

# INTRODUCTION

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INTRODUCTION

This Framework Plan proposes a long-term vision for the future evolution of the Ship Creek area of Anchorage, including downtown Anchorage and the Cook Inlet waterfront. In its 100 year history the Municipality of Anchorage has evolved from a tent city to a major metropolitan center and transportation hub on the Pacific rim. This Plan will guide future development of the original site of Anchorage, Ship Creek for the next century of growth and evolution, and when fully implemented will create something that Anchorage has never had: A truly accessible and public waterfront. Anchorage is the only major US city on a large body of water without such a waterfront, and given the spectacular natural setting that Anchorage enjoys and the immediate access to its surrounding natural areas, giving the public an attractive and accessible Cook Inlet waterfront this is the logical next step in the city's development. As newer generations of Americans migrate back to our cities' centers seeking a more urban and sustainable lifestyle, this waterfront will add tremendous value to Anchorage's downtown, further stimulating investment and development.

The Framework Plan shares many of the same goals and makes many of the same recommendations as the 1991 Ship Creek/Waterfront Land Use Plan, but with significant updates to reflect current conditions of contemporary Anchorage, other recent planning studies by the Municipality and the Alaska Railroad, Port and Railroad operations, and the advent of commuter rail. This Plan also illustrates physical urban design proposals to guide how development can take place in the study area and create a dynamic urban environment that will be the next great neighborhood for residents and visitors to Anchorage.

**Why redevelop Ship Creek now?**

The Ship Creek area has been identified as a target for redevelopment for decades. The Anchorage Downtown Comprehensive Plan (Downtown Plan) identifies Ship Creek as an emerging new district, well positioned for mixed use development. The Alaska Railroad has been working diligently to drive the revitalization effort. Why renew the focus now?

1. The Alaska legislature recently passed legislation that lengthened the maximum allowable lease terms on the Alaska Railroad properties from 55 to 95 years. This change opens more attractive and conventional financing options for projects on Railroad property.



Anchorage aerial photograph

2. The economy is strengthening. Recovery from the “great recession” is underway. The Alaskan economy is growing, unemployment is down and the energy sector is expanding in the Cook Inlet.
3. Nationwide, people are increasingly choosing a more urban lifestyle. The existing housing market is quite tight – with a vacancy rate less than 5%. Millennials and Empty Nesters are driving resurgence in downtown housing, shopping and entertainment. The downtown market has not been fully captured in Anchorage.
4. Anchorage is a landlocked city. Bounded by Cook Inlet, the Chugach Mountains and the Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Anchorage cannot expand horizontally. It needs to redevelop land already within its geographic boundaries.
5. The Alaska Railroad has seen a decrease in revenue from freight operations. Revenue from land leases is one option to explore to fill that gap. Some of the most attractive lands they own are in Ship Creek and along the waterfront. In addition, the vacant Alaska Railroad land has no tax value. Redeveloping these sites can also yield a significant revenue return to the Municipality.

Combined, all of these forces can act together to drive new development into the Ship Creek area and make it an attractive place to invest for both the public and private sectors.

**What do people want?**

This Ship Creek Framework Plan is the result of hundreds of hours of stakeholder involvement over a six month period. The plan is based on the vision, ideas and design principles crafted at three public meetings held in March of 2013. The Vision and Design Principles section of this plan summarizes those comments and ideas. We hope that participants will see a direct link to many of the goals, ideas and aspirations shared at these meetings.

Beyond the public meetings, the planning team held dozens of individual interviews with local leaders in the fields of transportation, recreation, tourism, economic development, land development, education and the environment. Lastly we met with representatives of the major land owners, operators, stakeholders adjacent to the Ship Creek site, including the Port of Anchorage, the Alaska Railroad, the Alaska Trucking Association, the Alaska Cruise Association, the Northern District Set Netters Association and the Government Hill Neighborhood. We thank everyone for their spirited participation.

Several common themes developed during the public meetings and interviews.

- The Port of Anchorage, the Alaska Railroad, the Cruise Ship arrivals, connections to the Airport and potential commuter rail all help to position Ship Creek as the Gateway to Alaska.



- Ship Creek is currently disconnected from downtown and the adjacent neighborhoods. It is difficult to get down to the valley. High volumes of truck and rail traffic can make it feel unsafe to walk, ski or bike through the area.
- Ship Creek itself and the Cook Inlet waterfront are major amenities that are hard to access and under utilized during much of the year.
- Year round recreation could be a major driver of redevelopment. Expanding and connecting the trails and improving access to the creek, the waterfront and fishing should be major goals of the plan.
- No single land use should dominate the plan. A mix of uses, activities and amenities should create an 18 hour active neighborhood that is pedestrian friendly and authentically Alaskan.

What can the market support?

Every good plan is guided by a strong vision. Great ones are also based on solid market analysis. The team spent many hours researching the Anchorage real estate market to see what types of redevelopment could Ship Creek capture and absorb.

Currently, there are strong markets for new housing and office space. Hotels are also a possibility, but can be difficult given Anchorage’s short summer tourist season. New destination retail is, perhaps, the hardest use to attract. However, neighborhood serving retail can be expected to follow the construction of new housing and office uses. The plan also explores the potential of a new all season public market that could house the popular summer Weekend Market as well as other outlets that allow locals to sell their own products and creations year round.

In the early phases, the plan promotes primarily new housing and office uses. One new hotel anchors the waterfront end of Ship Creek. All uses are clustered around a signature public space that is directly connected

to downtown and the proposed public market.

How does that plan relate to Anchorage’s existing plans and policies?

Intent of the Framework Plan

A Framework Plan identifies an organizing “big idea” that reflects a vision for a specific location and states the principles that reflect the location’s priorities. The Ship Creek Framework Plan is provided in order to identify key assets and opportunities that can be used to create a vibrant and active location for living, shopping, and recreating in the Ship Creek area. It identifies attractors, iconic places and locations, greenways, enhanced corridors, and new buildings and structures.

The framework plan contrasts with a District Plan, which in accordance with AMC 21.05.155 is intended to supplement and provide specificity to the goals, objectives, policies, and strategies of the Comprehensive Plan. The framework plan also is not intended to provide the specificity of zoning, such as that of AO 2006-046 which established a Planned Community (PC) zoning district for Ship Creek. In essence, the Framework Plan is the intermediary between the two. The differences between the documents are illustrated in the chart below.

This big idea for the Ship Creek area is to create an active waterfront for downtown Anchorage. Anchorage is one of the few cities of its size on a large body of water that has virtually no public waterfront. While the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail and Ship Creek are tremendous assets to the community and offer scenic vistas of water, there is no public waterfront that ties people directly to Cook Inlet.

The principles that reflect priorities for Ship Creek that will best succeed in attracting investment and achieving the framework plan vision are:

- Build on the existing recreation amenities that are in the Anchorage area and create Anchorage’s all-season urban playground.

- Create a new neighborhood for Anchorage that will be a unique new neighborhood with a mix of uses, walkable and linked to transit choices.
- Create a new Anchorage waterfront that will create a new active, urban waterfront that connects downtown Anchorage to Cook Inlet.
- Create a Gateway to Alaska that will provide residents and visitors a welcoming and exciting introduction to Anchorage and Alaska.

Relationship of the Framework Plan to Anchorage’s existing plans and policies

This plan supports and advances the policies laid out in Anchorage’s recent planning efforts, as follows:

Anchorage 2020 Plan. This Framework Plan conforms to the Anchorage 2020 Comprehensive Plan and the strategies contained within the plan. This plan seeks to increase the housing supply with the addition of housing in the Ship Creek area. It also seeks to maintain and enhance Ship Creek as a part of the drainage infrastructure and as a key recreation asset. It also seeks to connect the trail system, providing linkage between the Ship Creek Trail and the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail. Specifically, the framework plan addresses 2020 policies as follows:

- Policy 3: The framework plan seeks to increase housing availability in the northwest portion of Anchorage.
- Policy 10: The framework plan encourages mixed use development in the Ship Creek area, complementing that proposed for the Anchorage Central Business District.
- Policy 11: Mixed use development is encouraged and intended to improve the aesthetics of adjacent development.
- Policy 12: Housing will be required to comply with the Planned Community District and its guidelines which demand a high building and site design standard.
- Policy 18: This will strengthen the Central Business District’s role as a regional center, providing a connection to a multi-modal center, providing a strong connection to the recreational assets in the Ship Creek area, and complementing the district with additional housing opportunities, and arts and cultural venues.
- Policy 21: Development is encouraged to take advantage of the Ship Creek developing multi-modal character and to relocate Whitney Road to better serve both commercial/industrial traffic and the needs of the Ship Creek district. Further, architectural

DOCUMENT	PURPOSE
District Plan	Identify objectives, policies, and strategies to supplement the Comprehensive Plan
Framework Plan	Identify a unifying “big idea” and provide a vision and priorities for future development of a specific area. Provide possible investors and developers and idea of what possibilities may exist.
Planned Community Zoning District & Design Guidelines	Specify allowed, conditional, and prohibited uses and quantify dimensional standards. Guidelines provide prescriptions for development, i.e. provide the rules for development

\*Specifically AO 2006-046

and site design standards are provided in existing code to address the quality of development and those standards are intended to apply in this framework plan.

- Policy 26: Industrial reserves are maintained with this framework plan.
- Policy 30: The framework plan proposes multi-modal access and service, pedestrian to transit linkages, more efficient freight movement through the relocation of Whitney Road, and optimization of parking.
- Policy 31: The Framework Plan encourages the development of the Port of Anchorage Ingra-Gambell interconnection and the realignment of Whitney Road to better protect the mixed use developments within Ship Creek, as well as the adjacent developments of the Anchorage CBD and the Government Hill neighborhood.
- Policy 36: The framework plan proposes new connections of trails within the Ship Creek area, including key connections to Ship Creek Trail and the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail.
- Policy 51: The framework plan encourages the preservation of key historic structures within the Ship Creek area.
- Policy 64: The framework plan proposes to protect Ship Creek and enhance its recreational value. Further, the plan proposes to provide for an estuary near the western termination of Ship Creek that could enhance wildlife values and human/wildlife connections, much as Potter Marsh does. Also, the plan calls for fill into tidelands to increase Anchorage's coastal access, but only after appropriate study is done relative to coastal resource analysis.
- Policy 67: Ship Creek is proposed to be protected with enhancement of public access at appropriate locations where access is not detrimental to the resource.
- Policy 70: The framework plan proposes to better address public access, providing for protection of Ship Creek resources while facilitating public appreciation and use of the creek in a responsible and sustainable manner.
- Policy 72: The framework plan calls for further analysis of seismic issues with respect to ensuring that proposed development protects the public from hazards.
- Policy 88: The integration of arts into the Ship Creek mixed-use development is fundamental to the intent of both the framework

plan and the existing design guidelines that exist for most of the subject area.

**1991 Ship Creek Waterfront and Land Use Plan.** The Framework Plan complements and updates the 1991 Plan, as many of the suppositions of the previous Plan have proven outdated: To that extent, this plan provides realistic boundary changes for areas of use that have been more defined since 1991. For example the 1991 Plan assumed that much of the Port of Anchorage operations would be relocated to Fire Island and that Alaska Railroad freight operations would relocate to Birchwood. The current Framework Plan is wholly consistent with the goals and objectives of the 1991 Plan, as well as its specific recommendations, as they are as relevant today as they were 23 years ago:.

**1991 Plan Goals and Objectives (pp.33-35):**

*Goal #1: To revitalize portions of the Ship Creek/Waterfront area and support its growth into a viable, tourist-related, people-oriented commercial development.*

*Goal #2: To respond to the needs of local residents and tourists for public access to the water, night as well as daytime activities and year-round activities to maximize the use and enjoyment of the Creek and Waterfront for all.*

*Goal #3: To protect and preserve the historic character of Ship Creek by generating sufficient revenues to rehabilitate or otherwise protect historic buildings.*

*Goal #4: to promote economic diversification and development in the Ship Creek/Waterfront area.*

*Goal #5: To promote and protect the natural resources of Ship Creek and the waterfront.*

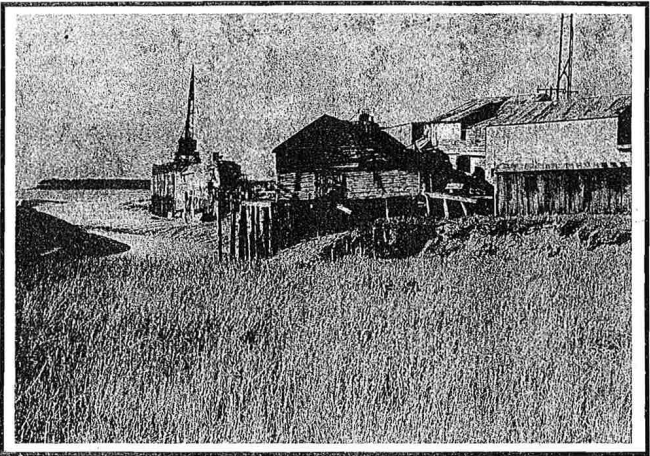
*Goal #6: To integrate the waterfront and Ship Creek into the fabric of the Municipality.*

**1991 Plan Recommendations (p. 45):**

*The Ship Creek/Waterfront area has all the potential to become a major attraction for residents and visitors alike. It has historical interest as the site of the beginnings of Anchorage. It has scenic resources in the waterfront, the tidal estuary, and Ship Creek. It has maritime uses. It has an underutilized waterfront that could be stimulated into becoming as exciting maritime area. All of these components make for a bright new vision for Ship Creek.*

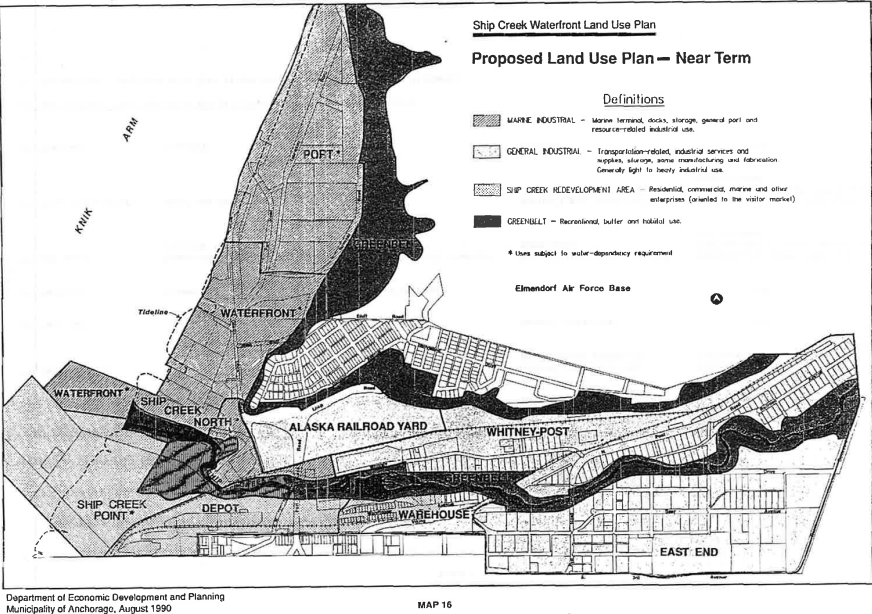
*...This vision would result in the creation of an attractive, cultural, and commercial area, attractive to residents and visitors alike, being used winter and summer, day and night...*

# Ship Creek/Waterfront Land Use Plan



Municipality of Anchorage  
Department of Economic Development and Planning  
August, 1991

1991 Ship Creek / Waterfront Land Use Plan cover



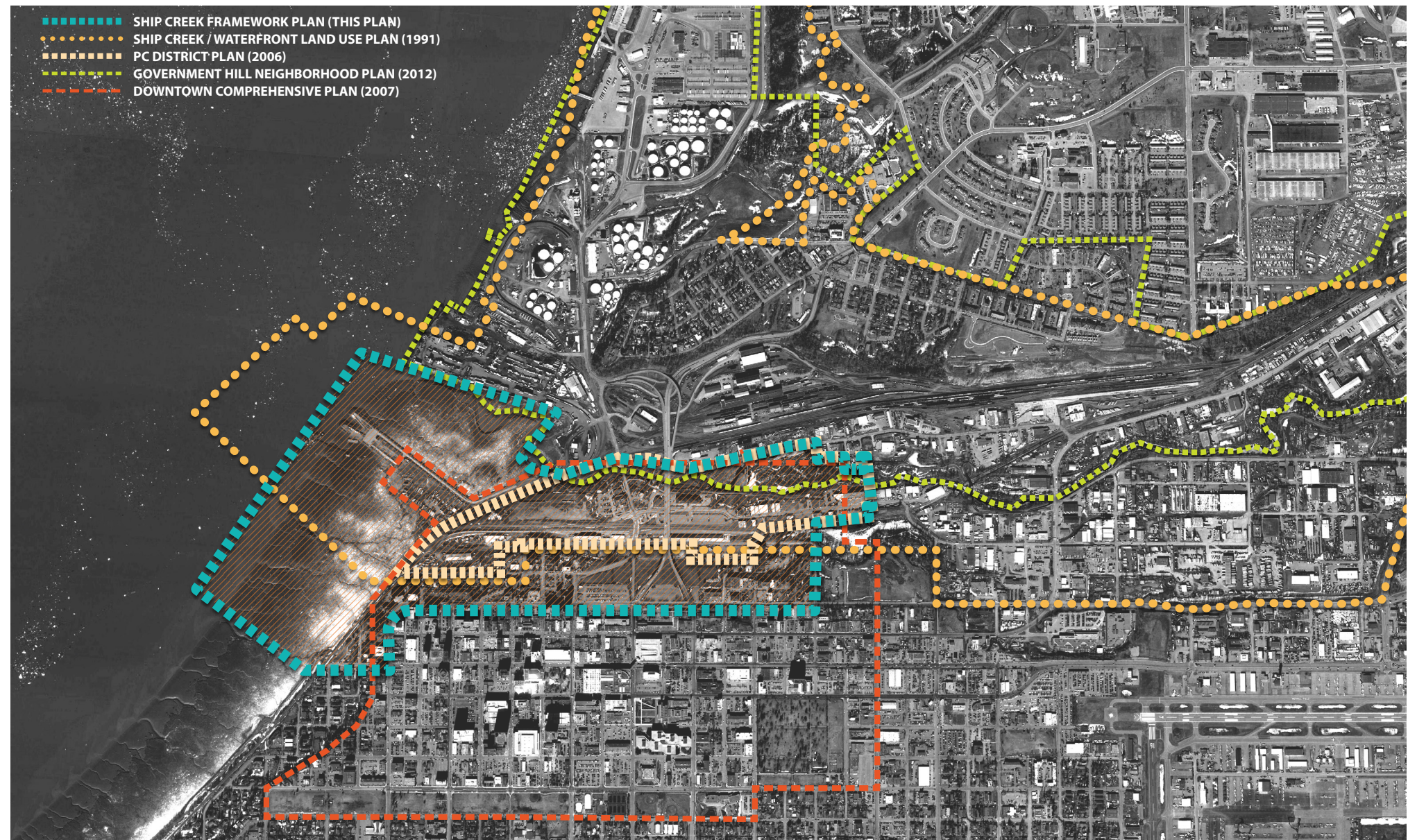
1991 Ship Creek / Waterfront Land Use Plan showing fill in Cook Inlet



It should also be noted that the 1991 Plan, like the current Framework Plan, called for significant areas of land fill in the mud flats to create new areas for waterfront development. This Framework Plan provides illustrative definition as to how these areas could physically be developed. Both the 1991 Plan and the Framework Plan foresee the development of a mixed use, walkable neighborhood and commercial district in the Ship Creek area. Also, both Plans envision the development of an active waterfront that turns Anchorage's face to the water. Further, the plans both envision that the tidal areas of Knik Arm may provide development opportunities for further enhancing Anchorage's position in the growing tourism and recreation global marketplace. Both however recognize that seismic conditions require further evaluation as development cautiously proceeds. With respect to the boundaries of the 1991 plan relative to this plan, it should be emphasized that this plan addresses only those areas that are subject to mixed use development and does not address Port of Anchorage-owned lands, or most of the industrial-zoned lands owned by ARRC.

**2007 Anchorage Downtown Comprehensive Plan.** The Framework Plan largely complements the 2007 Anchorage Downtown Comprehensive Plan. That plan envisions an active multi-use development in the Ship Creek area and actively promotes strong pedestrian and multi-modal ties between Ship Creek and the core of the Central Business District. It envisions a multi-modal transportation facility which this framework plan does as well, though located slightly different from that of the Downtown Comprehensive Plan.

**2003 Ship Creek Intermodal Transit Center Study.** The Framework Plan incorporates the Transit Center in the urban plan, although with some adjustments to its location and size to reflect the new urban context into which it would be placed and the recent decision to locate the primary Intermodal Transit Center (ITC) in Midtown Anchorage, rather than downtown. The 2003 study indicated the new transit center to be located on the west end of the passenger terminal, connected to a pedestrian bridge crossing Ship Creek Avenue aligning with E Street. The 2003 study was done without the benefit of any planning context for further urban redevelopment in the Ship Creek basin, and as such the design was focused primarily on factors related to its own functional requirements. The size of the Transit Center is also reduced from the 2003 proposal, reflecting the new reality of the primary ITC planned for Midtown: The Ship Creek Transit Center will still remain as a necessary commuter rail station and transit point for commuters to Ship Creek and other downtown locations, however. Following the precedent of the historic Alaska Railroad Passenger Depot, the new Ship Creek Transit Center will occupy the ground floor of a multi-story commercial office structure, offsetting some of the costs for the new facility.



Comparison of Plan Boundaries

**2001 Anchorage Freight Mobility Plan and the 2000 Ship Creek Multi-modal Transportation Plan.** The Framework Plan is generally consistent with these earlier studies, and specifically incorporates two of the principal recommendations contained in them. The current plan includes the re-alignment of Whitney Road to the north of the Knik Arm Power Plant and the new flyover bridge linking Loop Drive with the Ingra-Gambell couplet and the Glenn Highway and Seward Highway. When implemented, these changes will lead to much improved truck access to the Port of Anchorage and greatly improved public safety for pedestrians, bike riders and drivers in the Ship Creek redevelopment area.

**Government Hill Neighborhood Plan.** The Framework Plan generally meets the intent of the Government Hill Neighborhood Plan with respect to protecting the Government Hill neighborhood from the negative aspects of industrial use such as noise and pollutants. Also, the framework plan agrees with proposals in the Government Hill Neighborhood Plan to provide better pedestrian access to Government Hill from downtown and to also rehabilitate the old power plant, and redevelop abandoned buildings.

**Planned Community Zoning District.** The Framework Plan fully embraces the 2006 Planned Community designation for much of the Ship Creek area and relies on the Ship Creek District Guidelines (AO 2006-046).



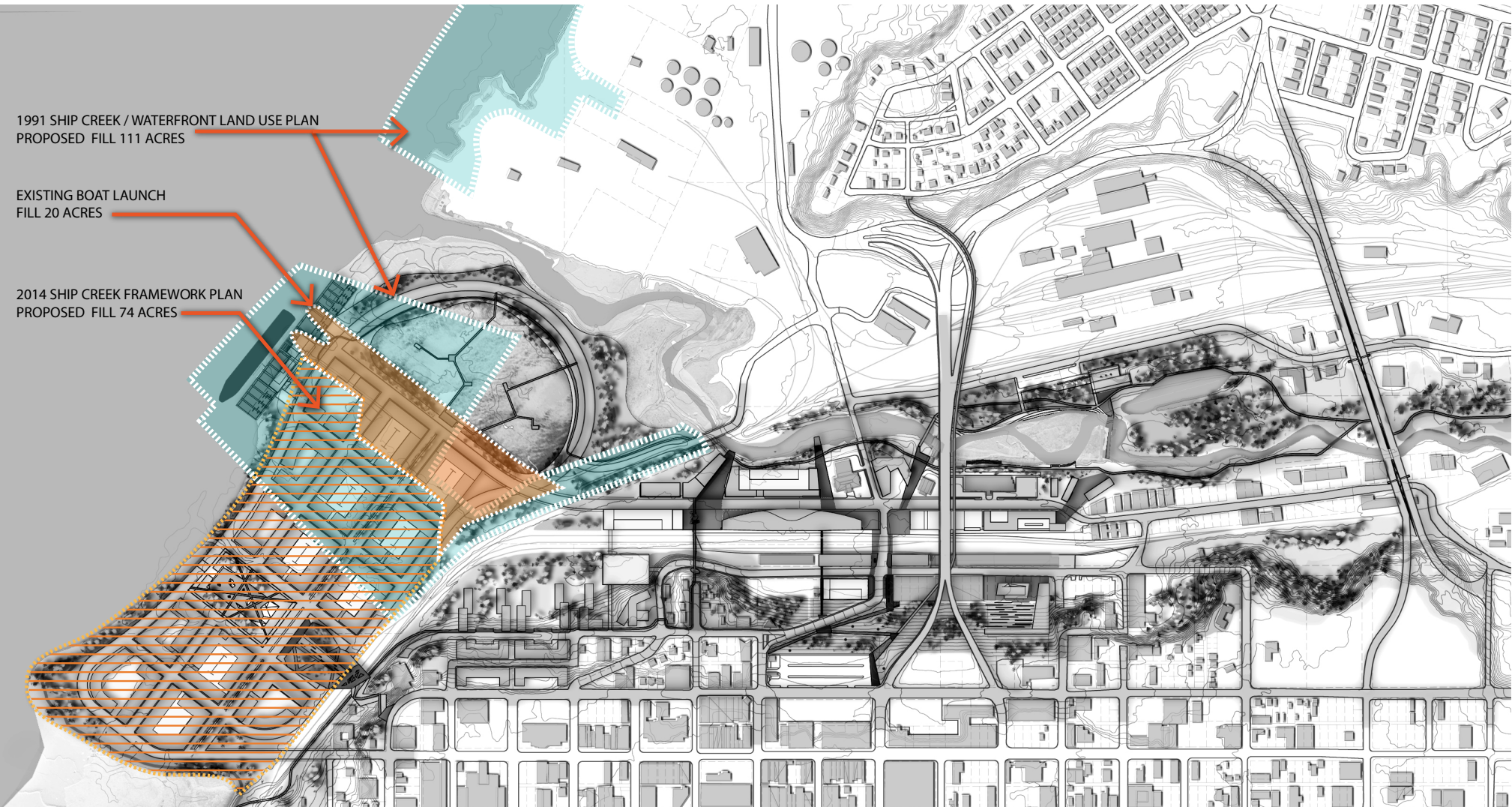
The framework plan in fact views the Planned Community (PC) zoning and the design guidelines as the implementation procedure to further the framework plan. The PC district requires levels of review and thus provides a process to ensure that the intention of the framework plan is carried out in the actual design of the buildings and sites within the PC district. While the framework plan does not require that the boundaries of the PC district and the framework plan coincide, it may be appropriate to extend the boundaries of the PC district to match those of the framework plan for all lands that are under the singular ownership of the ARRC.

The diagram above provides a graphic representation of the boundaries of the framework plan and its relationship to the plans and zoning discussed above. It should be noted that boundaries of the Government Hill Neighborhood Plan and the Downtown Comprehensive Plan both slightly overlap. Both overlap significantly with the 1991 Ship Creek Development and Waterfront Plan.

As discussed before, the conflicts among the plans are not significant and for the most part are compatible. However, it would seem appropriate that the overlapping district plans probably would stand to benefit from common boundaries such that a proposed action such as this framework plan did not need to examine compliance with three different overlapping district plans. With respect to the conformance of the PC zoning district to the framework plan, it is not unusual that a plan of this type would encompass many zoning districts. However, it could possibly be in the plan's interest that the single-owned ARRC properties that are covered by the framework plan could be incorporated into PC district by re-designating the PC district boundary.

**Land Fill Development.** Phase III of the Framework Plan involves creating new areas of land fill west of the current high tide line and south of the boat launch. Development in the coastal tidelands is not a new idea or prohibited by any identified policy. Development in coastal zones has to balance the competing needs of access to the water, economic development, and preservation of habitat and protection of water quality. As urban centers evolved along their waterfronts, they historically have incorporated areas of fill to augment upland development. Significant areas of most of the great waterfronts in the United States, such as San Francisco, Seattle, Charleston, Boston and New York were constructed on land fill in a coastal zone.

Improving the Cook Inlet waterfront through land fill is also not a new concept for Anchorage: The Ship Creek boat launch and the Port of Anchorage are constructed on fill in this zone, and the Port expansion alone includes approximately 70 acres of fill area in Cook Inlet. The 1991 Ship Creek Waterfront/Land Use Plan also planned for approximately



Cook Inlet Land Fill Comparison

85 acres of fill in the mud flats and beyond into Cook Inlet. The extent of the planned fill area is shown on the diagram below and as indicated on the legend this "Ship Creek Redevelopment Area" was planned for "Residential, commercial, marine and other enterprises (oriented to the visitor market)". The current Framework Plan is completely consistent with the 1991 Plan in this regard, and actually contains less area of proposed fill and does not project into the deeper waters of Cook Inlet beyond the mud flats, as shown on the diagram below.

The 2007 Anchorage Coastal management Plan, in addition to striving for coastal habitat protection, also recognizes the need for balance in its stated goals and objectives:

- Promote and maintain access opportunities to coastal areas for purposes of recreation, tourism, coastal development, and transportation and utilities.

- Establish siting and design criteria for the location of uses or activities immediately adjacent to marine areas, streams, and lakes, so as not to preclude future public access to the resource.
- Promote pedestrian-oriented waterfront activities, consistent with public safety and security.
- Work with the State of Alaska, MOA, and landowners to develop access improvements at the Port and Ship Creek.

The new waterfront concept illustrated in this plan is preliminary and will have to undergo significant additional study and extensive public participation to determine its desirability in the community and its ability to secure the required permissions for its implementation.