

Correspondence



RABBIT CREEK COMMUNITY COUNCIL (RCCC)

A Forum for Respectful Communication & Community Relations

1057 West Fireweed Lane, Suite 100 / Anchorage, AK 99503



January 24, 2025

TO: Tiffany Briggs, Executive Director, Heritage Land Bank tiffany.briggs@anchorageak.gov
Heritage Land Bank Advisory Commissioners c/o Emma Giboney
Emma Giboney, Land Management Officer emmagiboney@anchorageak.gov

RE: Agency Review of Application for Disposal of Parcel 2-147

Thank you for inviting Rabbit Creek Community Council (RCCC) to comment during the Agency Review of the potential disposal of Heritage Land Bank (HLB) Parcel 2-147.

At our January 9 meeting, RCCC discussed the proposed Application for disposal and development of Parcel 2-147. RCCC voted to submit comments to HLB opposing the sale and proposed use, by a vote of 22 yeas, 1 nay, 0 abstentions.

We understand that the purpose of this review is for HLB staff to assess:

- (1) the public need and purposes for this property; and
- (2) the feasibility, viability and desirability of the proposed disposal and land use, which would be a privately-operated recreation center, trails, and trailhead parking adjacent to Chugach State Park.

Summary

RCCC opposes sale of this parcel, which would violate the adopted Potter Valley Land Use Analysis (PVLUA). RCCC supports implementation of the Potter Valley Land Use Plan, which calls for transfer of this parcel to Chugach State Park (PVLUA, page 59). RCCC finds that Parcel 2-147 is unsuited for the proposed use; and that private ownership would likely diminish current and future public access to Chugach State Park (CSP). Private development would also adversely affect the watershed, wildlife habitat, and scenic values that are essential elements of Chugach State Park and upper Potter Valley. This position is premised on the findings below.

Contrary to the statements in the Application, RCCC has not previously supported this proposed sale and commercial trailhead. Neither has RCCC taken a position on other developments loosely proposed by the Applicant in Potter Valley, as claimed by the Applicant. RCCC has asked

repeated questions about access, infrastructure, risk management, and impacts to the watershed and surrounding lands that remain unanswered.

PUBLIC PURPOSE

The value of public ownership is summarized in the Potter Valley Land Use Analysis, in which the CSP Superintendent recommended public ownership and transfer to Chugach State Park for the public purposes of “...public access to Chugach State Park, protection of scenic values, avoiding development in snow avalanche hazard zones, and conservation of wildlife habitat and water quality” (CSP Superintendent Al Meiners, 1997, PVLUA Appendix C).

Public access.

- Parcel 2-147, in its current undeveloped state, allows low-level public hiking access that is appropriate for a fragile area of steep slopes with no developed trails.
- Private purchase would threaten public access in the near term. Private owners can post their undeveloped property to stop public access. The Applicant has posted her current undeveloped Potter Valley parcels, despite an existing easement that is dedicated to public use (Plat No. 88-106).
 - HLB is not dependent on the Applicant for future road access, even though the Applicant currently owns the adjoining parcel to the north. Other private parcels about 2-147, across which public road access might be obtained via existing easement or rights of way
- Private purchase would not guarantee a commercial trailhead (see feasibility, below) and current antagonistic attitude toward public access (see above).

Viewshed and scenic values.

This parcel is highly visible as a backdrop from Potter Marsh and also from Midtown and Downtown Anchorage. The parcel is steep and mostly above treeline. There is no way to blend a large commercial site into steep, town-facing slopes that mostly exceed 46% (PVLUA Map 4, below). The Hillside District Plan has viewed objectives and Policy 7 for steep slopes and upper elevations, including minimizing site disturbance and maintaining natural, indigenous vegetation (HDP page 6-6 and 6-49). Title 21.07.020 has objectives for “...protection of visually significant and or prominent natural features such as ridgelines and rock outcroppings. (AMC 21.07.020.C.1.h)

Conservation of wildlife habitat and water quality.

Grading and clearing for commercial development are incompatible with the HDP objectives to minimize disruption of the Hillside natural setting and natural systems, to avoid drainage problems, protect water quality, protect habitat, and maintain rural character (*Objectives for development standards*, HDP page 6-26). Most of the lower (northern) section of Parcel 2-147 is very wet from subsurface seeps which daylight on

the lower slopes and flow into Potter Creek. Developing a road through there would be very expensive and potentially adversely affect the watershed.

If a commercial-scale well and septic system is part of the development, this would pose a risk to the recharge of groundwater on which all down-valley residents rely. The Maximum Perimeter of Public Sewerage is at least two miles from this parcel (HDP Map 5-8).

Wildlife habitat would be affected by intensive use. Wildlife habitat within Chugach State Park is protected when development along the periphery is low-intensity so that wildlife can travel in and out of the Park. Chugach State Park has a mission of resource protection as well as recreation. Public ownership is the best guarantee for sustainably-built, low-impact trails suited to the fragile alpine slopes.

Protection of Life and Property

The extreme high winds in Upper Potter Valley require a high standard of construction. Parcel 2-147 lies outside the Building Safety Service Area (HDP Map 6.5). This may exempt a private developer from safety standards.

Emergency response time to Upper Potter Valley are a concern, especially in the case of fire. Remote trailheads are an attractive nuisance for illegal bonfires and partying.

PUBLIC NEED

Avoid unfunded public burdens. Major trailheads are an intensive use that require development of infrastructure both inside and outside of Chugach State Park. RCCC is concerned about the prematurity of this proposed project, which could generate many unfunded public expenses and neighborhood costs. The Parcel is outside of the Municipal Parks and Recreation Service Area Boundary, and a 2017 ballot measure failed to extend the boundary (contrary to the applicant's statement on the issue). The Applicant stated in the application "a vote was never taken to add the area." Also, the Applicant apparently lacks the funds to pursue the proposed development as she is "currently in the process of seeking grants and other funding businesses supportive of public access and conservation."

The need for cost-efficiency. There is obvious need for additional public recreation access across the front range of the Chugach. Existing CSP trailheads have a backlog of existing needs, such as access roads, more parking, toilets, security, and trail hardening to protect the park. Given the funding deficits, any proposed *new* trailheads should be cost-efficient in terms of location, timing and scale. Parcel 2-147 is isolated from infrastructure. Private development could pose stiff costs to the public, such as increased road maintenance and park resource protection. The north-facing steep aspect of this parcel means any new infrastructure will be shaded much of the time between October and February rendering it less welcoming than other areas for much of the year.

Other potential trailheads. There are other potential trailhead sites in Potter Valley, such as road-accessible HLB Parcel 2-144B. Parcel 2-144B could provide parking for existing trails in both lower and upper Potter Valley. RCCC has asked for HLB to consider the trailhead potential of Parcel 2-144B in the HLB 2026-2030 Work Plan.

Public involvement. RCCC has repeatedly supported improved trail access, through decades of letters to public officials and through various initiatives, mostly to ensure public easements and ROW. Successful, well-managed access requires coordinated planning among municipal and state agencies and the interested public. This proposed land sale and commercial trailhead has had no outreach and coordination.

FEASIBILITY

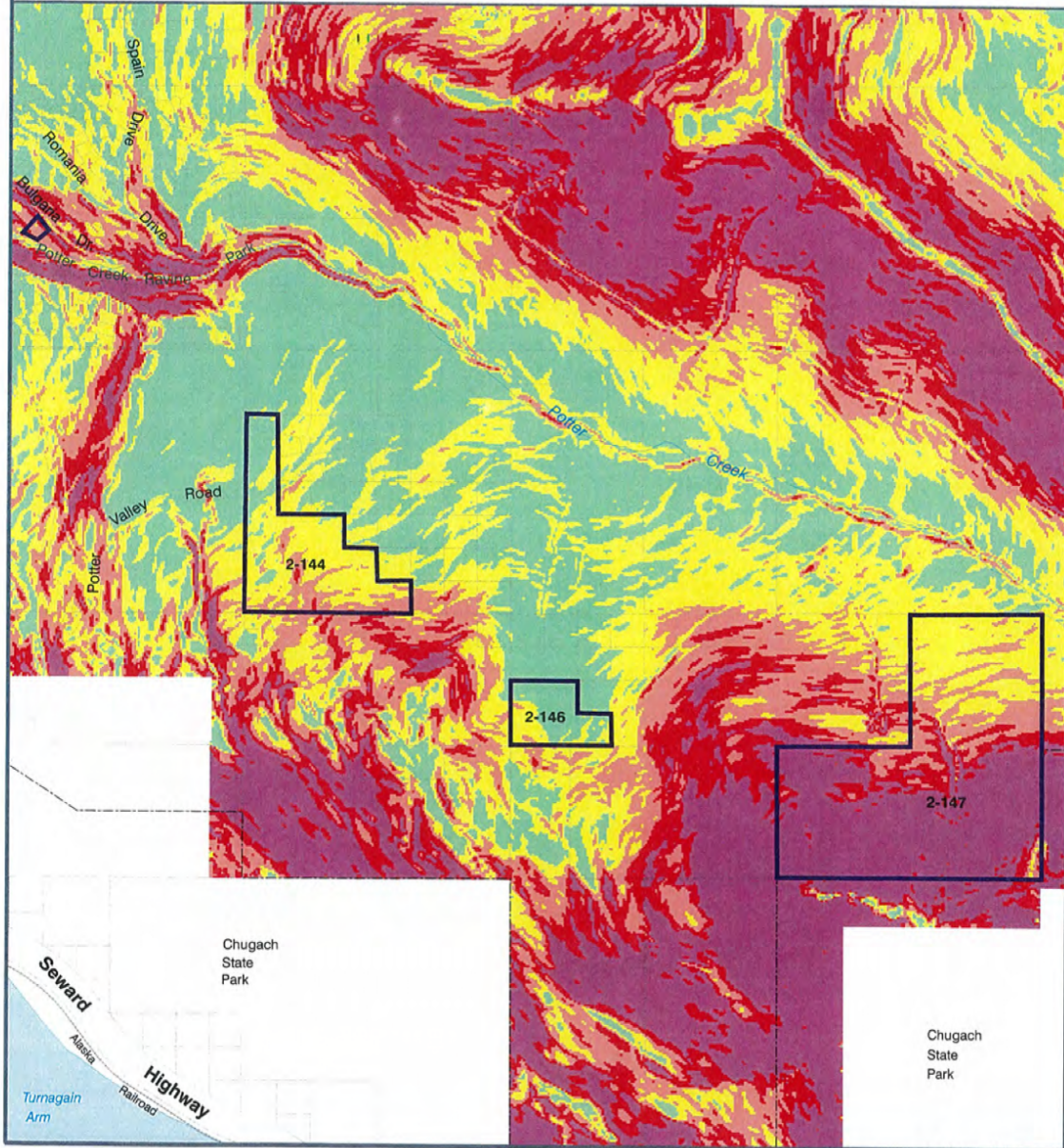
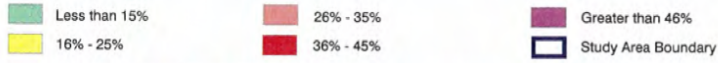
This parcel is unsuited for the proposed use of a commercial recreation center, with a parking lot, toilets, visitor center, and trails.

- The slopes on this parcel are entirely greater than 16 percent. Over half the slopes exceed 46 percent (PVLUA Map 4). MOA 21.07.020 allows minimal disturbance to slopes over 30 percent and prohibits development on slopes over 50 percent. These slopes are not conducive to the footprint for a large parking lot, a commercial visitor center or a network of trails.
- There is nearby private land with more suitable slopes, including 160 acres already owned by the Applicant.
- Costs for infrastructure appear prohibitive.
 - The Steamboat Drive/Stewart Trail approach would need to be upgraded for more than two miles. There are steep slopes and wetlands.
 - Alternatively, Potter Heights Road would need to be upgraded for more than a mile, including Streamside development: but the ROW is only 20-foot-wide in some places which is not sufficient for a public road.
 - Both approaches are constrained by private parcel ownership, with gaps or insufficiencies in the rights-of-way.
 - 1.
 - A parking lot for 30 cars and vaulted toilets would cost upward from \$1.8 million (extrapolated from a recent Municipal estimate for a Basher Road parking lot).
 - Electricity and natural gas would need to be extended. On-site water and septic would be needed.
 - Given the driving distance from Anchorage, all labor and delivery would have extra costs.



Slope - Subarea C

Approximate Scale: 1" = 1360'



Municipality of Anchorage
Department of Community Planning and Development
December 1999

Map 4

VIABILITY

The viability of a commercial recreation center and trailhead seems doubtful for numerous reasons, as shown by comparisons with Eagle River Nature Center and Arctic Valley Ski Areas. Potter Valley would have a high construction costs, maintenance burdens, and fewer revenue-generating attractions.

Both of the other sites operate as budget-constrained non-profits. They are heavily dependent on volunteer labor and fund-raising, as well as governmental road maintenance.

Paid parking is a main revenue source, especially for Eagle River Nature Center. Both sites have a monopoly on parking for recreation access, whereas in South Anchorage, recreationists have options to park at other trailheads using their CSP annual passes. There are many days, particularly in fall and winter, when high winds deter most recreation in Upper Potter Valley and there would be no parking revenues.

Potter Valley site lacks the choice of trail destinations and all-season experiences available at the other two sites.

Potter Valley has one unimproved social trail, the Stewart Homestead Trail. There is no developed recreation in Potter Valley. Low-cost recreation development, such as yurts for rent, is not feasible because of the extreme weather.

Potter Valley site lacks the scenery and cultural history at the other two sites. Eagle River Valley has been called a “Little Yosemite” and has a glacial river, rich wetland habitat, and spawning salmon. These resources are conducive to tourism and nature education. Arctic Valley has ski lifts, access to Cold War Nike Missile relics, and a trail network to several peaks and passes.

DESIRABILITY

RCCC finds that sale of Parcel 2-147 for the proposed commercial recreation center is undesirable as follow:

RCCC finds that Parcel 2-147 is physically ill-suited for a commercial recreation center; and that the necessary infrastructure would be cost-prohibitive (as explained above).

Parcel 2-147 is likely to create public funding burdens.

RCCC proposes that any *new trailhead* needs to be infrastructure-efficient and avoid unfunded public burdens for development and management.

Private ownership would impede current and future public access to Chugach State Park. If sold, this parcel could become a barrier to public access both immediately and in the long term.

Social trails across this parcel to Chugach State Park could be blocked, as has happened on nearby parcels. Future public trail development would be constrained.

Private ownership for speculation would usurp the purpose of HLB to hold valuable public land for future use

- If sold, this parcel would likely be held speculatively (given the cost of development, and the lack of developed trails in adjoining parts of CSP). Private “land banking” would usurp the purpose of the Heritage Land Bank to hold land for future public benefit.
- If developed in the near term by a “deep pockets” developer, a surge in recreation could precipitate resource damage to adjoining lands in Chugach State Park where there are only minimal social trails and no park improvements.

CONCLUSION

RCCC opposes sale of this parcel, which would violate the adopted Potter Valley Land Use Analysis (PVLUA) and work against the Public Purpose and Need. RCCC supports implementation of the Potter Valley Land Use Plan, which calls for transfer of this parcel to Chugach State Park (PVLUA, page 59).

Signed,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Timothy Alderson', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Tim Alderson, Chair
Rabbit Creek Community Council

Cc: Zac Johnson, Anchorage Assembly District 6
Randy Sulte, Anchorage Assembly District 6
Ben Corwin, Chugach State Park Superintendent