Figure 3. GWEA Population Growth, 2000-2022

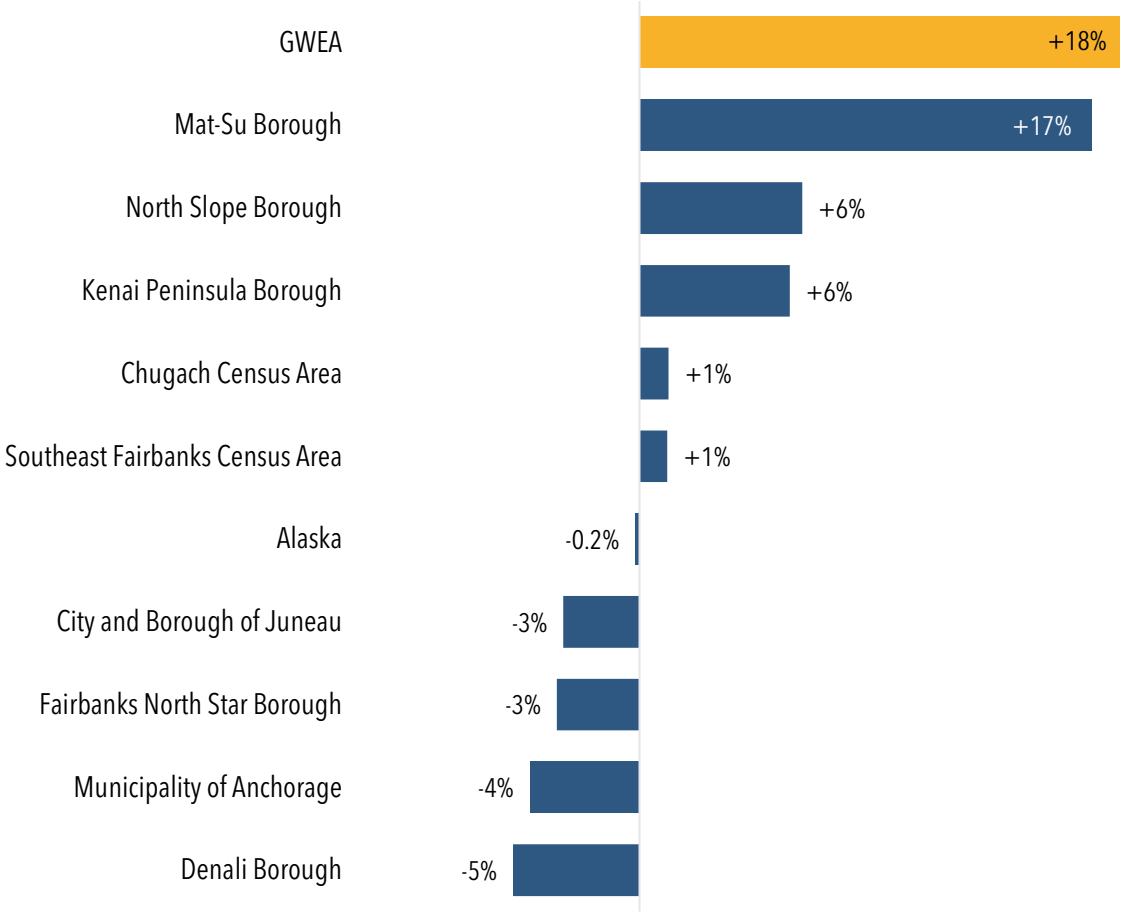


Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development
Note: The boundaries of GWEA communities were reclassified in 2010, resulting in a slight population jump that year.

During the 2013-2022 timeframe, while other boroughs in Alaska lost population or remained flat, the MSB and GWEA have consistently grown. The GWEA population increased by 18% in the last decade, surpassing the greater MSB's 17% growth rate.

By comparison, the statewide population decreased by 0.2% from 2013 to 2022 and the population of the Municipality of Anchorage decreased by 4%.

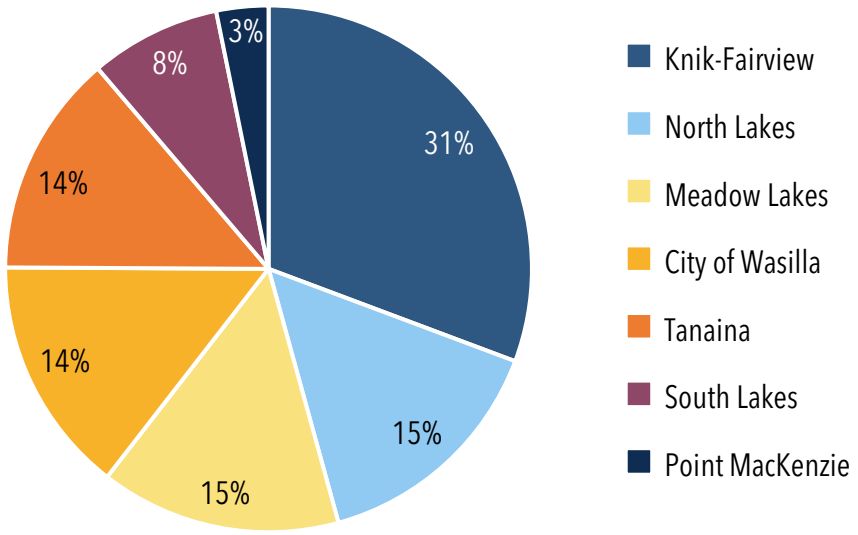
Figure 4. Population Change, Select Areas, 2013 to 2022



Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development

The most populous area in the GWEA is Knik-Fairview, with over 20,000 residents in 2022. The City of Wasilla makes up 14% of the total GWEA population, with 9,500 residents. Point MacKenzie has the smallest share of residents, with about 2,000 residents or 3% of GWEA population.

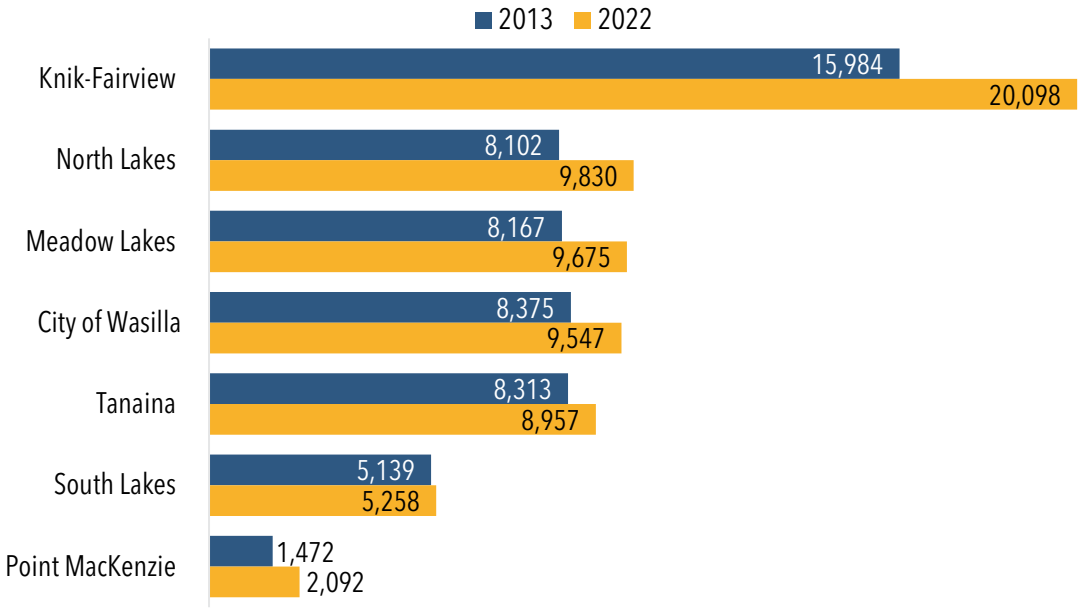
Figure 5. Population Distribution Among GWEA Areas, 2022



Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development

In the last decade, population growth has occurred throughout the GWEA. The population of Point MacKenzie increased at the highest rate, growing by 42% in the last decade. This growth coincided with the opening of the Goose Creek Correctional Facility. In absolute numbers, Knik-Fairview increased by the largest number of residents (+4,000).

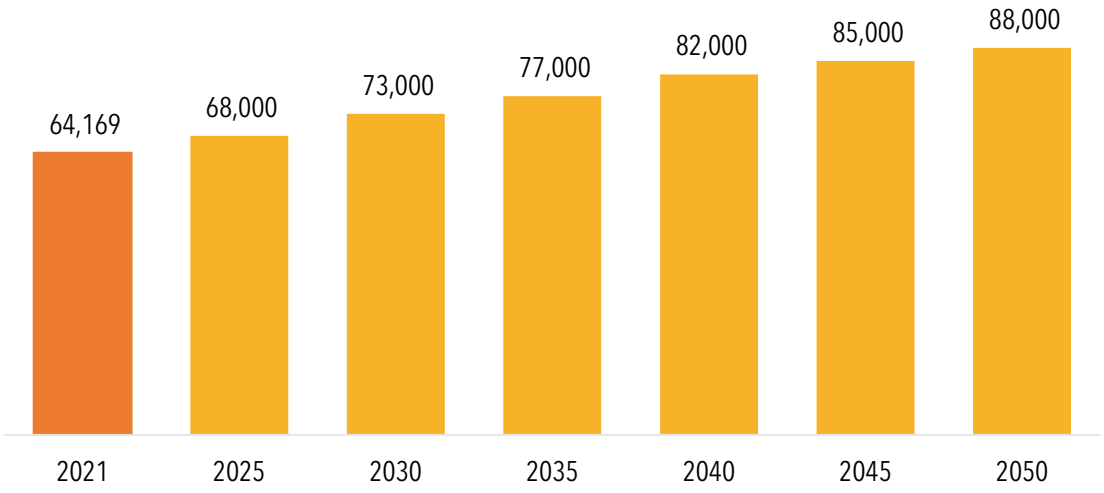
Figure 6. Population Growth, GWEA Areas, 2013 to 2022



Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development

Based on DOLWD population forecasts, it is estimated the GWEA will increase by about 20,000 residents by 2050 (+30%).

Figure 7. GWEA Population, 2021 Actual, 2025-2050 Forecast



Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, McKinley Research Group analysis
Note: To forecast GWEA population, it was assumed that 62% of the borough's population growth is attributed to the GWEA communities.

ELEMENTS OF POPULATION CHANGE

The MSB has experienced annual growth due to both net in-migration of residents and natural increases (births minus deaths). Net migration is responsible for 59% of the borough's population growth since 2013, and natural increase is responsible for 41% of the population growth.

Table 1. Components of Population Change, Mat-Su Borough, July 2013-July 2022

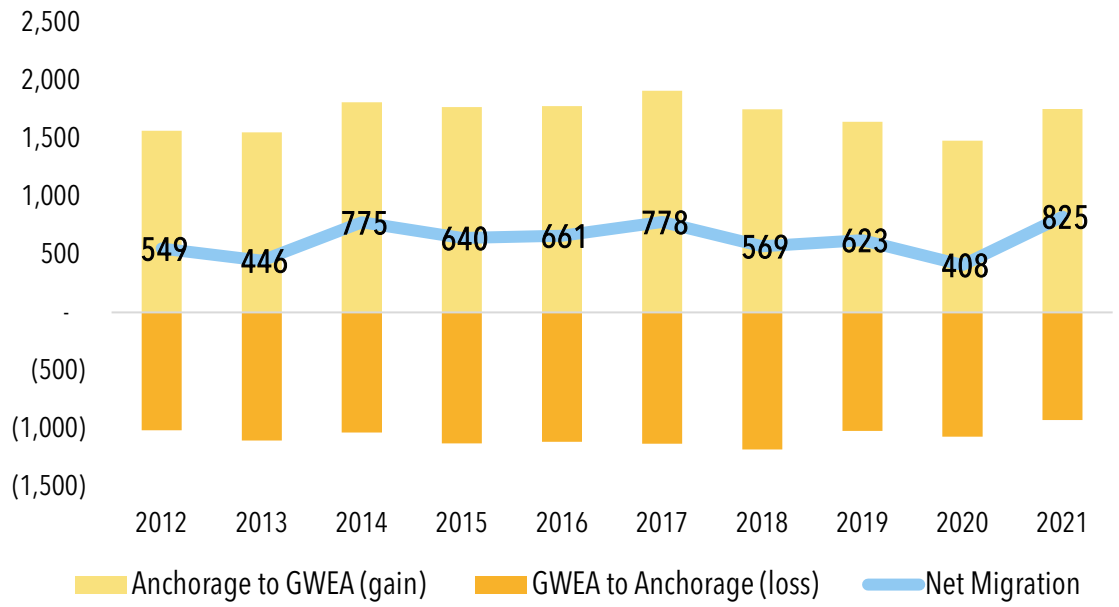
Time Period	Natural Increase (Births minus Deaths)	Net Migration (In- minus Out-migration)	Population Change
2013-22	6,638	9,417	16,055

Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development

Migration to and from Anchorage accounts for the majority of GWEA migration and has contributed to steady population increases over the last 10 years. Between 2012 and 2021, an annual average of 1,073 GWEA residents moved to Anchorage and 1,700 Anchorage residents moved to the GWEA, resulting in annual net migration of 627 individuals to the GWEA region.

Between 2020 and 2021, 74% of individuals who moved to the GWEA came from Anchorage, and 69% of those who moved out of the GWEA region moved to Anchorage.

Figure 8. Net GWEA and Anchorage Migration, 2012-2021

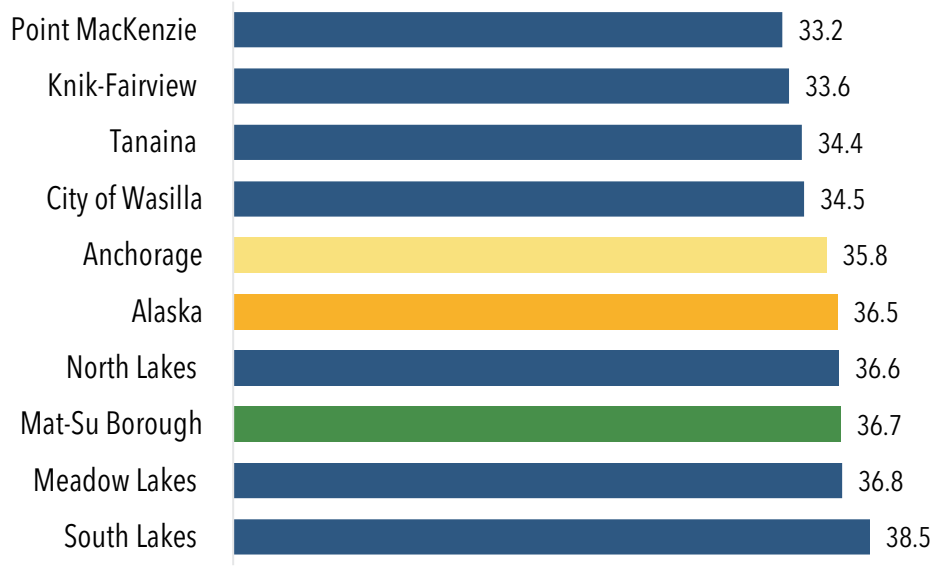


Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development

Age

In 2022, the median age of MSB residents was 36.7, very close to the statewide median of 36.5. Communities in the GWEA ranged in median age from 33.2 (Point MacKenzie) to 38.5 (South Lakes).

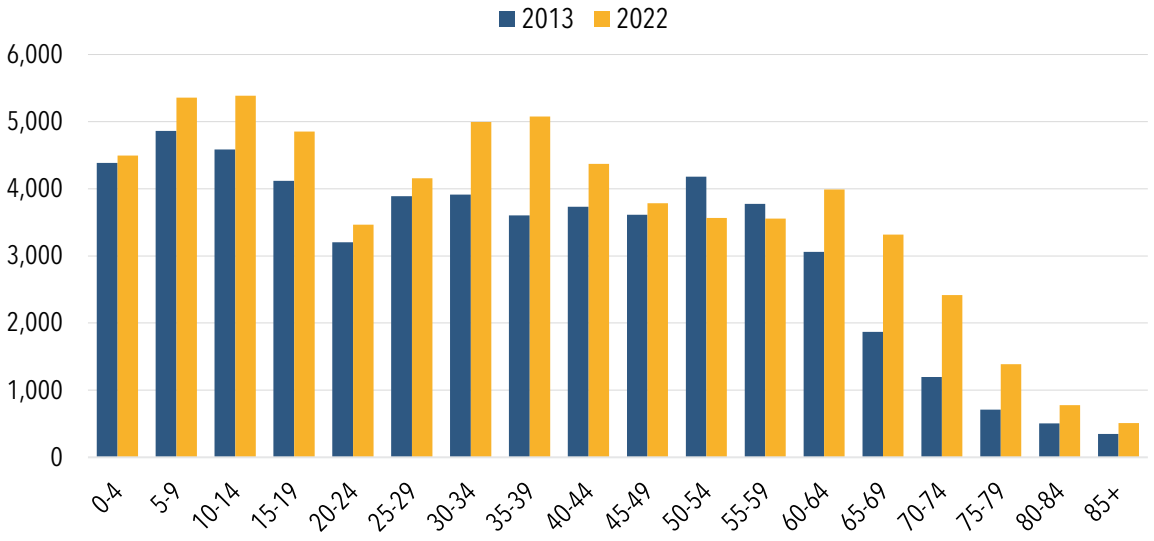
Figure 9. Median Age: GWEA Communities, Mat-Su Borough, Anchorage, Alaska, 2022



Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development

In the last decade, the population of the GWEA grew in nearly every age group. There are significantly more children, working age adults, and adults over age 60 in the GWEA than there were in 2013.

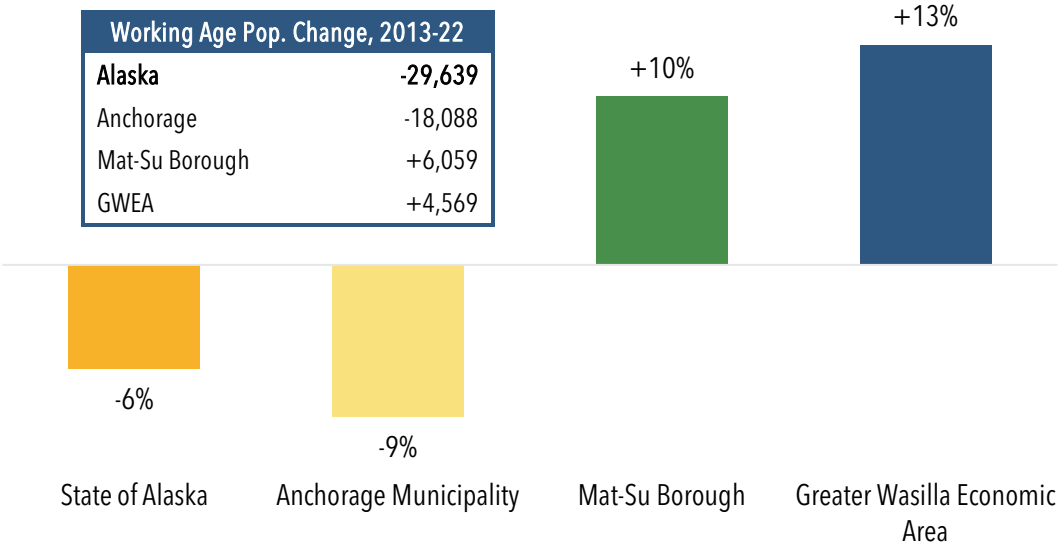
Figure 10. Age Distribution, GWEA, 2013 and 2022



Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development

The working age population is defined as those aged 16 to 64. Since 2010, Alaska has seen a 6% drop in the working age population and Anchorage has seen a 9% drop. Over the same period, the MSB has seen a 10% increase in its working age population, and the working age population in the GWEA has grown by 13%.

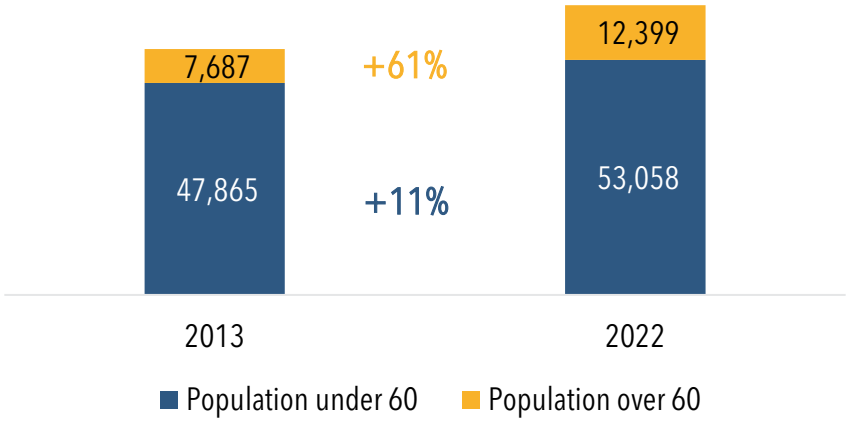
Figure 11. Working Age Population Change in Select Regions, 2013 to 2022



Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development

The population of GWEA residents over age 60 is increasing at a faster pace than the overall GWEA population. Between 2013 and 2022, the population of GWEA residents over age 60 increased by 61%, while the population of GWEA residents under age 60 increased by only 11%. The total GWEA population increased by 12% during this time period.

Figure 12. Population Change by Age Group, GWEA, 2013 and 2022



Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development

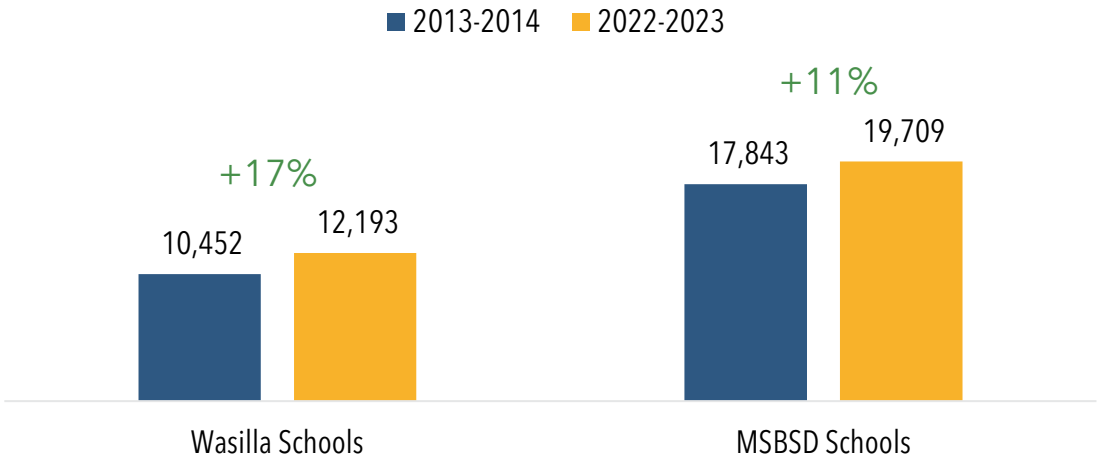
Education and Income

Education

The Mat-Su Borough School District (MSBSD) has almost 16,000 students across all communities and 1,200 teachers. Geographically, the district encompasses Wasilla, Houston, Big Lake, and Palmer, a larger area than the GWEA. In Wasilla, the school district oversees 10 elementary schools, two middle schools, one traditional high school, one public charter high school, and one career and vocational training high school.

In the 2022 – 2023 school year, over 12,000 students were enrolled at MSBSD schools in Wasilla, accounting for 62% of MSBSD enrollment. Enrollment at Wasilla schools has increased by 17% in the last decade; MSBSD enrollment increased by 10%.

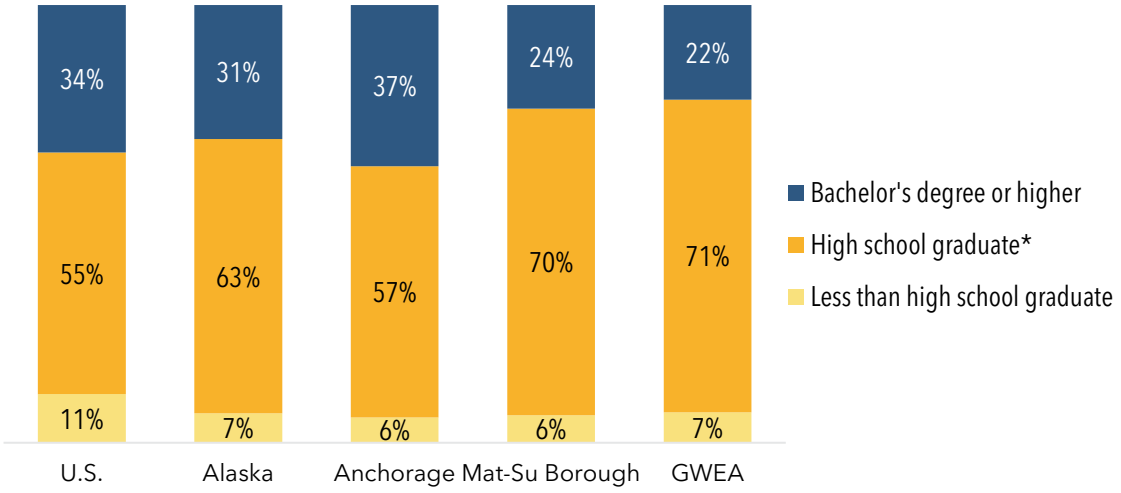
Figure 13. Pre-K to 12th Grade Enrollment, Wasilla & MSBSD, 2013 and 2022



Sources: Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, McKinley Research Group calculations

About 93% of GWEA residents over age 25 are high school graduates, 4% higher than the national average (89%).[1] Although a higher proportion of residents are high school graduates, a lower proportion of GWEA residents are college graduates. As of 2021, 22% of GWEA residents over age 25 have a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 34% of U.S. residents and 31% of Alaska residents with bachelor's degrees or higher.

Figure 14. Educational Attainment: US, Alaska, Anchorage, MSB, GWEA, 2021

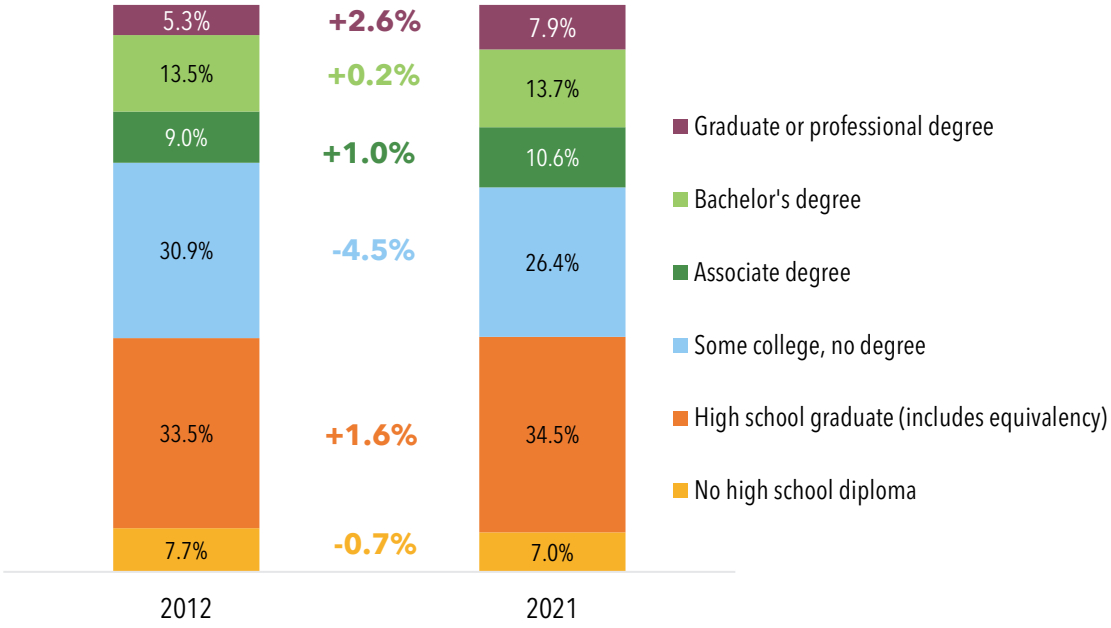


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2021 5-year Estimates
*Includes equivalency

[1] U.S. Census educational data include only individuals over age 25 and do not consider the level of education that individuals are currently attending or engaged in. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023. Educational Attainment.)

Between 2012 and 2021, the proportion of GWEA residents with a bachelor's degree or higher increased by 3 percentage points, primarily driven by growth in graduate or professional degrees. This is on par with the statewide increase over the same period (3 percentage points) and lower than the national increase (6 percentage points). Over the same period, the proportion of GWEA residents that have not received a high school diploma or equivalent decreased by 1 percentage point.

Figure 15. Highest Level of Education Completed in GWEA, 2012 and 2021



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2011 and 2021 5-year Estimates

Household and Personal Income

In 2021, median household income in the GWEA was $81,000. As shown in Table 2, this is slightly higher than state and MSB median incomes, and below the median income in Anchorage of $89,000 in 2021.

Household income counts all earners in the household over age 14 and is the sum of all earned income.[2] Median household income is the mid-point of all household incomes in the region. Median income is often considered a better representation of what earners in the region are making than mean (or average) income, which can be skewed upward by a small number of very high-income households.

[2] U.S. Census Bureau. 2021. Subject Definitions. https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/tech_docs/subject_definitions/2021_ACSSubjectDefinitions.pdf

Table 2. Household Incomes: Alaska, Anchorage, Mat-Su Borough, and GWEA, 2021

Annual Household Income	Alaska	Anchorage	Mat-Su Borough	GWEA
Median Household Income	$80,287	$88,871	$79,300	$81,114
Mean Household Income	$103,258	$113,873	$98,444	$98,251

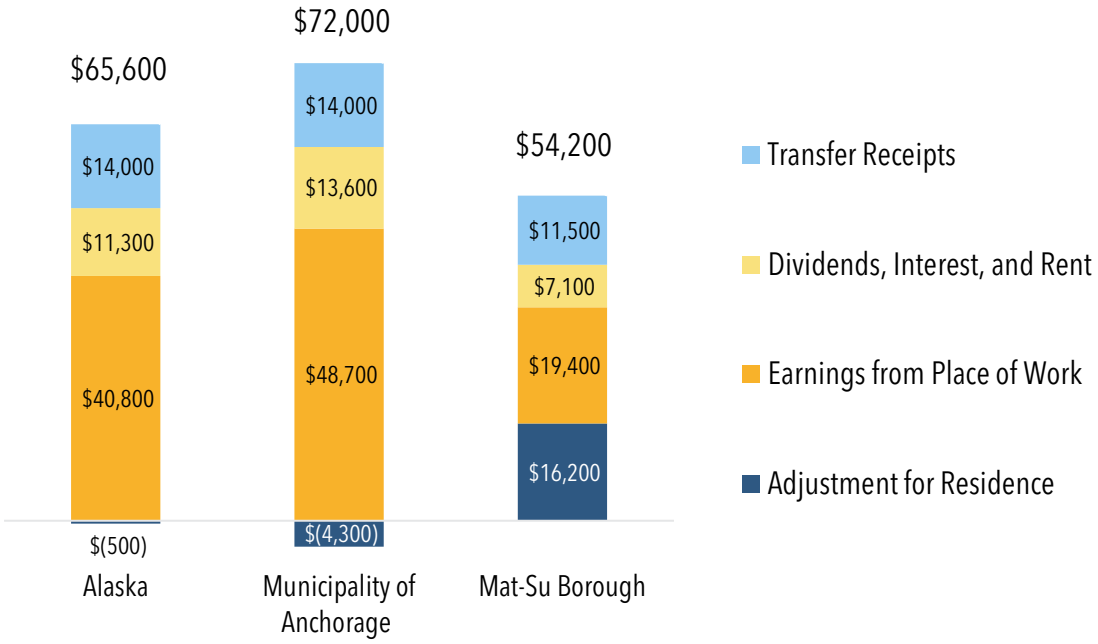
Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2021 5-year Estimates; McKinley Research Group analysis

Per-capita personal income is the total personal income earned in an area divided by the area's population. Components of personal income include earnings by place of work, including wages and salaries and proprietor incomes; transfer receipts; dividends, interest, and rent payments; and an adjustment for residence.

The adjustment for residence is calculated as the net inflow or outflow of the earnings of interarea commuters. This number is positive for the MSB because earnings from Borough residents working elsewhere are higher than earnings from non-Borough residents working within the Borough. Because of the high number of commuters in the MSB, this category is a significant component of per-capita personal income.

The per-capita personal income in the MSB was $54,200 in 2021, 17% lower (-$11,400) than statewide per-capita personal income and 25% below (-$17,800) Anchorage.

Figure 16. Per-Capita Personal Income by Component, Select Areas, 2021

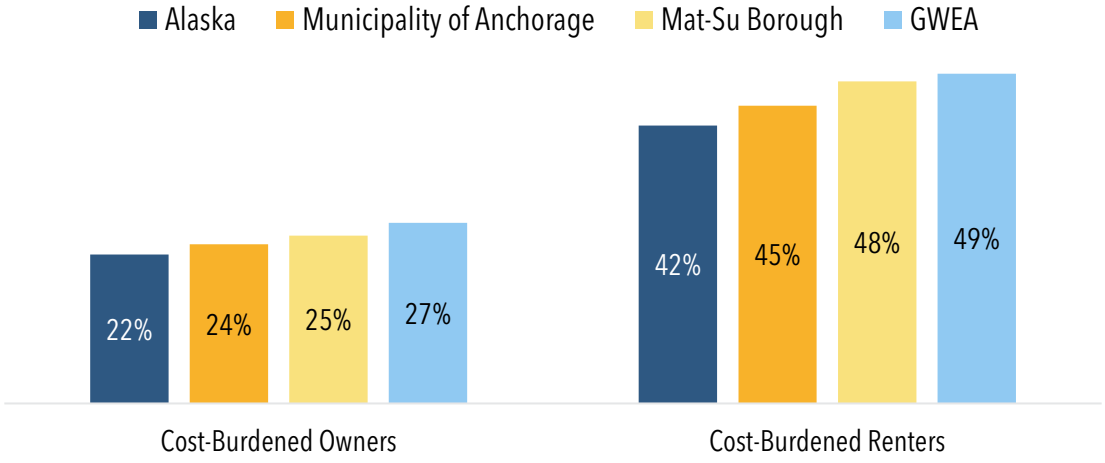


Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis

Individuals are defined as cost-burdened if they spend 30% or more of their income on housing costs. In Alaska, the proportion of cost-burdened renters is nearly double the proportion of cost-burdened owners.

The proportion of cost-burdened owners in the GWEA was 27% in 2021, 5% higher than the statewide proportion. Nearly half of renters in the GWEA are defined as cost-burdened, 7% higher than the statewide proportion.

Figure 17. Proportion of Cost-Burdened Owners and Renters, Select Areas, 2021

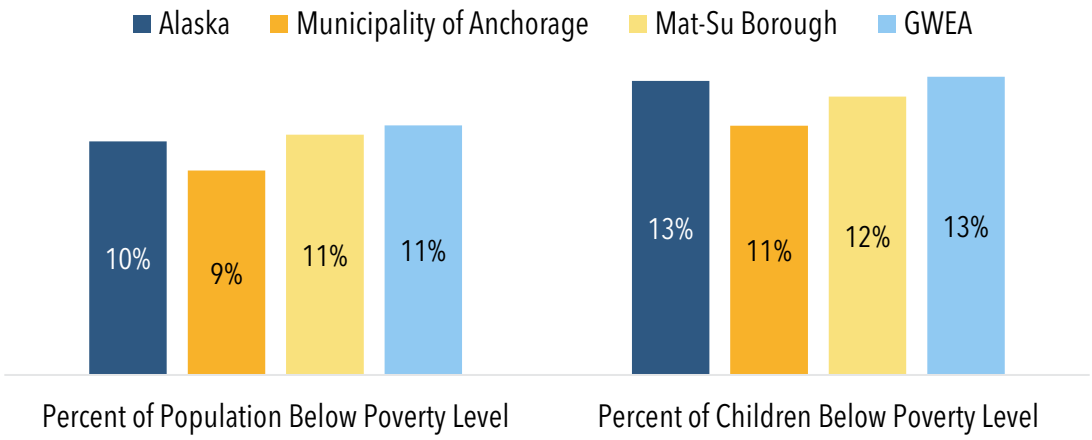


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2021 5-year Estimates

In Alaska, 10% of the population lives below the poverty level. This proportion is 1% higher in both the MSB and in the GWEA. In 2021, the poverty level for a family of four living in Alaska was $33,130.

In Alaska, children are more likely to live below the poverty level than the population as a whole. In 2021, 13% of Alaska children lived below the poverty level. A smaller proportion of children live below the poverty level in Anchorage and the MSB (11% and 12%, respectively). In the GWEA, the proportion of children living below the poverty level is identical to the statewide proportion (13%).

Figure 18. Poverty Levels, Alaska, Anchorage, Mat-Su Borough, and GWEA, 2021

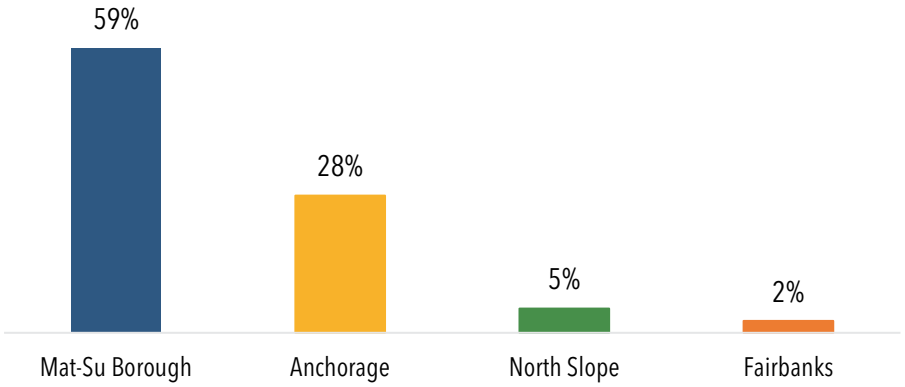


Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2021 5-year Estimates

Employment and Housing

In 2021, three out of every 10 working MSB residents commuted to Anchorage for work. About 60% of MSB residents worked in the borough, 5% commuted to the North Slope, 2% to Fairbanks, and the remaining 5% of MSB resident commuters worked elsewhere in Alaska.

Figure 19. Mat-Su Borough Resident Commuters by Place of Work, 2021

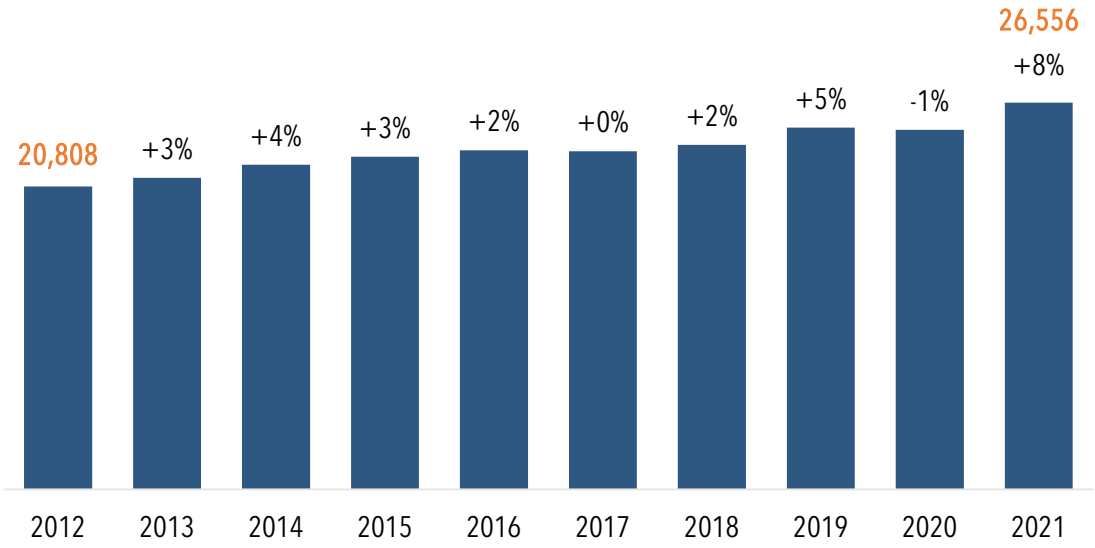


Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development

Employment, defined as the number of wage and salary jobs, is growing faster than population in the MSB. While population increased by 17% from 2012 to 2021, employment grew by 28%. During the same period, employment fell by 10% in Anchorage and by 7% statewide.

The largest year-over-year increase in employment occurred between 2020 and 2021 (+8%). As of 2021, 26,556 individuals are employed in the MSB.

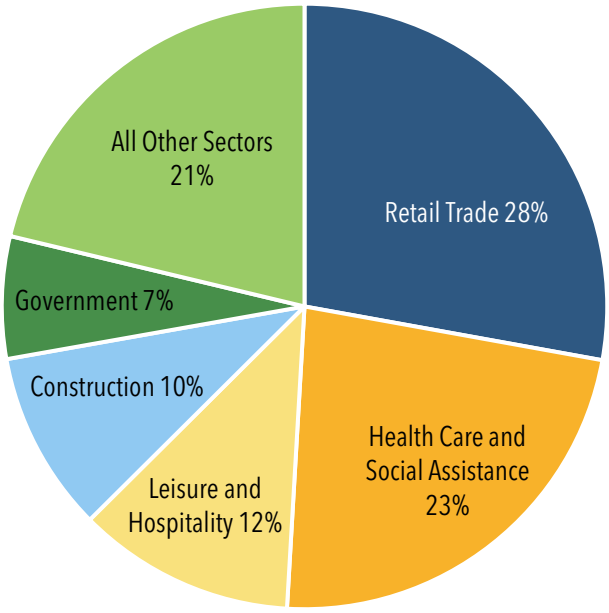
Figure 20. Total Wage and Salary Employment, Mat-Su Borough, 2012 – 2021



Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development

In the GWEA, the top five sectors by number of wage and salary jobs account for 80% of all wage and salary jobs. The largest sector is retail trade, accounting for 28% of GWEA jobs (3,992 jobs). The health care and social assistance sector follows with 23% of GWEA jobs (3,309 jobs). Other top sectors are leisure and hospitality, construction, and government. (*More detail on key sectors is included in the section on economic clusters.*)

Figure 21. Employment by Sector, GWEA, 2021

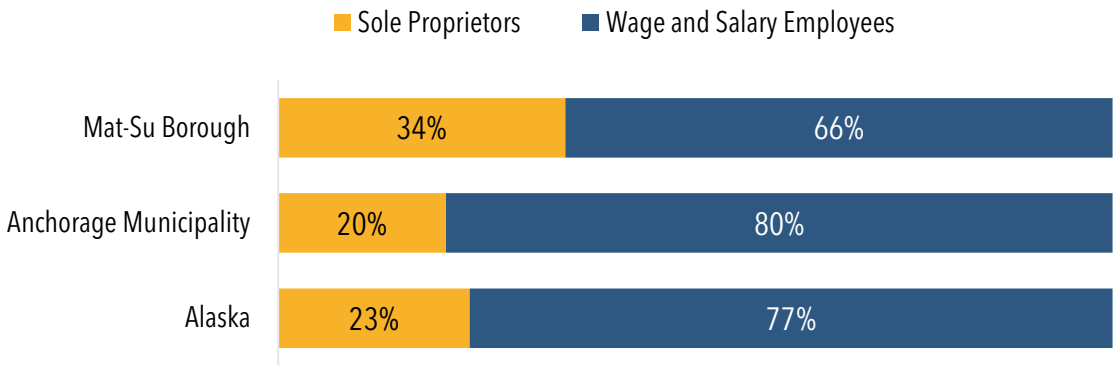


Sources: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, McKinley Research Group calculations

As of 2021, sole proprietors made up 34% of all working MSB residents, a higher proportion than in Anchorage (20%) or statewide (23%). The number of sole proprietors in the MSB grew by 9% between 2019 and 2021. Over the same period, the number of sole proprietors increased by 7% in Anchorage and 5% statewide.

As of 2021, about 15,000 individuals were self-employed in the MSB.

Figure 22. Employment Share, Wage & Salary and Sole Proprietors, Select Areas, 2021



Sources: Bureau of Labor Statistics, McKinley Research Group calculations

Businesses

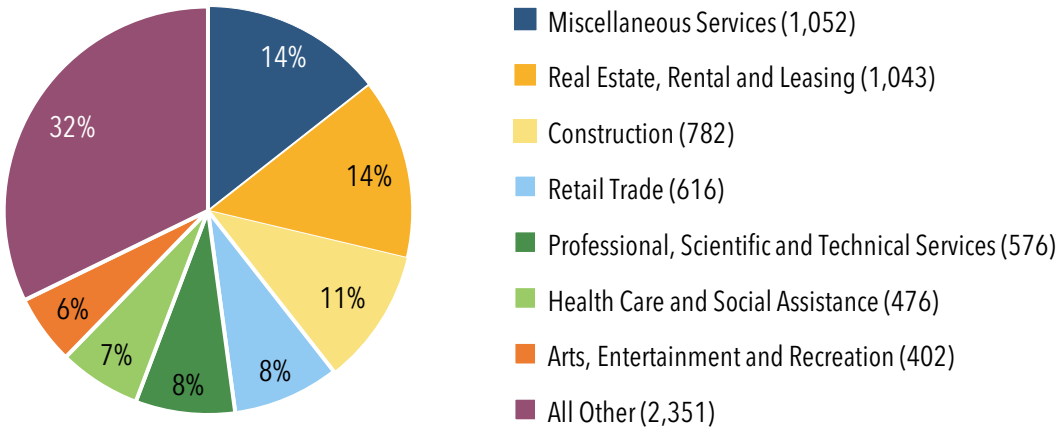
The State of Alaska requires companies and entities who conduct business in the state to apply for a business license. There are 7,298 active State of Alaska business licenses with physical addresses within the GWEA boundaries. About 5,512 of these business licenses were issued after 2017.[3]

Bear Paw Brewing Company opened in 2021.

Of all businesses with physical addresses in the GWEA, the largest proportion are categorized in the Miscellaneous Services sector (14%). This sector includes establishments providing personal care services, advocacy services, equipment and machinery repair, pet care services, and miscellaneous services. The second largest proportion of businesses with physical addresses within the GWEA are companies in the real estate sector.

[3] This number may overstate the number of companies that started doing business after 2017, as the State of Alaska requires companies to apply for a new license if their business license expired. Business licenses on file may also be voluntarily cancelled and a new one issued if the business owner decides to rename their business or recategorize the industry classification.

Figure 23. State of Alaska Active Business Licenses by Sector, GWEA



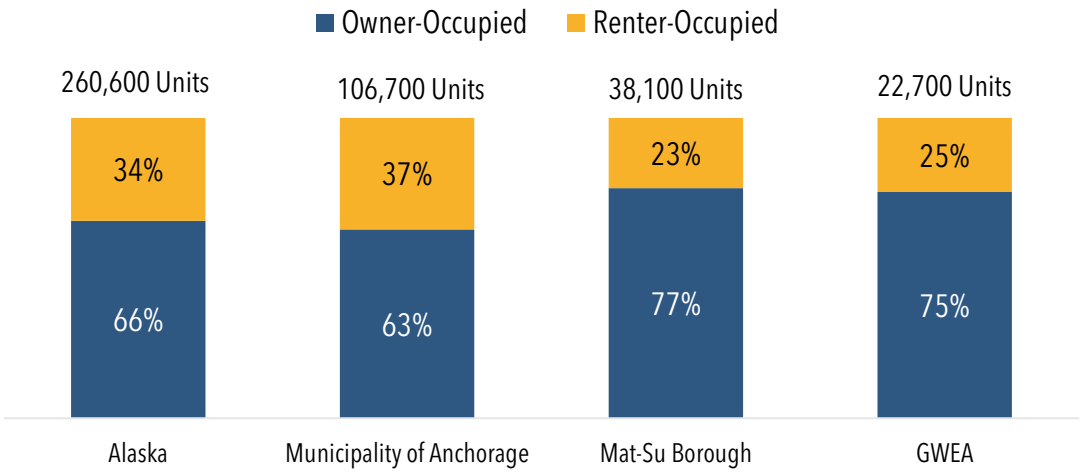
Sources: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, U.S. Census Bureau
Notes: The State of Alaska uses the label 'Other Services' instead of 'Miscellaneous Services.' This label was renamed to avoid confusion with the category 'All Other,' which includes non-service businesses. 'All Other' includes business licenses for manufacturing, accommodation and food services, transportation and warehousing, educational services, agriculture, and finance and insurance companies, among others.

Housing

In 2021, there were an estimated 22,700 occupied housing units in the GWEA in 2021, 59% of all occupied units within the MSB (38,100 units).

The proportion of owner-occupied housing units is higher in the MSB and the GWEA than in Anchorage and statewide. In 2021, about three-quarters of occupied housing units were owner-occupied in the MSB and the GWEA, compared to about two-thirds owner occupancy in Anchorage and statewide.

Figure 24. Occupied Housing Units by Tenure, Select Areas, 2021

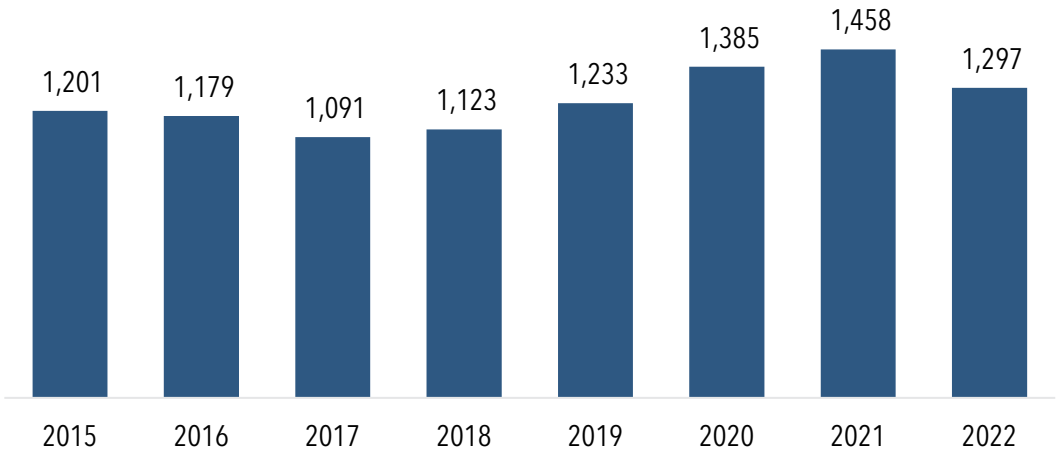


Source: U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey, 5-year Estimates

The volume of residential home sales in the GWEA has held fairly steady since 2015. Including new and previously owned residential units listed on the market, an average of 1,246 units sold annually between 2015 and 2022. Sales volumes peaked in 2021 at 1,458 residential units sold before declining in 2022 to 1,297. Units sold within the GWEA account for nearly two-thirds of all units sold within the MSB.

Sales volumes fell from 2021 to 2022 and the average days units spent on the market increased. In 2021, residential units in the GWEA spent an average of 24 days on the market. In 2022, that number increased to 28 days on the market.

Figure 25. Residential Units Sold, GWEA, 2015 – 2022



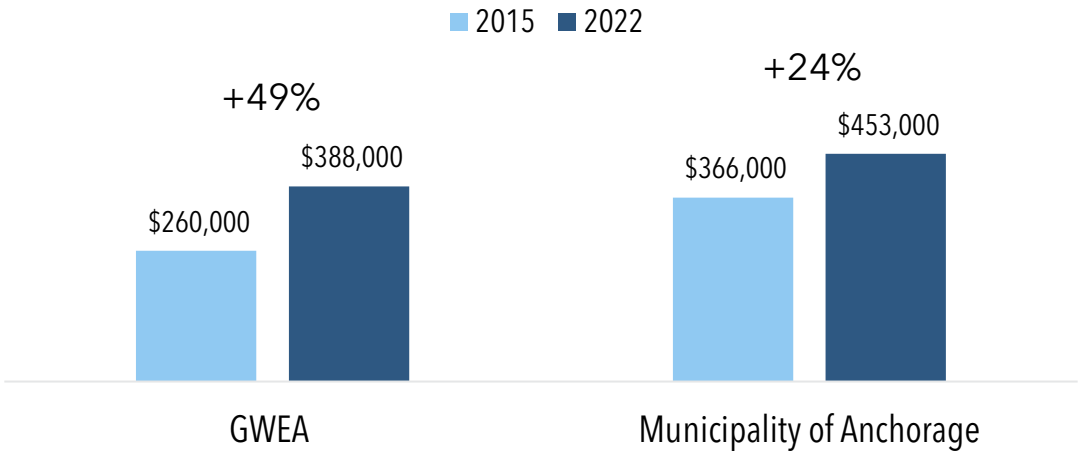
Source: Multiple Listing Service

Residential home sales in the GWEA totaled over $500 million in 2022, 63% of the sales volume of the MSB. Although long-term trends indicate a gradual increase in the volume of units sold in the GWEA, the volume of residential home sales in the GWEA fell by 11% from 2021 to 2022. This is likely due to both an increase in interest rates and an increase in home prices.

The average price of residential homes in the GWEA is lower than average home prices in the Municipality of Anchorage. However, average home prices in the GWEA are increasing at a faster rate than in the Municipality of Anchorage. In 2015, the average price of a residential home in the GWEA was $260,000. As of 2022, this figure had increased by nearly 50% to $388,000. In Anchorage, home sale prices increased by only 24% over this period.

Average home prices in the GWEA were 29% lower than average home prices in the Municipality of Anchorage in 2015. By 2022, the average price of residential GWEA homes was only 14% lower than in Anchorage.

Figure 26. Average Home Sale Prices, GWEA and Anchorage, 2015 and 2022



Source: Multiple Listing Service

Community Wellness

Cost of Living

Alaska generally has a higher cost of living than other states because of high transportation costs, among other factors. Regional price parities (RPP) compare the cost of living across states and metropolitan areas. RPP data are available for the Anchorage Metropolitan Statistical Area, which combines the Municipality of Anchorage and the MSB.

In 2017, the cost of living in the Anchorage Metropolitan Statistical Area was 108% of average national costs, or 8% higher than the national average, with housing 26% higher. By 2021, statewide housing costs were closer to national averages. As of 2021, cost of living in the Anchorage Metropolitan Statistical Area was 6% above national averages, and housing 13% higher.

Table 3. Regional Price Parity, Anchorage Metropolitan Statistical Area, 2017 and 2021

	2017	2021
Goods	111.3	108.5
Services	102.3	103.2
Housing	126.0	113.0
All Items	**108.0**	**106.3**

Source: U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis

The *Alaska Geographic Differential Study* compares local costs of living to Anchorage's cost of living. This most recent study, published in 2008, indicates the cost of living in the Palmer/Wasilla area is 6% lower than in Anchorage. Breakouts by expenditure category are available only at the

aggregated MSB level, including Palmer, Wasilla, and Willow, and excluding Talkeetna. The housing expenditure category for this region was 21% lower than in Anchorage, although utility costs were 3% higher than in Anchorage. The cost of food was 3% higher in the region than in Anchorage, and the cost of transportation was 4% higher.[4]

Quality of Life and Well-being

In a 2022 survey, 69% of MSB residents described their overall quality of life as good. Compared to a similar survey conducted in the same region, self-reported quality of life in the MSB has declined since 2016, when 77% of residents rated their quality of life good. Although quality of life ratings are not available by community, average ratings were higher for urban areas (8.1/10) compared to rural areas (7.8/10) within the borough.

Enjoying the playground at Wasilla Lake.

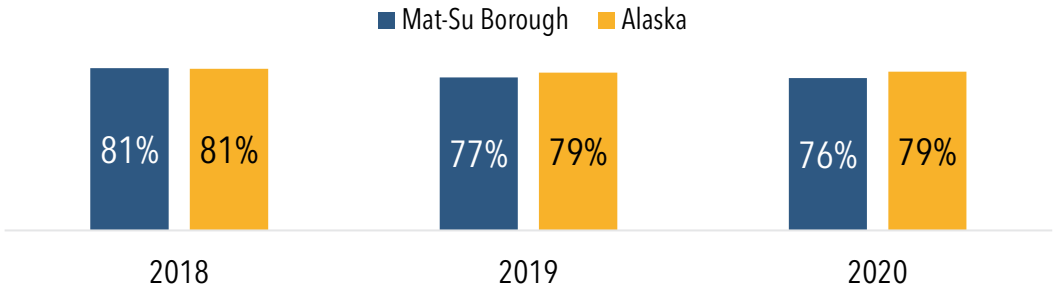
Table 4. Overall Quality of Life, Mat-Su Borough Survey Findings

	2016	2019	2022
Poor (1-3)	1%	2%	1%
Moderate (4-7)	19%	26%	29%
Good (8-10)	77%	72%	69%

Source: Mat-Su Health Foundation, Community Health Needs Assessment, 2022; McKinley Research Group analysis

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, regular physical activity is one of the most important things people can do for their health. Between 2018 and 2020, the share of MSB adults who were physically active fell from 81% to 76%, while statewide, the percentage stayed more level.

Figure 27. Physically Active Adults, Mat-Su Borough and Alaska, Percent, 2018 – 2020



Source: Alaska Department of Health, Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System survey

[4] McDowell Group, *Alaska Geographic Differential Study*, 2008.

In 2020, about 85% of adults living in the MSB were covered by some form of health insurance and 65% said they had a personal health care provider. About 10% said they could not see a doctor due to cost. These rates were similar to statewide rates, as Table 5 indicates.

Between 2018 and 2020, the proportion decreased of both MSB adults and adults statewide who were unable to see a doctor because of cost.

Table 5. Access to Health Care, Mat-Su Borough and Alaska, 2018 – 2020

		2018	2019	2020
Residents with some form of health insurance	Mat-Su Borough	87%	89%	85%
	Alaska	89%	89%	88%
Residents with a personal health care provider	Mat-Su Borough	71%	73%	65%
	Alaska	64%	68%	65%
Could not see a doctor because of cost	Mat-Su Borough	17%	14%	10%
	Alaska	14%	13%	11%

Source: Alaska Department of Health, Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System survey
Note: All data are estimates based on surveys and have a confidence interval of 95%.

Public Safety

Excluding arrests for traffic violations, the Wasilla Police Department made 2,630 arrests between 2017 and 2021. The most common offense in terms of arrests was driving under the influence (DUI), accounting for 18% of all arrests in this period. Across all reporting police departments in Alaska, DUI arrests account for 11% of all arrests.

Across all reporting precincts, the most common offense among arrestees over the last five years was simple assault, accounting for 17% of arrests. In Wasilla, simple assault was the third most common offense type, accounting for 8% of total arrests.

Table 6. Top Offenses by Number of Arrests, Wasilla and Alaska, 2017 – 2021

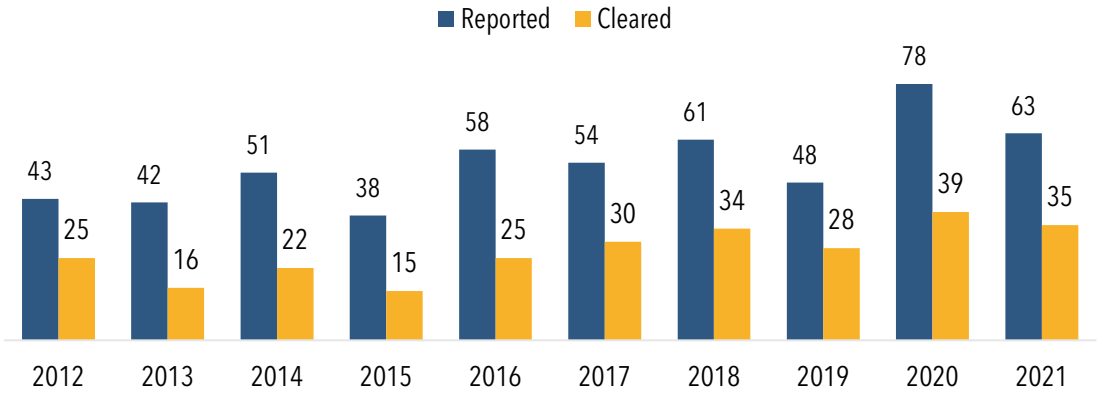
Wasilla Police Department			All Reporting Alaska Precincts		
Offense Type	Number of Arrests	Percent of Total	Offense Type	Number of Arrests	Percent of Total
Driving Under the Influence	470	18%	Simple Assault	20,773	17%
Larceny	229	9%	Driving Under the Influence	13,643	11%
Simple Assault	218	8%	Aggravated Assault	8,921	7%
Drug Abuse Violations	127	5%	Larceny	8,527	7%
All Other Offenses	1,586	60%	All Other Offenses	72,439	58%
Total	**2,630**	**100%**	**Total**	**124,303**	**100%**

Source: Federal Bureau of Investigations, Uniform Crime Report

The Wasilla Police Department submits information on reported and cleared crimes within its jurisdiction. From 2012 to 2021, the number of reported crimes peaked in 2020 with 78 reports.

Between 2012 and 2021, the Wasilla Police Department cleared half of all reported crimes. As crimes may not be cleared in the year they occur, yearly clearance rates cannot be calculated.

Figure 28. Reported and Cleared Crimes, Wasilla Police Department, 2012 – 2021



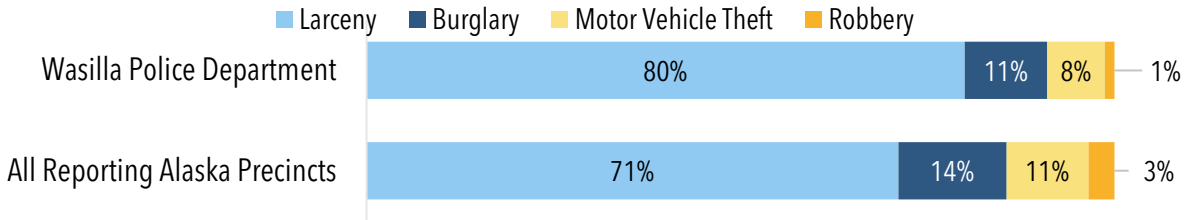
Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation, Uniform Crime Report
Note: In the UCR Program, a law enforcement agency reports that an offense is cleared by arrest, or solved for reporting purposes, when at least one person has been arrested, charged with commission of the offense, and turned over to the court for prosecution.

Property crime offenses include burglary, robbery, motor vehicle theft, and larceny. Larceny includes the unlawful taking of any property or article that is not taken by force, violence, or fraud, and does not involve the unlawful entry of a structure. Burglary includes the unlawful entry of a structure to commit a felony or theft. Motor vehicle theft is the theft or attempted theft of a motor vehicle. Robbery includes the offender using force, threat of force, violence, or fear to take anything of value from the victim.

Reports of property crime to the Wasilla Police Department peaked in 2018 with 647 reported offenses. Four out of five reported property crime offenses between 2011 and 2020 were for larceny. By comparison, 71% of reported property crimes statewide during this period were for larceny.

Burglary is the second most common property crime reported to the Wasilla Police Department, accounting for 11% of property offenses reported in the last decade. Robbery, which involves force or threat of force or violence, accounted for 1% of all reported property crimes in this period. Across reporting precincts in Alaska, robbery accounts for 3% of property crime reports.

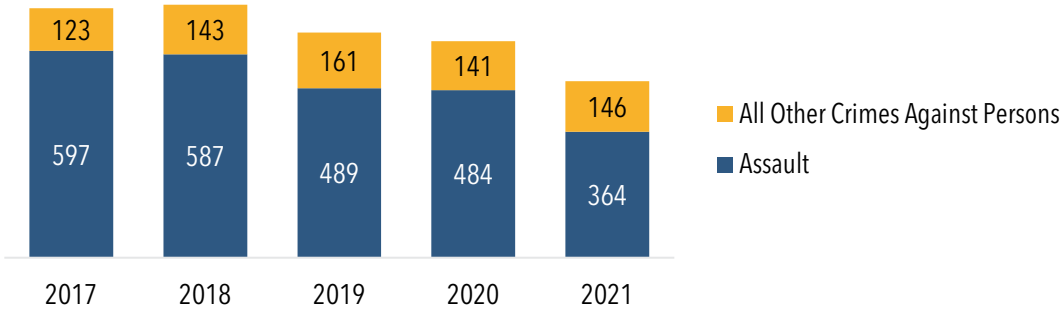
Figure 29. Property Crime Reports by Type, Wasilla and Alaska, 2011 – 2020



Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation, Uniform Crime Report

According to the Alaska Department of Public Safety, crimes against persons in the MSB decreased from about 720 in 2017 to 510 in 2021. The largest proportion of crimes against persons were assaults, comprising 82% of all incidents in 2017 and 71% in 2021.

Figure 30. Mat-Su Borough Criminal Incidents, Crimes Against Persons, 2017 – 2021



Source: Alaska Department of Public Safety
Note: Data for 'All Other Crimes Against Persons' are estimates due to redaction of data for crime types with fewer than five incidents a year.

Food Security

According to the 2022 Mat-Su Community Health Needs Assessment Household Survey, 7% of residents reported that someone in their household did not have enough food to eat within the past 12 months. Residents with household income under $50,000, living in rural areas, and over age 50 were more likely to report that someone in their household had inadequate access to food.

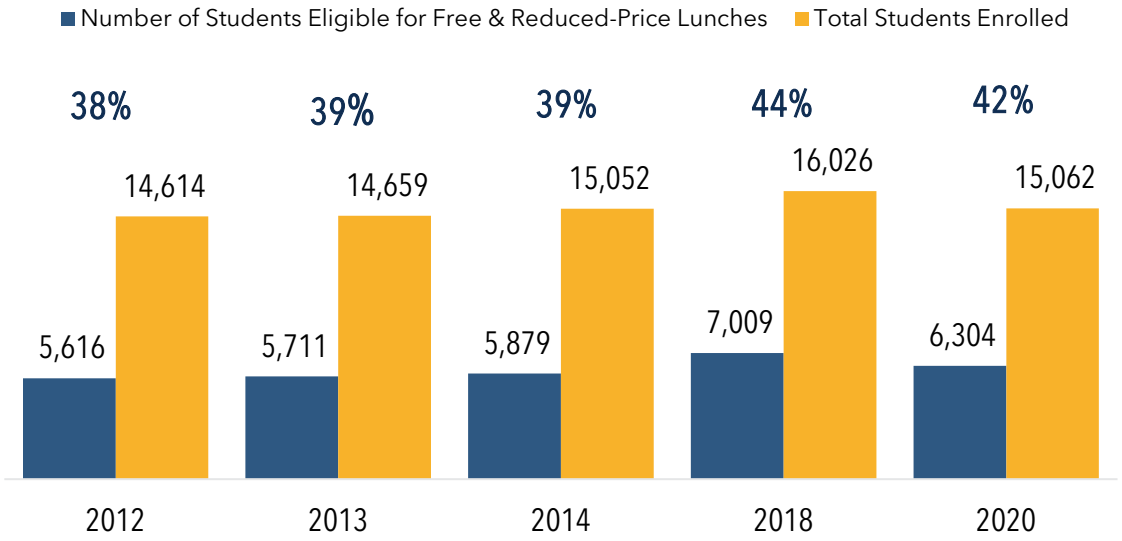
Table 7. Inadequate Access to Food, Mat-Su Borough Subgroups, 2022

		Percent
Age	Under 50	3%
	Over 50	10%
Household Income	Under $50K	16%
	Over $50K	4%
Geography	Urban	4%
	Rural	14%
All Respondents		**7%**

Source: Mat-Su Health Foundation, Community Health Needs Assessment, 2022.

In 2020, over 6,300 students in the MSBSD were eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunches, or 42% of all district students. The percentage of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunches increased by 4 percentage points between 2012 and 2020.

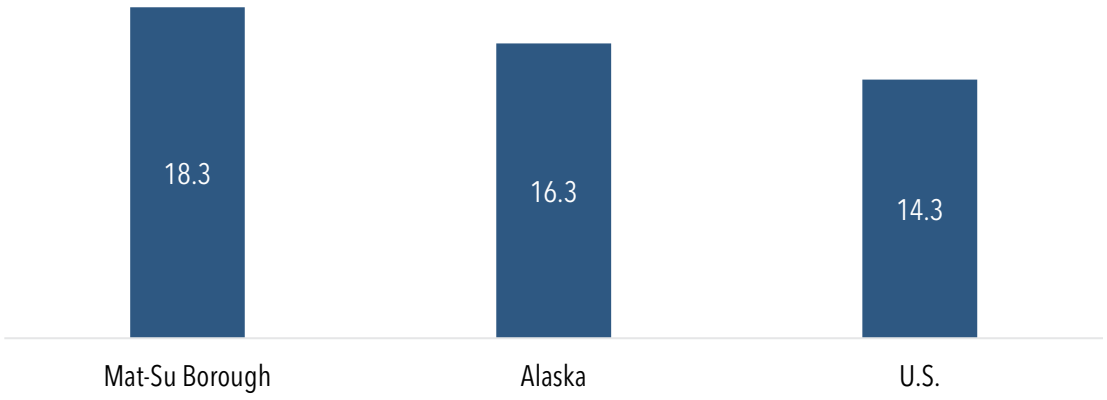
Figure 31. Free and Reduced-Price Lunch Eligibility, Mat-Su Borough School District



Source: Alaska Department of Education and Early Development
Note: In 2020 due to the pandemic, all students were offered free lunches regardless of eligibility.

The Food Environment Index Score is a measure of the share of food retailers considered healthy based on retailer size and food offerings. The MSB has a higher score than Alaska or the U.S., indicating greater availability of healthy food compared to the state and nation.

Figure 32. Food Environment Index Scores, Mat-Su Borough, Alaska, and U.S.



Source: U.S. News and World Report, Healthiest Communities data

Economic Clusters

Major economic sectors in the GWEA include retail, health care, government, transportation, tourism, real estate, and construction. This section analyzes trends in each sector, or "economic clusters" of activity in the GWEA, and their potential for growth in the future.

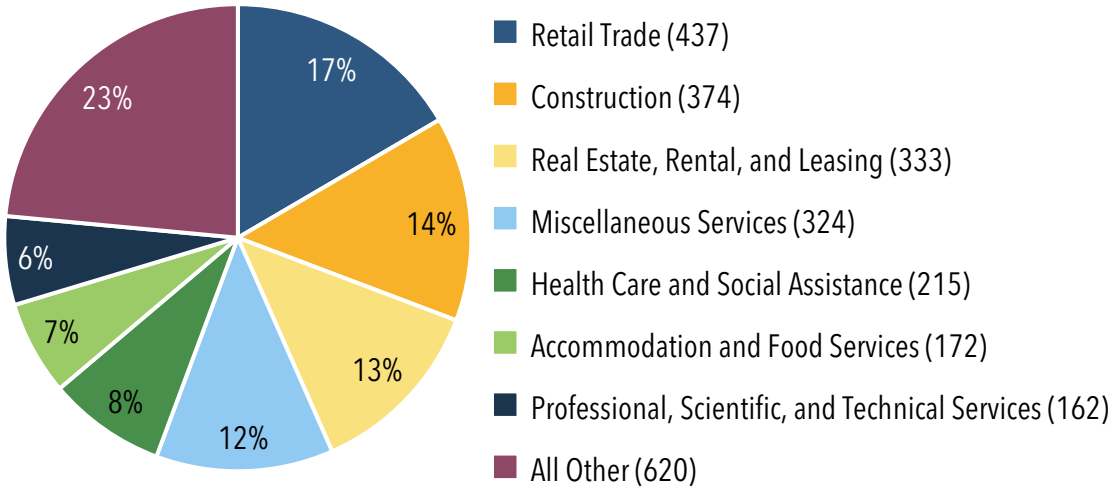
Retail

Retail trade is one of the GWEA's primary sectors, accounting for 28% of all jobs in the GWEA. Comparatively, retail jobs account for only 16% of all jobs within the MSB. The 168 retail businesses operating within the GWEA employed nearly 4,000 individuals in 2021, 95% of all retail employees in the MSB.[5]

Businesses in the retail trade sector contribute the largest share of the city's sales tax collections. In 2021, the City of Wasilla collected $15 million in sales taxes from businesses in the retail industry, 73% of all sales tax collections.

Retail trade also accounts for the largest proportion by sector of business licenses issued by the City of Wasilla (17%, 437 licenses).

Figure 33. City of Wasilla Business Licenses by Sector, 2023



Source: City of Wasilla
Notes: The City of Wasilla uses the label 'Other Services' instead of 'Miscellaneous Services.' This label was renamed to avoid confusion with the category 'All Other,' which includes non-service businesses.

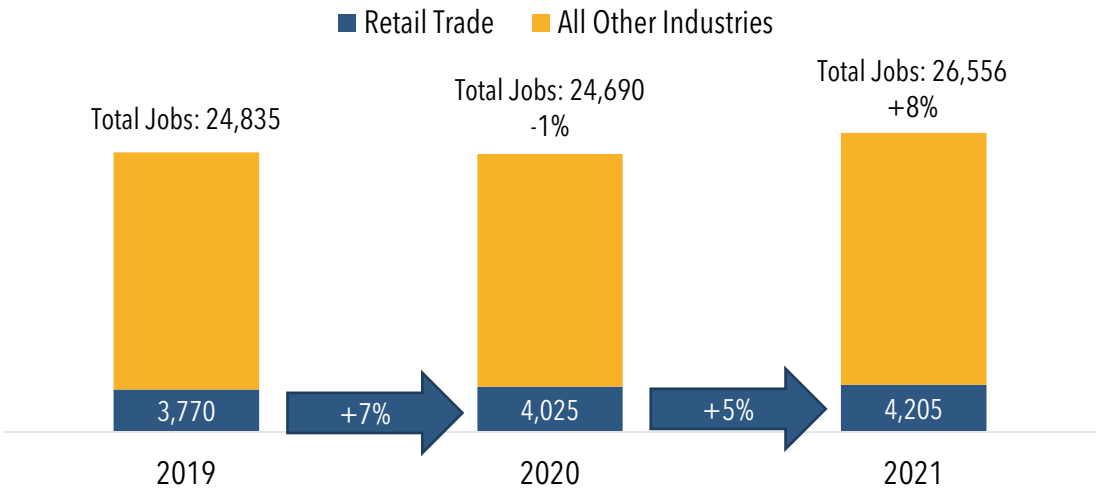
[5] GWEA employment in the retail sector is overstated. Many retail establishments in the MSB have regional headquarters located in Wasilla, and employees working at store locations outside of Wasilla may be counted as Wasilla employees.

Planet Fitness, Shoppes at Sun Mountain

The GWEA's retail sector has seen 11% growth in employment over the last five years, 1% less than total employment growth within the region. One significant new development in the retail sector is the Shoppes at Sun Mountain located on the Parks Highway. The development opened in August 2019, and has since attracted small businesses, larger Alaska companies, and national franchises. Hilton Hotels announced in 2020 it would build a Home2 Suites in the development, though construction has not begun.

MSB retail trade employment accounts for 16% of total employment in the borough and is growing at a faster rate than total borough employment. While the number of jobs in the borough increased by 7% between 2019 and 2021, retail industry jobs increased by 12%. Retail jobs accounted for 25% of job growth in the MSB in this time period.

Figure 34. Retail Sector and Total Jobs, Mat-Su Borough, 2019-2021 Annual Averages



Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development

Health Care

The health care and social assistance sector is one of the driving forces behind job growth in the GWEA. As of 2021, two-thirds of MSB health care jobs are in the GWEA, and nearly one in four GWEA jobs are in health care. Between 2017 and 2021, GWEA employment in the health care and social assistance sector grew by 25%, more than twice the overall GWEA job growth rate of 12%. The growth rate of health care employment in the GWEA far surpassed the statewide health care employment growth rate of 2%.

Table 8. Health Care and Social Assistance Sector Jobs, Select Areas, 2017 and 2021

	2017 Average	2021 Average	5-Year Growth
GWEA	2,637	3,309	25%
Mat-Su Borough	4,071	5,189	27%
Alaska	46,490	47,397	2%

Sources: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, McKinley Research Group calculations

On average, health care workers in the GWEA earn $45,200 annually (2021). This is higher than the average wages of all GWEA jobs ($43,600) but lower than the average of all health care workers statewide ($51,800).

Of the nearly 7,300 businesses with a physical presence in GWEA, 476 are in the health care and social assistance sector (7%). The largest proportion of health care and social assistance businesses in the GWEA are physicians' offices (66), followed by offices of all other health practitioners (63), including dental hygienists, midwives, naturopaths, respiratory therapists, and registered or licensed practical nurses, among others.

The average cost of a hospital stay in the MSB was 16% lower than the statewide average as of 2020 ($20,717 versus $24,767). Of all borough and census areas in Alaska, the MSB had the second lowest cost for hospital visits. However, health care costs in the MSB were still 40% higher than nationwide averages ($14,916).

Figure 35. Average Cost of Hospital Stay, Select Areas, 2020

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Healthcare Cost and Utilization Project

Government

Wasilla is incorporated as a First Class City. It has an elected mayor and six elected city council members, each of whom serve three-year terms. The City does not have its own fire department or school district, relying on borough government for the provision of those services, but it has its own police department and is responsible for public works development and maintenance within the city limits. At the City of Wasilla, 135 positions were funded in Fiscal Year (FY) 2021, an increase of 29 jobs (17%) from FY2012.

Excluding teachers and other school district employees, nearly 950 government employees (local, state, and federal) work in the GWEA in 2021.[6] Government employment in the GWEA grew by 21% between 2017 and 2021, nearly double the growth rate of all employment within the GWEA (12%). Government sector employment accounts for only 7% of all employment in the GWEA, but accounts for nearly 20% of employment in the MSB; however, these figures are skewed by factors such as the designation of school district employees as Palmer workers.

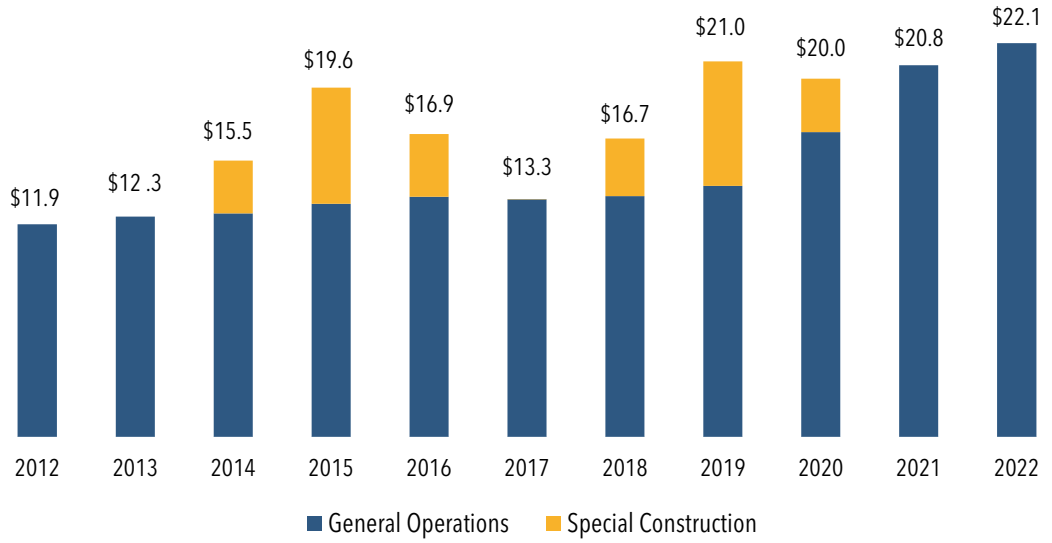
Within the last 10 years, four new public facilities have been developed in the GWEA. Iditarod Elementary School was permitted in 2014 and now has over 400 students enrolled. A new city library facility was also permitted in 2014, a 25,000 square foot building located in historical downtown Wasilla.

More recent government infrastructure developments in the GWEA are a city police station and an expansion of the MSB fire station. The police station, a 21,000 square foot facility, was completed in 2020. This station, as well as the Wasilla library, were financed by a temporary capital projects sales tax (see below).

City government in Wasilla is financially stable and strong. Tax revenue is exclusively from a 2.5% sales tax, with revenues almost doubling from $11.9 million in 2012 to $22.1 million in 2022.[7] Capital project sales taxes, which are passed by ballot initiative and temporarily add 0.5 percentage points on top of the regular sales tax, are used to fund special construction projects such as the police station and the Wasilla library. (The Menard Sports Center was also funded this way in the early 2000s). The latest capital project sales tax had a built-in sunset in 2021. Largely because so many large projects are forward funded in this way, the City has no debt. Wasilla has completed the initial research and planning phases on several capital projects that are now "shovel-ready," and can be built as funding becomes available.

[6] All employees of the MSBSD are captured as Palmer employees because the district headquarters are in Palmer. This means GWEA employment in the local government sector is underestimated.
[7] City of Wasilla, Department of Finance

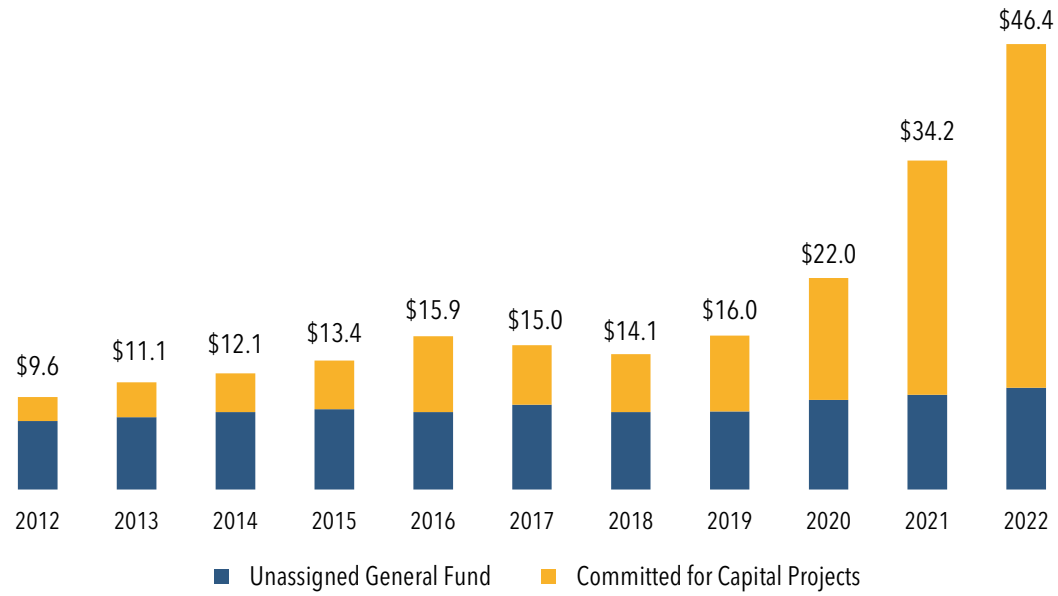
Figure 36. City of Wasilla Sales Tax Revenue, 2012-2022 (in millions)



Source: City of Wasilla, Department of Finance

Savings balances for the City of Wasilla are considerable. Prudent financial management and state and federal funding has allowed the city government to continue putting tax revenue into savings almost every year over the last decade.

Figure 37. City of Wasilla General Fund Account Balances, 2012-2022 (in millions)

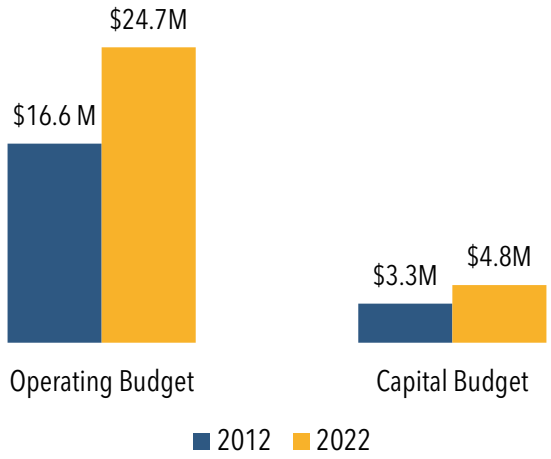


Source: City of Wasilla, Department of Finance

Additionally, federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act funding received in 2021 and 2022 contributed almost $30 million to the city's savings committed for capital projects. This was added to the savings built up during the temporary 0.5% sales tax to generate revenue for the new library and police station. The City of Wasilla had $46.4 million in savings as of 2022, with $35.8 million committed for capital projects and $10.6 million in unrestricted funds.

The operating budget for the City of Wasilla increased from $16.6 million in 2012 to $24.7 million 2022, and capital expenditures increased from $3.3 million to $4.8 million in that time, with a peak of capital spending in 2020 of $9.2 million.

Figure 38. City of Wasilla Budget Expenditures, 2012 and 2022



Source: City of Wasilla, Department of Finance

In May 2023, the City Council passed a city budget that included $22 million in capital expenditures, the largest capital budget in city history. Matching state and federal funds will allow this capital expenditure to total $57 million in projects, including expansion of the Wasilla Airport runway and initial upgrades to water and sewer infrastructure.

Tourism

As of 2021, nearly 1,700 leisure and hospitality jobs were based in the GWEA, 56% of all MSB jobs in the sector. About 90% of GWEA leisure and hospitality jobs are in the accommodations and food services subsector, which includes establishments providing lodging or short-term traveler accommodations, full-service restaurants, drinking places, and others.

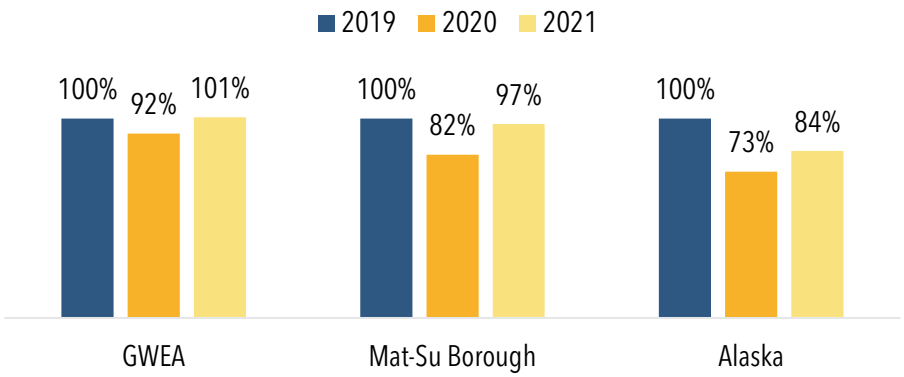
The remaining 10% of leisure and hospitality jobs are in the arts, entertainment, and recreation subsector. Within the entire MSB, accommodation and food service businesses account for 86% of leisure and hospitality employment, and arts, entertainment, and recreation businesses make up the remaining 14%.

Official Iditarod Re-Start Sign

Statewide, employment in the leisure and hospitality sector was impacted significantly by the pandemic, falling by 27% between 2019 and 2020. In 2021, statewide leisure and hospitality employment was 16% below 2019 levels.

By contrast, leisure and hospitality employment fell by only 8% from 2019 to 2020 in the GWEA and had fully recovered by 2021. Impacts on MSB employment in this sector fell in a mid-range between the GWEA and the state.

Figure 39. Annual Average Leisure and Hospitality Employment as Percent of 2019 Employment, Select Areas, 2019 – 2021



Sources: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, McKinley Research Group calculations

Wages in the GWEA's leisure and hospitality sector have grown by 27% between 2017 and 2021, a faster rate than overall wage growth in the GWEA (21%). However, the average annual wage of leisure and hospitality jobs in the GWEA was $22,402 in 2021, 7% lower than in the MSB ($24,216) and 21% lower than statewide ($28,188). In the GWEA, leisure and hospitality wages are 49% below the average wages of all wage and salary positions. Comparatively, in Alaska, wages for these jobs are 56% below the average.

Real Estate

In 2021, there were 164 real estate jobs based in the GWEA. Employment in this sector has seen 3% growth over the last five years, less than the total GWEA job growth of 12% during this period. Average wages in this sector were $39,607 in 2021, 16% higher than 2017 wages not accounting for inflation. Wage growth in real estate jobs is lower than total wage growth in the GWEA (21%) over this period.

Construction

Construction employment in the GWEA has grown by 21% in the last five years, surpassing the total GWEA employment growth of 12%. The growth of construction employment in the GWEA was much higher than statewide growth (5%) and lower than construction employment growth in the MSB (36%).

Table 9. Average Construction Sector Employment, Select Areas, 2017 and 2021

	2017 Average	2021 Average	5-Year Growth
GWEA	1,144	1,385	21%
Mat-Su Borough	2,075	2,823	36%
Alaska	15,172	15,905	5%

Sources: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, McKinley Research Group calculations

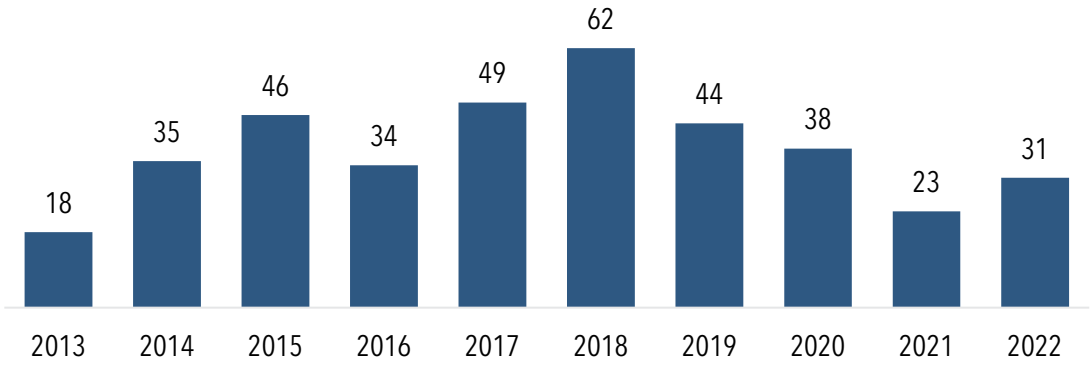
As of 2021, half of all construction jobs in the MSB are based in the GWEA (1,385 jobs). Nearly 300 construction employers are in the GWEA, 30 more than in 2017.

The City of Wasilla requires residents and businesses to submit applications for any construction performed within city limits. Permits are required for projects including new residential construction, new commercial construction, additions and renovations to current structures, installing fences, constructing dwellings for farm animals, and others.

From 2013 to 2022, the City of Wasilla received nearly 1,800 applications for construction permits. About 55% of these applications were for residential construction projects; 45% were for commercial construction projects.

Between 2013 and 2021, 83 new commercial structures were built in the City of Wasilla totaling over one million square feet of new commercial space. From 2012 to 2021, 380 new residential buildings were permitted within the City of Wasilla boundaries. Nearly two-thirds of these buildings were single-family homes, 26% duplexes, and 14% fourplexes or multi-family homes. Permits issued for new residential construction ranged from a low of 18 in 2013 to a high of 62 in 2018.

Figure 40. City of Wasilla New Residential Construction Permits, 2013-2022



Source: City of Wasilla

Infrastructure Related to Economic Development

Transportation

ROADS

Wasilla is advantageously positioned at the intersection of two of the most traveled state highways, the Glenn Highway connecting Anchorage and Wasilla, and the Parks Highway linking Wasilla to Fairbanks. The Parks Highway runs directly through downtown Wasilla and has daily traffic of 37,400 vehicles. The Palmer-Wasilla Highway connects downtown Wasilla and downtown Palmer and has daily traffic of 15,600 vehicles.

Parks Highway Traffic in Downtown Wasilla

Annual average daily traffic on both highways has increased substantially over the last 10 years. Traffic on the Parks Highway increased by 10% since 2012; traffic on the Palmer-Wasilla Highway increased by 24%.

The Parks Highway/Glenn Highway interchange is one of the busiest intersections in the state, with total average daily traffic of 29,000 vehicles. Rapid population growth in the Mat-Su Valley has resulted in major road improvement projects to both highways over the last 10 years, including lane expansions and a new over- and under-pass system at the Parks-Glenn highways junction.

Knik-Goose Bay Road is a 39-mile long, four-lane highway (later turning into a two-lane highway) that traverses the primarily residential areas of outer Wasilla, Knik, Goose Bay, and Point MacKenzie, as well as the area surrounding the Goose Bay Correctional Center. Annual average daily traffic on Knik-Goose Bay Road was 19,300 vehicles in 2021.

RAILROAD

The Alaska Railroad has a depot in downtown Wasilla and makes regular stops on its Denali Star and Winter Aurora service. Close to 2,000 riders annually embark or disembark in Wasilla throughout the year, but most transit through to Talkeetna, Denali National Park, or Fairbanks. For summer 2023, the Alaska Railroad reports that no passengers have scheduled stops in Wasilla. On average, a combined 65,000 riders pass through Wasilla on the Denali Star and Winter Aurora routes annually, peaking during the summer months (May through September) with almost 75,000 riders, and about 12,000 during the remainder of the year. The Wasilla depot is small with limited amenities; it is not easily accessible to Wasilla's business district by foot.

Alaska Railroad Depot in Downtown Wasilla

The Alaska Railroad began construction of a spur line from Houston to Port MacKenzie on Cook Inlet. The 32-mile rail link would shorten the distance between Interior Alaska and tidewater, creating the potential for development of new industries and significantly reduced transportation costs. It would also help provide redundancy in the supply chain by bolstering shipping connectivity in the Southcentral region and into the rest of the Railbelt. The project is under construction in segments. The Alaska Legislature has appropriated $184 million for the project and an additional $125 million is needed to complete it. The completed project will create the longest industrial rail loop in the state and provide for efficient movement of materials between ship, rail, truck, and barge.[8]

PORT MACKENZIE

Point MacKenzie is the southernmost area of the GWEA. The mostly undeveloped area houses a strategic asset, Port MacKenzie. Located at the north end of Cook Inlet, Port MacKenzie is a deep-water port that currently has capacity to process 32,000 cubic tons of material weekly but sees this volume of activity only rarely. About once a year, large ships from Asia dock at Port

[8] Matanuska-Susitna Borough, Department of Transportation, Director of Port Operations

MacKenzie with shipments of concrete. Each time a big ship comes in, it generates about $100,000 in revenue for the port. Port MacKenzie costs $800,000 a year to operate and currently earns about $250,000 annually through docking fees.[9]

Port MacKenzie has applied for federal grant funding to build a ramp that would allow for the service, maintenance, and repair of barges that operate in upper Cook Inlet. Port management estimates that 10-15 barges could be serviced at one time with the new ramp, with opportunities for expansion in the 9,000 acres of developable industrial land nearby. This would be a new business line for Port MacKenzie with potential opportunities for revenue growth, relocation of shipbuilding enterprises in the surrounding area, and the addition of highly skilled jobs.

The Port MacKenzie Development District consists of 9,033 acres of uplands available for commercial and industrial development. The Port MacKenzie Master Plan outlines land use designations and provides guidelines for future port improvements and development through 2031.

Port MacKenzie is less than two miles by water from the Port of Anchorage, and proposals to connect the two via bridge or ferry service have been discussed for decades. Proposals to build a bridge connecting downtown Anchorage with the Mat-Su Valley (championed by the Knik Arm Bridge and Toll Authority, or KABATA) have generally assumed a Mat-Su destination near Port MacKenzie. This location connects to downtown Wasilla via Knik-Goose Bay Road.

A ship docked at Port MacKenzie.

Port MacKenzie is also the site of a trial project using tidal energy to power the cathodic protection systems for the docks at the port through a partnership with Ocean Renewable Power Company.

MUNICIPAL AIRPORT[10]

The Wasilla Municipal Airport (Federal Aviation Administration [FAA] Identifier IYS) is located eight minutes from the center of downtown Wasilla. It has a 3,700-foot paved runway, with engine repair, airframe repair, and fuel service on-site and is one of three paved airports in the MSB, with the others located in Talkeetna and Palmer.

[9] Ibid.
[10] *Portions of the following are excerpted from preliminary drafts of the Wasilla Airport Master Plan 2023.*

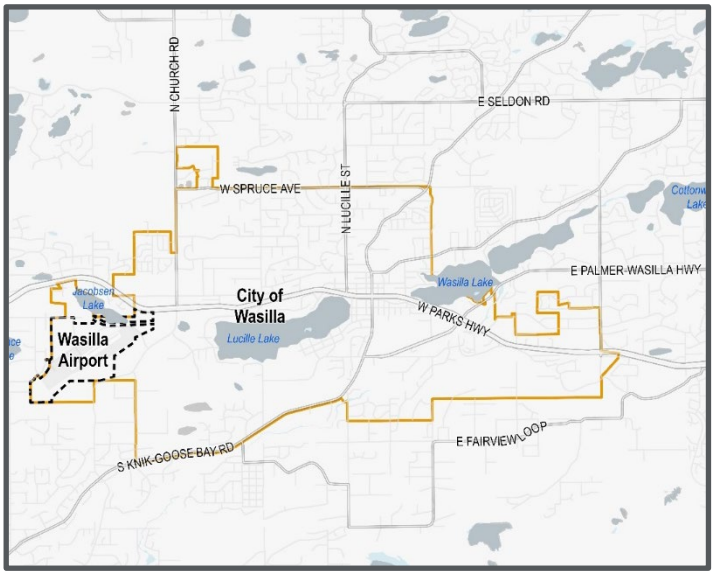
The airport was constructed by the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOTPF) in 1992 with funding from the FAA. The site was selected by DOTPF in conjunction with FAA after a study of several potential sites and completion of an FAA-approved environmental assessment. Upon completion, its ownership was conveyed from the State of Alaska to the City of Wasilla. The City has spent about $1.6 million to construct access from Clapp Street (Aviation Avenue) and extend municipal water to the airport.

Wasilla Municipal Airport

Population-based demand for the airport and aviation services will likely remain strong and increase with population. This is consistent with the steadily rising employment in the transportation support services industry, despite other aviation-related industries having not yet recovered to pre-pandemic employment levels.[11]

Figure 41 shows the location of Wasilla Airport near the western City boundary. The highlighted parcel represents the Wasilla Airport property boundary, which contains City-owned parcels within it. City-owned and privately owned property surrounds Wasilla Airport. Privately owned parcels to the east and south are zoned for industrial use.

Figure 41. Map of Wasilla Municipal Airport Location



The land around the Wasilla Airport is currently largely vacant and undeveloped, including the privately owned, industrially zoned parcels located to the south and east. The areas to the north, east, and south of the airport are mostly undeveloped, except for the Museum of Alaska Transportation to the north. The only adjacent development is a single-family residential area immediately to the west.

[11] Per Northern Economics, subcontractor to HDL Engineering Consultants who is preparing the *Wasilla Airport Master Plan 2023*.

Health Care

Mat-Su Regional Hospital is located near the Parks Highway – Glenn Highway interchange, technically within neither Wasilla nor Palmer city boundaries (this area is in the Gateway census-designated place). It is a 125-bed hospital with 50 medical/surgical beds and eight beds each for intensive care, progressive care, and obstetrics.

A new eight-bed residential substance abuse detox center, Dylan's House, opened in Wasilla in 2023. This facility will meet some of the demand for withdrawal management services in the MSB.

Education

The MSBSD is a public-school administrative district that encompasses Palmer, Wasilla, Big Lake, and Houston. (For more detail, see the earlier section on *Education and Income.)* Mat-Su College is a satellite campus of the University of Alaska. While the campus itself is in Palmer, some courses are taught in facilities in Wasilla.

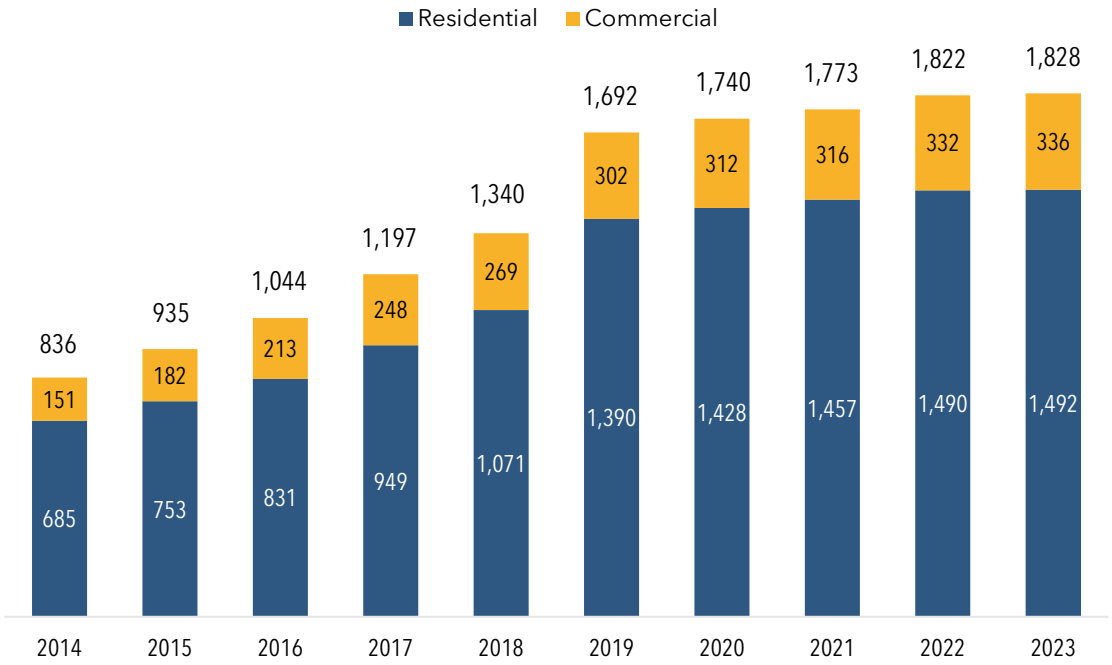
Wasilla High School

Utilities

The City's rapid population growth has strained its maturing infrastructure, resulting in problematic low-pressure zones in the water infrastructure. The City currently supplies over 1,800 homes and businesses with drinking and wastewater services. About 1,500 of these connections are residential and 330 are commercial. Since 2014, the number of metered connections has increased by almost 1,000, more than doubling in a decade. Average total flows are around 600,000 gallons per day with peak flows up to 1,000,000 gallons per day.[12]

[12] City of Wasilla, 2023. https://www.cityofwasilla.gov/services/departments/public-works/utilities/drinking-water

Figure 42. Water Utility Metered Customers, City of Wasilla, 2014-2023



Source: City of Wasilla, Public Works Department

Within Wasilla city limits, drinking water comes from three primary underground wells and four 1-million-gallon above-ground steel reservoirs. Water service is currently provided at $9.12 per thousand gallons, subject to a monthly minimum of $45.57, plus city sales tax. The wastewater treatment plant consists of two aerated lagoons that receive waste from city-maintained and pumped septic tanks. Wastewater service is currently provided at $10.32 per thousand gallons, subject to a monthly minimum of $51.58, plus city sales tax.[13]

The Home Depot commercial area of Wasilla is considered a low-pressure zone by City of Wasilla Public Works. The City advises new developers in this area to add internal boosters in their mechanical rooms to get water flow up to the normal working pressures of 40-60 psi. This adds costs for developers and has reportedly discouraged some development. Current plans to upgrade a high-pressure line from one of the 1,000,000-gallon storage tanks are expected to eradicate the problem for future developers.

Playing in a sprinkler at the Wasilla Fire Department

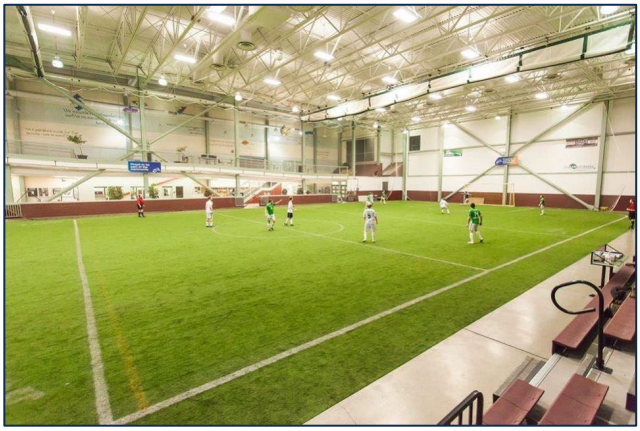
[13] Ibid

The wastewater treatment infrastructure is also currently overburdened. Though the city has not turned down additional customers, the current level of septic tanks needing servicing means maintenance falls behind, thereby increasing risk of septic system failure.

As the City works to add more flow to the water system and update old infrastructure, it has identified about $21 million in additional needed water and sewer upgrades.[14]

Recreational Assets

The natural landscape, with easy access to recreation, is frequently listed by residents as one of the most significant economic strengths of the GWEA. Recreation contributes to community connectedness and activities, as well as the attractiveness of the location for visitors or new residents. Both indoor and outdoor recreation are prominent in City planning documents.



Turf arena in the Menard Sports Center

The Curtis D. Menard Memorial Sports Center is a 102,000 square foot multi-use facility that can accommodate up to 5,000 people. Located within the city limits of Wasilla, the Sports Center is a hub of activity year-round. It is commonly used by local hockey teams and soccer teams, with its full-size ice rink and turf field, and hosts track and field teams with its running track. Community events are regularly held at the Menard Center, from e-sports tournaments to business expositions, conferences, and concerts. The existence of such a large, multi-use facility allows Wasilla to host state tournaments in hockey, soccer, figure skating, and track, drawing hundreds of families to the area and boosting economic activity. The Menard Sports Center will also be a crucial center of sports activities for the Arctic Winter Games hosted in Wasilla in 2024. Additionally, the Sports Center serves as the MSB's shelter and emergency services hub in case of natural disasters.

Wasilla is well-known for its easily accessible lakes, primarily Lake Lucille, Lake Wasilla, and Cottonwood Lake. These three lakes are located within downtown Wasilla and offer outdoor recreational opportunities to the public. While private residential developments (and hotels) are located on the lakes, each has public access with playgrounds or boat launches. During summer months, the lakes are busy with water activities and boating, while in winter months residents use the lakes for ice skating, ice fishing, and hockey.

[14] City of Wasilla, Public Works. Personal communication. April 11, 2023.

SWOT Analysis

The CEDS process included many opportunities for public engagement, including an economic summit, community meetings, an online survey, individual interviews with key stakeholders, and ongoing dialog with the CEDS Steering Committee. This public engagement forms the backbone of the SWOT analysis, which summarizes the community's perceptions of the GWEA's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. The percentages listed in the tables below reflect the total percent of respondents who identified the topic as one of their "top three" strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, or threats.

To reach the GWEA's overall economic development potential, it will need to leverage its strengths and mitigate its weaknesses to take advantage of existing and future opportunities and address outside threats.

Community Responses

Strengths – Existing Internal Advantages

Community members consistently spoke of **geographic location** as one of the biggest strengths of the area: at a nexus of two major state highways, just an hour drive from the largest metropolitan area, Wasilla is well-positioned to be a commercial and residential hub for Southcentral and Interior Alaska. The **natural landscape** of the region creates a beautiful setting for living, working, and recreating, a strength when looking to attract new businesses and residents. Low taxes (including no property taxes in the City of Wasilla) and prudent fiscal management have provided Wasilla with **financial strength** at the government level, and, coupled with the **availability of land,** continue to make this a desirable destination, as continued population growth shows. **Housing** is cheaper than in Anchorage (although costs are increasing), providing an affordable alternative for those who work in Anchorage and can commute.

Table 10. Wasilla Strengths*

Geographic location	17%
Business development	14%
Financial strength	11%
Attributes of residents	10%
Existing infrastructure	8%
Landscape and natural resources	7%
Land & housing	6%
Outdoor recreation access	5%
Room to grow	5%
Schools/Education	5%
Accessible government	4%
Growing population	4%
Available workforce	3%

*Table includes results that garnered 2% or more of

Weaknesses – Existing Internal Disadvantages

Weaknesses identified by community members reflected a consensus that Wasilla's **infrastructure** is old, outdated, and not providing a sufficient foundation for the population growth that has happened and is expected to continue. Wasilla's infrastructure is, in many cases, not serving its basic functions. This includes water and wastewater infrastructure, which is not sufficient to connect new developments to city water, and road infrastructure and public transit, which have not kept up with the increasing demands of the growing commuter population. Other weaknesses identified are **lack of city planning** and **land use restrictions** that inhibit certain types of development. On the labor side, **lack of skilled workforce** was a concern for attracting new industries, and **school district performance** is not as high as some would like.

Table 11. Wasilla Weaknesses*

Traffic Congestion	23%
Community Infrastructure	15%
Lack of City Planning	11%
Public Safety/Crime	8%
Supply Chain/Dependence on Other Communities	7%
Sprawled Out, No Community Feel	6%
Utility Infrastructure	6%
Cost of Living	5%
Lack of Skilled Labor	4%
Attributes of Residents/Community	3%
Government Regulations	3%
Lack of Basic Industry	2%
Land Use Restrictions	2%
Public Transportation	2%
Tourism Infrastructure/ Activities	2%
School District Performance	2%

*Table includes results that garnered 2% or more of total votes.

Opportunities – Potential External Improvement

Nearly a quarter of respondents identified the **Wasilla Municipal Airport** as a significant economic development opportunity for the GWEA. A separate airport master planning process is currently underway to identify opportunities to attract new business activity at the airport. Also identified as a significant opportunity was **tourism and recreation**, with residents feeling that the Alaska Railroad depot in downtown Wasilla could serve as more of a jumping-off point for visitors, most of whom only pass through to other destinations in Alaska. **City planning and road planning**, in alignment with growth projects, are seen as opportunities for the GWEA to accommodate new residents and provide for the needs of new businesses, amplifying growth. Opportunities to **diversify and expand industries and workforce**, including **attracting remote workers**, were considered priorities as well.

Table 12. Wasilla Opportunities*

Airport	22%
Tourism/Hospitality	18%
City planning for growth	15%
Expand industries	8%
Expand workforce	8%
Road planning	7%
Recreation	7%
Partnering with other cities	5%
Expand social services	3%
Expand City Boundaries	2%
Attract Remote Workers	2%

*Table includes results that garnered 2% or more of total votes.

Threats – Potential External Risks

The most significant perceived threats to the region tend to relate to public policy, e.g., **over-regulation** and **anti-development politics**, which are seen to contribute to a lack of new business opportunities. Isolation and **supply chain disruptions** are major threats due to the **"one road in, one road out" geography** of the GWEA and aging and inadequate infrastructure that make the region especially vulnerable to **natural disasters**. Many respondents indicated concerns about **food security** given the reliance on Anchorage and the Lower 48 for almost all consumer goods.

Table 13. Wasilla Threats*

Over-regulation	14%
Anti-development politics	14%
One road in, one road out	13%
Inflation	11%
Reliance on "Outside" supply chain	10%
Aging and inadequate infrastructure	9%
Declining O&G development	8%
Public safety/crime	8%
Food security	5%
Natural disaster	5%

*Table includes results that garnered 2% or more of total votes.

Strategic Initiatives

This section presents the CEDS vision statement, overarching goals, priority objectives, and action plan as developed throughout the CEDS community engagement process. It also reviews related strategic initiatives already underway in the City of Wasilla and GWEA. Action plan items include:

- Activities – *What activities need to be completed?*
- Timeline – *What is a realistic timeframe for execution?*
- Responsibility – *Which organization will lead and which organization(s) will support the action item?*
- Expected costs – *How much will this action item cost?*
- Potential funding sources – *Where will funding come from?*

CEDS Vision Statement

Wasilla is a resilient community with future-ready infrastructure that supports a strong business hub, quality job growth, and unparalleled opportunities to explore the outdoors and raise a family.

Strategic Plan

The Strategic Plan includes three overarching goals:

- **Goal A: Improve regional connections and attract new business opportunities with modern infrastructure that meets the needs of residents, visitors, and businesses.**
- **Goal B: Attract new businesses and industries to boost economic resilience and availability of high-quality jobs.**
- **Goal C: Foster a community that has continuous opportunities for resident connection and engagement with the natural environment.**

Goal A: Improve Infrastructure to Support Economic Resilience

Objective 1: Upgrade water, wastewater, and stormwater infrastructure

Action	Timeline	Lead	Partners	Cost	Funding Sources
a. Inventory needs and current utility map online	2023	City of Wasilla	MSB, SOA	$75,000	SOA, EDA, FEMA
b. Conduct utility rate study	2024	City of Wasilla	MSB, ADEC	$50,000	SOA, EDA, FEMA, ADEC
c. Apply for grant funding to enhance and expand reliable water and wastewater	2023-2028	City of Wasilla	MSB, ADEC, EPA, SOA	$20,000,000	SOA, EDA, FEMA
d. Meet MS4 permit requirements to develop and implement a comprehensive Storm Water Management Program	2023-2028	ADEC	City of Wasilla, MSB, City of Palmer	$2,000,000	SOA, EDA, FEMA, EPA

Objective 2: Develop regional transportation infrastructure

Action	Timeline	Lead	Partners	Cost	Funding Sources
a. Update Wasilla Comprehensive Plan	2024	City of Wasilla	MSB, USDOT, FAA, DOTPF, ARRC, EDA	$250,000	City of Wasilla, EDA
b. Conduct Land Use Study	2024	City of Wasilla	MSB, USDOT, ARRC, FAA, EDA, DOTPF	$100,000	City of Wasilla, EDA
c. Adopt airport master plan to expand cargo and passenger service	2024	City of Wasilla	DOTPF, FAA, EDA, DOT	$100,000	DOTPF, FAA, private businesses
d. Leverage engagement with the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) process	2023 - 2028	City of Wasilla	MSB, DOTPF, City of Palmer, MPO	$25,000	MPO, ARPA

Goal A. Improve Infrastructure to Support Economic Resilience (continued)

Objective 3: Upgrade and improve broadband access

Action	Timeline	Lead	Partners	Cost	Funding Sources
a. Develop a strategy to upgrade and improve broadband access	2024	City of Wasilla	MSB, MTA, GCI Inc.	$25,000	SOA, EDA, FEMA, ARPA

Objective 4: Increase housing development within city limits

Action	Timeline	Lead	Partners	Cost	Funding Sources
a. Identify developable land and incorporate housing into Comprehensive Plan	2024	City of Wasilla	Housing developers, AHFC, CIHA, MSB, HUD, Realtors	$50,000	City of Wasilla, MSB
b. Provide planning for residential development within city limits	2024	City of Wasilla	MSB, SOA, Planning Department, Realtors, CIHA	$100,000	City of Wasilla
c. Complete a housing needs assessment, and market demand, financial feasibility, and incentives study for higher density / high rise residential development	2024	City of Wasilla	AHFC, CIHA, MSB, Realtors	$125,000	HUD programs

Objective 5: Develop initiatives around resiliency in emergency / food security / agriculture

Action	Timeline	Lead	Partners	Cost	Funding Sources
a. Study of food security needs and existing assets	2024	City of Wasilla	MSB, SOA, FEMA, U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, food banks, grocers, food growers and distributors	$75,000	SOA, EDA, FEMA
b. Develop and implement public awareness campaign about food security and emergency preparedness	2025	City of Wasilla	MSB, FEMA	$50,000	SOA, EDA, FEMA
c. Identify locations for food storage, preparation, and processing	2025	City of Wasilla	MSB	$50,000	SOA, EDA, FEMA

Goal B: Diversify Local Economy

Objective 1: Attract new industries, e.g., manufacturing, logistics, and "value-added"

Action	Timeline	Lead	Partners	Cost	Funding Sources
a. Explore potential for creation of an economic development district and ARDOR for GWEA	2023	City of Wasilla	EDA	$100,000	DCCED, MSB, EDA
b. Study available incentives to attract new business and industries	2024	City of Wasilla	DCCED, MSB	$100,000	DCCED, MSB, EDA
c. Streamline online permit process	2024	City of Wasilla	MSB	$100,000	City of Wasilla, MSB
d. Become an EDA-designated "Tech Hub"	2023	City of Wasilla	DCCED, MSB	$150,000	City of Wasilla, MSB
e. Conduct direct marketing and outreach efforts to logistics, manufacturing, value-add companies	2024 - 2025	City of Wasilla	MSB	$100,000	EDA, City of Wasilla
f. Conduct outreach and marketing for remote workers and entrepreneurs	2023 – 2025	City of Wasilla	MSB	$100,000	EDA, City of Wasilla
g. Support development of "food hub" business to manage the aggregation, distribution, and marketing of locally-producers	2023 – 2025	City of Wasilla	MSB, U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, State Division of Agriculture		Private investment, U.S. Dept. of Agriculture

Objective 2: Provide increased workforce training

Action	Timeline	Lead	Partners	Cost	Funding Sources
a. Leverage existing needs assessment and case study analyses for local applications	2024	City of Wasilla	MSB, DOLWD, MSBSD, Mat-Su College, Charter College	$75,000	DOLWD, EDA
b. Promote training programs to meet expected workforce needs	2024-2028	City of Wasilla	MSB, MSBSD, Mat-Su College, Job Corps, Charter College, NIT	$2,000,000	DOLWD, EDA, AFL-CIO, Mat-Su Health Foundation

Goal B: Diversify Local Economy (continued)

Objective 3: Become a visitor and recreation hub

Action	Timeline	Lead	Partners	Cost	Funding Sources
a. Complete new railroad depot and "tourist enhancement district"	2024	City of Wasilla	ARRC	$2,000,000	USDOT, MSB
b. Promote hotel and accommodation development	2023 - 2028	MSCVB	City of Wasilla, MSB	$150,000	EDA
c. Deploy strategic sustainability marketing campaign attracting visitors to Wasilla	2023 - 2028	MSCVB	City of Wasilla, MSB	$150,000	City of Wasilla, MSCVB

Goal C: Improve Community Connections to Promote Resident Well-Being

Objective 1: Build an attractive Main Street District

Action	Timeline	Lead	Partners	Cost	Funding Sources
a. Conduct an MSD study of walkability, connectivity, traffic, and parking	2024	City of Wasilla	MSB, AKRR, DOT	$150,000	City of Wasilla
b. Increase lighting and pedestrian safety in downtown area	2024-2025	City of Wasilla	MSB, DOT	$250,000	Dept. of Energy, FERC, DOT

Objective 2: Increase year-round events

Action	Timeline	Lead	Partners	Cost	Funding Sources
a. Streamline permit process for events at public facilities	2023	City of Wasilla	MSB	$25,000	City of Wasilla, MSB
b. Support centralized events calendar	2024 -2025	City of Wasilla	MSB, MSCVB, Greater Wasilla Chamber of Commerce	$150,000	City of Wasilla
c. Establish one City-sponsored event per quarter	2025	City of Wasilla	City, Greater Wasilla Chamber of Commerce	$100,000	City of Wasilla

Goal C: Improve Community Connections to Promote Resident Well-Being (continued)

Objective 3: Improve upon existing recreation assets

Action	Timeline	Lead	Partners	Cost	Funding Sources
a. Examine opportunities to maximize usage and potential growth at Menard Center	2023-2025	City of Wasilla	MSB, MSCVB	$100,000	City of Wasilla, MSB
b. Execute CVB's Arctic Winter Games plan	2023 - 2024	City of Wasilla	MSB, MSCVB	$500,000	City of Wasilla, MSB
c. Improve connectivity to Mat-Su Borough trails systems	2024-2028	MSB	City of Wasilla, Alaska Trails, MSTPF	$2,000,000	SOA, EDA, USDOT

Evaluation Framework

The matrix below lists actions planned for each CEDS goal and priority objective and identifies qualitative and quantitative measures to assess progress toward each objective.

Goal A: Improve Infrastructure to Support Economic Resiliency	
Action	**Performance Measure**
Objective 1: Upgrade water, wastewater, and stormwater infrastructure	
a. Inventory needs and current utility online mapping	• Needs inventoried • Online mapping completed
b. Conduct utility rate study	• Funding source identified • Study solicited and awarded • Study completed
c. Apply for grant funding to enhance and expand reliable water and wastewater	• Funding source identified • Grant applications completed and submitted • Grants awarded • Infrastructure improvements made
d. Meet MS4 permit requirements for develop and implement a comprehensive Storm Water Management Program	• Permit compliance met
Objective 2: Develop regional transportation infrastructure	
a. Update Wasilla Comprehensive Plan	• Funding source identified • Planning contract solicited and awarded • Comprehensive plan completed and adopted
b. Conduct Land Use Plan	• Land Use Plan study area defined • Funding source identified • Plan solicited and awarded • Land Use Plan completed
c. Adopt airport master plan to expand cargo and passenger service	• Master Plan adopted
d. Leverage engagement with the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) process	• Impacts of financial support for infrastructure improvement identified and measured
Objective 3: Upgrade and improve broadband access	
a. Develop a strategy to upgrade and improve broadband access	• Strategy, with utility support, developed and implemented

Goal A: Improve Infrastructure to Support Economic Resiliency (continued)	
Action	**Performance Measure**
Objective 4: Increase housing development within city limits	
a. Identify developable land and incorporate housing into Comprehensive Plan	• Comprehensive Plan and Land Use Study completed • Developable land for housing development identified
b. Provide planning for residential development within city limits	• Planning and zoning changes identified and revised (where needed)
c. Complete a housing needs assessment, and market demand, financial feasibility, and incentives study for higher density / high rise residential development	• Funding source identified • Study solicited and awarded • Study completed
Objective 5: Develop initiatives around resiliency in emergency / food security / agriculture	
a. Study of food security needs and existing assets	• Funding source identified • Study solicited and awarded • Study completed
b. Development and implement public awareness campaign about food security and emergency preparedness	• Funding source identified • Awareness campaign strategy identified • Public awareness campaign implemented • Impact of campaign measured
c. Identify locations for food storage, preparation, and processing	• Site assessment conducted

Goal B: Diversify Local Economy	
Objective 1: Attract new industries, e.g., manufacturing, logistics and "value-added"	
a. Explore potential for creation of an economic development district and ARDOR for GWEA	• Discussions with EDA conducted • Discernment process completed
b. Study available incentives to attract new business and industries	• Funding source identified • Study solicited and awarded • Study completed
c. Streamline online permit process	• Online permit process simplified • Permit process measured for improved access
d. Become an EDA-designated "Tech Hub"	• Complete application with EDA
e. Conduct direct marketing and outreach efforts to companies	• Market targets identified • Marketing and outreach (communications) plan developed • Marketing materials prepared • Marketing visits/meetings conducted
f. Conduct outreach and marketing for remote workers and entrepreneurs	• Market targets identified • Marketing and outreach (communications) plan developed • Marketing materials prepared
g. Support development of "food hub" business to manage the aggregation, distribution, and marketing of local producers	• Food hub site selected • Private investment identified • Business operations initiated
Objective 2: Provide increased workforce training	
a. Leverage existing needs assessment and case study analyses for local applications	• Existing workforce initiatives compiled and synthesized • Initiatives to meet Wasilla workforce needs adapted
b. Promote training programs to meet expected workforce needs	• Marketing materials prepared • Communications plan developed • Marketing campaign initiated • Evaluation of campaign efficacy measured
Objective 3: Become a visitor and recreation hub	
a. Complete new railroad depot and "tourist enhancement district"	• Comprehensive Plan and Land Use Study completed • Tourism enhancement district designated • Railroad depot development funding identified • Railroad depot construction completed • Tourism enhancement district plan developed
b. Promote hotel and accommodation development	• Developer targets identified • Incentive strategy developed and implemented
c. Deploy strategic sustainability marketing campaign attracting visitors to Wasilla	• Funding source identified • Marketing materials prepared • Communications plan developed • Marketing campaign initiated • Evaluation of campaign efficacy measured

Goal C: Improve Community Connections	
Action	**Performance Measure**
Objective 1: Build an attractive Main Street District	
a. Conduct an MSD study of walkability, connectivity, traffic, and parking	• Comprehensive Plan completed • Walkability Study solicited and awarded • Study completed
b. Increase lighting and pedestrian safety in downtown area	• Funding source identified • New lighting installed
Objective 2: Increase year-round events	
a. Streamline permit process for events at public facilities	• Online permit process simplified • Permit process measured for improved access
b. Support centralized events calendar	• Participating organizations identified • Best outreach approach evaluated (online/mobile application/posters, etc.) • Event calendar coordinated and maintained
c. Establish one City-sponsored event per quarter	• Funding allocated and staffing identified • Quarterly event calendar determined • Events coordinated and publicized
Objective 3: Improve existing recreation assets	
a. Examine opportunities to maximize usage and potential growth at Menard Center	• Funding source identified • Utilization and Market Analysis Study solicited and awarded • Study completed
b. Execute CVB's Arctic Winter Games plan	• Funding allocated and staffing identified • Regional partners coordinated • Community impact evaluated (lessons learned) and measured (i.e., sales tax increases, etc.)
c. Improve connectivity to Mat-Su Borough trails systems	• Funding source identified • Coordination with existing trails managers conducted • New or improved trails constructed and maintained

Economic Resiliency

This section summarizes key themes that emerged throughout the CEDS process to enhance the GWEA's economic resiliency.

Develop Future-Ready Competitive Infrastructure – The City of Wasilla and its business community recognizes the need to incorporate emergent communications technology, transportation, and utility infrastructure, competitively positioning the GWEA as an attractive region to invest and do business. This includes maintaining and expanding road infrastructure to meet capacity for a growing population, investing in future-ready water and wastewater systems, and ensuring that health care and education infrastructure is successfully providing residents the services and supports they need to thrive.

Diversify Economy – Sustainable economic development in the Wasilla area requires diversification of the industries to reduce reliance on retail and service sector employment. Ultimately, Wasilla hopes to attract industries like manufacturing, logistics, and climate technology to provide quality high-skilled jobs that will keep Wasilla residents from having to commute outside the area to work, improve quality of life, and buffer the economy from shocks.

Attract Highly Skilled Workforce – Attracting new industries will require investments in workforce training to ensure that the right workers are available to fill positions in high-skill sectors such as manufacturing and engineering.

Food Security – Many residents noted the importance of shoring up Wasilla's food security, due to the fragility of the supply lines into Wasilla. The existence of a single highway into the region, and reliance on the Port of Alaska in Anchorage for almost all food supplies, highlights a risk of food shortages in cases of natural disaster.

Preserving food is important for food security.

Regional Collaboration and Redundancy – Multiple government entities operate in the GWEA, including the Mat-Su Borough, the City of Wasilla, and the City of Palmer. Overlapping operational districts will allow for critical redundancy, particularly in the areas of public works, public safety, and transportation.

Appendix A: Spring Summit Breakout Group Results

During the May 18th, 2023 *Wasilla Spring into Action Economic Development Summit: Planting the Seeds of Possibilities and Opportunities for Wasilla's Future,* attendees participated in a breakout activity to answer three questions:

- *What excites you the most about the Wasilla CEDS?*
- *How should the community measure success of the CEDS?*
- *How can the community remove roadblocks to ensure success of the CEDS?*

Below is a compilation of their responses.

Responses
What excites you the most about the Wasilla CEDs?
Infrastructure development
Improve road system
Catching up with our growth
Confirmation of the known and building the road map to implementation
Partnering with the MSB & Palmer
Development opportunities
Open the North Slope
Collaborate with communities
Workforce opportunities (skilled workforce)
Lots of medical care in Wasilla
Room to grow
Reconnect with oil production opportunities
Share the fairgrounds with a municipal building (year around events)
Develop training centers for new job opportunities
Defining "downtown" economic hub
Focus: something to create conversation around
Scalable to other communities in MSB
Benchmarks for progress measurement
Opportunity

Responses
How should the community measure success of the CEDS?
Promote the plan
By goals being achieved by the time stipulated
Review CEDS on a regular annual basis
Improve quality of life metric
Real time count
New business (#)
% exported workforce (in GWEAs favor)
# of residents
# of beds (hospitality growth)
# of households (affordable housing)
Move weaknesses to zero
Improve perceptions of quality of life
Track funding that is "won" based on CEDS action and priorities, including federal grants
New business growth & improve capacity of city services to support this through planning for infrastructure such as reliable utilities & expansion
Increase community engagement
How can the community remove roadblocks to ensure success of the CEDS?
Leverage borough/state relationships to remove unnecessary obstacles in the process
Good planning for investable projects
Incentivize community engagement
Attend community council meetings
Remove regulations
Make sure to keep our eyes on the focus and leave egos at the door
Stay open-minded
Don't focus on what you can't do, focus on what you can
Explore all forms of communication
Community involvement/meetings outside of city hall
Education for all - prepare younger crowd to take over
Bring in those from outside and outside resources
Blend historic knowledge with new knowledge
Know the focus and goal
Keeping it live and relevant
Water + sewer: forward fund & plan for utility investments
Form-based code for 3rd or 4th story development (mixed-use)
Downtown overlay: rewrite the overlay code
Update city website for efficient permitting

Appendix B: Community Interviews

Thank you to those who agreed to be interviewed as part of our community engagement process:

- Kibe Lucas, Realtor, Keller Williams Real Estate
- Mike Brown, Mat-Su Borough
- Simon Brown, Wasilla City Council
- Stacey Coy, Owner, Northern Dame Construction
- Sam Dinges, Alaska Trails & Mat-Su Convention and Visitors Bureau
- Dave Griffin, Director of Operations, Port McKenzie
- Ted Leonard, former CFO, City of Wasilla
- Brian Lindamood, VP and Chief Engineer, Alaska Railroad
- Doug Miller, Senior Manager, Wostmann & Associates
- Ryan Ponder, VP Government and Regulatory Affairs, Matanuska Telephone Authority
- Samantha Spies, Collins Construction
- Jenny Willardson, Commercial Real Estate Agent, Elevate Alaska Realty
- Jessica Viera, Greater Wasilla Chamber of Commerce

Appendix C: Primary Documents

The following key documents were used to inform this Wasilla comprehensive economic development strategy:

- *City of Wasilla Comprehensive Plan (2011)*
- *Port MacKenzie Master Plan (2016)*
- *Mat-Su Borough Community Health Needs Assessment (2022)*
- *Mat-Su Borough Sustainable Tourism Plan (2022)*

McKINLEY RESEARCH GROUP, LLC

3800 Centerpoint Drive, Suite 1100 • Anchorage, AK 99503 • (907) 274-3200
801 West 10th Street, Suite 100B • Juneau, AK 99801 • (907) 586-6126

info@mckinleyresearch.com • mckinleyresearch.com