

Parks and Recreation: A Proposal For Moving Forward

(from www.tommorphet.com)

For a town that bills itself as a recreation mecca, we have a parks and recreation problem: Our parks and outdoor facilities need help and our recreation events occur on a spotty, irregular schedule.

Because we compete with the rest of the world for visitors and residents, these are important issues. Magnificent scenery won't solve them. Nonprofits and volunteer efforts that provide most of our recreation infrastructure and activities can't keep up with the things that residents and visitors want to do outdoors here or the places needed to do them.

The State of Alaska has drastically cut support of our four state parks and eagle preserve. Area trails are plagued by access issues and heavy use without proportionate maintenance. Residential development is squeezing out areas once used by hunters, fishermen, hikers and others. We are only now building the valley's first public-use cabin, a Herculean volunteer effort not likely to be replicated soon.

Remedying these issues will require establishing a framework of responsibility, assigning roles, and developing work plans to achieve goals.

Here's a proposed framework:

1. Create a nonprofit or recruit an existing one to provide *physical* recreation activities for borough residents, funded on an annual basis the same way the borough funds Haines Animal Rescue Kennel. This group's job would be to organize and promote weekly community recreation events open to adults and children such as hikes, ball games or tournaments, fun runs and the like. Besides generating new activities, the group would be expected to help promote and assist such existing events as the annual Dick Hotch Memorial Basketball Tournament, the fair volleyball and softball tournaments, and the Fourth of July Mount Ripinsky Race.
2. Dedicate the borough's Parks and Recreation Advisory Committee to the work of establishing and supporting physical recreation infrastructure throughout the borough, including all public parks, trails, and buildings devoted to physical recreation. Committee responsibilities would include working with agencies, nonprofits and governments to sustain and improve existing facilities, including addressing public access questions and pursuing new infrastructure, as supported by the public.

Such a division assigns appropriate roles to each group and is supported by local history.

As demonstrated by groups like HARK, Haines Friends of Recycling and the Haines Volunteer Fire Department, local nonprofits have proved themselves a most efficient means of delivering select and focused services to the community. A nonprofit group funded sufficiently to support an energetic and enthusiastic director, supported by a volunteer board of directors and volunteers, seems well-suited for promoting and organizing a variety of physical recreation events.

The borough-based Parks and Recreation Advisory Committee, with access to borough records, resources and staff, would appropriately be charged with government-related infrastructure functions such as making recommendations to the assembly on the funding of maintenance and improvements, on acquisitions, management and land-use questions, and on partnerships with government agencies and nonprofits responsible for trails, parks and facilities such as the swimming pool.

These two groups, working in tandem with groups and officials from our school district, nonprofits, and tourism and economic development departments, could bring focus to community recreation efforts and make steady progress toward improvements.

Current management of recreation, led by a loose and foggy patchwork of groups and agencies, moves ahead erratically, in fits and starts, when it moves ahead at all. Too often lately, it's been falling behind.