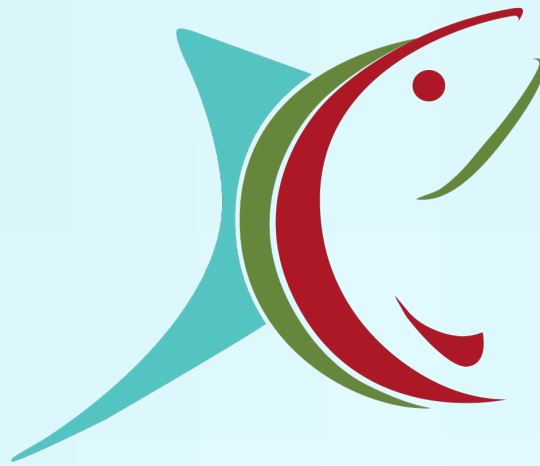


MARCH 2022

# Kenai Waterfront Revitalization Assessment

*Community Vision Work Session Results*



Prepared for  
City of Kenai



Prepared by



**McKINLEY RESEARCH**  
GROUP, LLC

*Formerly McDowell Group*



**Corvus**  
Design



ENGINEERS, INC.

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# Purpose and Process

## Purpose

The City of Kenai contracted with McKinley Research Group, in association with Corvus Design Inc., and PND Engineers, to prepare a study on how to maximize opportunities for economic development and community enhancement in the Kenai waterfront area. As part of this study process, the study team facilitated a vision work session collect 'high elevation' community member input to understand opportunities, concerns, priorities, and initial desired programming for the area. Key takeaways and input will provide the framework for subsequent economic and planning effort by the McKinley Research Group team.

## Process

Prior to the vision work session, the McKinley Research Group team worked with the City of Kenai to refine the session's agenda and exercises. To build awareness and encourage participation, the City of Kenai constructed a webpage for the waterfront assessment which provided notification about the assessment and vision work session, sent postcards to property owners within and around the waterfront area, created a public notice in accordance with the provisions of the Alaska Open Meetings Act, published a notice of public meeting in the Peninsula Clarion, as well as a City Hall, Kenai Post Office, Kenai Community Library, and the City's Facebook page.

The work session was held on Thursday, February 24, 2022, at the Kenai Chamber of Commerce and Visitors Center. The session was opened by Paul Ostrander, City of Kenai City Manager, who extended a welcome and background of the Kenai Waterfront Revitalization Assessment. Corvus Design then led about 40 residents (including City staff) through a series of facilitated exercises. The session length was 1.5 hours.



Attendees were broken into small groups of 7-8 participants to share their insight and ideas. In addition to collecting input, the facilitated sessions allowed community members to discuss the project, listen to new and opposing ideas, and develop trust in the project. Community members who could not attend the session can provide input through a Community Feedback Online Survey located on the City's project webpage. A summary of the key take-aways and input received follows.

# Synthesis

Based on the *Vision Work Session*, the public desires and supports new development in the project area but not at the expense of impacting the existing uses, primarily the seafood plants, and the ability to access the Kenai River and its many resources. There is a desire to expand these uses for both locals and visitors, while protecting the natural environment. The public wants revitalization to be authentic, protective of the river and natural environment, be accessible year-round, and provide economic opportunities. There is a need to protect and celebrate the area's history, culture, and outstanding views of the river, surrounding landscape, wildlife, and volcanoes. The phrase, "Build it for the locals, and the visitors will love it" is important in meeting these criteria.

There is consensus the waterfront area be revitalized for mixed-use, including a destination facility or 'anchor tenant' such as a convention center, lodge, hotel, or other facility that meets local needs and draws visitors. The feasibility to create an environment that supports new businesses, such as restaurants, breweries, tackle shops, tour operators, and general commercial and retail, will need to be investigated to determine if subsequent planning are viable and if these businesses have market potential. The area may also support housing, boardwalks, park and open space, campgrounds, and recreation, as well as expand and improve river access and the needed support facilities. Integrating the existing seafood plants into the overall revitalization effort would meet the community's desire to represent an authentic working waterfront. Further information is required to understand current landowner and key stakeholder interests, including the seafood processor's future needs, safety, and operation concerns, and how these facilities could become vibrant components of the revitalization effort.

Bridge Access Road is a high-speed highway and site access is challenging in its current configuration. Providing safe access to and within the large site will be critical to its success. Motorized and non-motorized users will need to be separated for efficient and safe movement of vehicles and freight and a pleasant setting for non-motorized users. Although utilities are in the immediate vicinity, additional utility infrastructure capacity will be needed to support the desired mixed-use concept. Through the creation of gateways, improving visual access to the site, and creating a new community destination will improve the visibility of the project area.

And finally, also heard was the important goal to maintain or protect natural areas, the Kenai River and its resources, while improving public access. Limiting development to low impact uses, such as recreation and water dependent uses, was a priority, as well as identifying unique or sensitive areas that support preservation of lands, wildlife, and fish.

Critical to success will be the development of incentives and other programs that will bolster economic development and facilitate private/public partnerships.

# Vision Exercises Results

## Exercise #1: SWOT Analysis

The first small group exercise was to discuss the strengths, opportunities, weaknesses, and threats (SWOT) related to the project and the site.

STRENGTHS Existing Internal Advantages	WEAKNESSES Existing Internal Disadvantages	OPPORTUNITIES Potential External Improvement	THREATS Potential Negative Impacts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Location and access to Kenai River</li> <li>• Fishing location</li> <li>• Views of volcanoes</li> <li>• Wildlife viewing (birds and whales)</li> <li>• Cultural and historic resources</li> <li>• Existing recreation facilities</li> <li>• Adjacent to City center and connectivity</li> <li>• Volume of visitors to area (economic opportunities)</li> <li>• Good commercial opportunities along Bridge Access Road</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sensitive habitat and permit restrictions</li> <li>• Underutilized site</li> <li>• Shore and bluff stabilization needed</li> <li>• Safety</li> <li>• High amount of land in private ownership</li> <li>• Tidal influence and shallow water depths</li> <li>• Lack of public access throughout site and challenging to access site</li> <li>• Aging and unused buildings/development</li> <li>• Bridge Access Road is too fast with high traffic volumes in summer</li> <li>• River access can be challenging (limited facilities and low tide)</li> <li>• Public has not fully bought into project</li> <li>• Maintenance will be high</li> <li>• Too far from City center</li> <li>• Improvements will be costly</li> <li>• Windy site</li> <li>• Lack of utilities on site</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expand recreation (RV's, camping ground, park, and open space)</li> <li>• Education (river ecology, history, fishing, natural resources)</li> <li>• River boardwalk along length and connected to City center</li> <li>• New businesses and investments</li> <li>• Capitalize on tourism</li> <li>• City/private partnerships and incentives for development</li> <li>• Make waterfront public (boardwalk) with parks and trails</li> <li>• Offer social opportunities for residents</li> <li>• Make visually and financially attractive for new investment</li> <li>• New commercial and retail business in a neighborhood setting</li> <li>• Provide facilities for those that do not dipnet</li> <li>• Develop eco-tourism opportunities</li> <li>• New housing</li> <li>• Expand commercial fishing</li> <li>• Increase/upgrade facilities to support sport fishing</li> <li>• Increase sales tax revenue</li> <li>• 'Put Kenai on the map'- create an authentic destination for all, year round</li> <li>• Increase property values</li> <li>• Encourage and support longer stays (activities, hotels, restaurants)</li> <li>• Potential harbor development and improved river access</li> <li>• Allow transportation of cargo</li> <li>• Remote work opportunities</li> <li>• Repurpose empty buildings and under-developed land</li> <li>• Instill a sense of pride in community</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Private ownership of land</li> <li>• River and bluff erosion</li> <li>• Lack of public knowledge/awareness (and support) of project</li> <li>• Shallow water and need to dredge</li> <li>• Preserving a healthy river and its fish</li> <li>• Weather and winter</li> <li>• Sewer and water utility challenges</li> <li>• Lack of interest and financing</li> <li>• Not having a clear vision of project</li> <li>• Chance for failure</li> <li>• Other communities move faster and are more attractive to investment</li> <li>• Lack of private/public partnership follow through</li> <li>• Costs and funding</li> <li>• Supply chain issues and shortage in workforce=higher costs</li> <li>• Economic challenges locally and nationally</li> <li>• Adjacent traffic congestion</li> <li>• River congestion and dipnet traffic</li> <li>• Sport fish vs. commercial fishing</li> <li>• Tidal challenges (access and mudflats)</li> <li>• Not all property owners will support or have same vision</li> <li>• Bad press</li> <li>• No investors=no project</li> <li>• High management and maintenance costs</li> <li>• Permitting and EPA requirements (red tape)</li> <li>• Variability in fish returns</li> <li>• Lack of community buy-in</li> <li>• Close mindedness of community members</li> <li>• City dock improvements/needs</li> </ul>

## Exercise #2: Goal Development

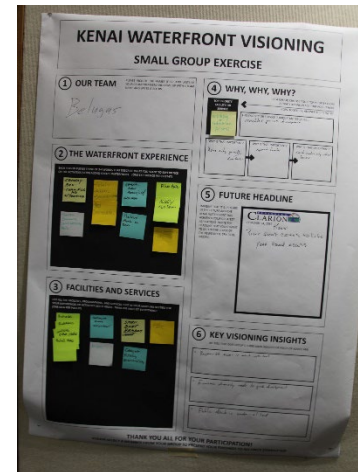
The second small group exercise explored the desired waterfront experience, and the facilities and services needed. The exercise also explored the long-term vision/tagline for the project and asked for any key insights that were made during the exercise.

### Desired Waterfront Experience

- Natural and river oriented
- Thriving
- Inspirational
- Relaxing
- Exciting
- Quiet
- Inviting
- In awe
- Walkable
- Enjoyable
- A true (authentic) Alaskan experience
- Enjoy awesome views (river and volcanoes)
- Provide postcard moments
- Allow to see Alaskans in action (working waterfront)
- Eating and socializing
- Shopping
- Local craft/art opportunities
- Highlight cannery row
- Balance of commercial fishing and sport fishing
- Experience local history
- Sustainable development
- Beautification
- River preservation
- Continuity along waterfront
- Experience arts, music, and culture
- Vibrant mixed-use area
- A fun place to spend money and time
- Make it Kenai appropriate, not a carnival
- Usable for all
- Needs to fit in with river

### Facilities and Services Needed

- River boardwalk
- Trails and pathways
- Restaurants and retail
- Dock and boat launch improvements
- Hotel
- Performance area (stage, pavilion)
- Park and open space (shelters, picnic, benches)
- Natural areas
- Improved river access
- Kenai marketplace
- High tower for exceptional views
- Faster internet
- Statues and artwork
- Lighting for year-round use
- Wind breaks
- RV park and campground
- Co-working space



- Dock for food and drink pick-up by boats
- Viewing platforms for wildlife and people watching
- Education center
- Defined roads and traffic patterns
- Interpretive signs
- Restrooms
- Utility extension and improvements
- Brew pub
- Parking
- Tackle and fishing support shops
- Oyster bar
- Banquet and convention center
- Walking tours

## Long Range Vision/Taglines

- Kenai Waterfront Voted Alaska's Greatest Gem.
- Turn Right to Kenai/Turn West at the Y.
- Kenai Named the Best Alaskan Community to Live In.
- Kenai Riverfront Comes to Life, Year-round.
- Kenai Celebrates Thriving Waterfront.



## Visioning Insights

- Just do it...make it happen!
- Needs to be a well-planned, year-round attraction.
- Include private landowners in process.
- Include history and culture in project.
- Keep public involved.
- High quality amenities.
- Kenai needs something to get people to visit us year-round.
- The site is an amazing 'invisible' resource (invisible to the community).
- What to do with the kids during dip netting? Provide family/children attractions.
- Responsible river access-critical.
- Economic diversity needs to guide development.
- Public dock is underutilized.
- Community, City Council, and Department support is critical.
- Everyone wants success.
- Development will enhance quality of life in Kenai.

## Exercise #3: Near-and Longer-Term Vision

To gather perspectives on near- and longer-term future visions, groups were asked the questions, "What will the project look like in 5-7 years?" and "What will the project area look like in 25-30 years?"

### In 5-7 years, the waterfront will be...

- Starting to be walkable.
- Moving forward as planned.
- A great place to go for a nature walk.
- Open for business.
- Just completing the waters of US permits.
- Used by the public.
- More community developed using the vision of this group. Maybe tax incentives to help.
- With project design and search of funding and PPP negotiation.
- In the development stage.
- Have an anchor facility such as a park that will attract investors.
- Under construction.
- Finished design and environmental impact statement- ready to begin construction.
- The place to be!
- Amazing!
- Stabilized.
- A visitors' center for all Alaska.
- A tourist site extraordinaire.
- A developing and vibrant mixed-use development.
- Finished new anchor business.
- Attracting investment in construction and remodel of buildings.
- Building and conceptual plan.
- A booming center of commerce- the place to meet.
- Somewhat planned out and funding options are being pursued.
- Expensive and hard to get.
- Transforming and developing.
- Instafamous.
- Thriving!
- A year-round facility and experience.
- Have a waterfront boardwalk.
- Fighting with Corps of Engineers to get approval to proceed.
- Booming with lots of revenue.



## In 25 years, the waterfront will be...

- Complete growing and being renovated because revenue is great.
- A nightlife and shopping destination.
- Full of life and business.
- Thriving.
- A historic waterfront destination.
- The year-round destination on the peninsula.
- A commercial fishing economic center.
- Bustling for all to enjoy its scenic views by way of RV park, trails, boardwalk, and boat-ins for coffee while dip netting.
- A tourist attraction.
- Place for youth to play, great for seniors.
- Alaska's premier experience.
- Booming.
- Robust mix of business, tourism, and quality living.
- Developed as the community center for all to enjoy.
- Maxed out for space.
- A destination that is highly visited by tourists and locals.
- The city center and thriving.
- A park full of trees and customers.
- A vibrant community center that brings pride to Kenai.
- Restored and rehabilitated to functional recreation and public use facility.
- An economic and cultural driver on the peninsula.
- A vital part of the community that is well known.
- A destination.
- Thriving year round.
- Economically independent.
- All taken.
- A thriving center of Kenai, with restaurants, and the world-famous Kenai Market Boardwalk.
- Renovating and expanding - maybe.
- A destination for visitors year-round. Community with public space, housing, and retail.
- Crowded with families, laughter, and successful business.
- Established and vision of success.
- Thriving and still expanding.



## Exercise #4: No Matter What...

Groups were then asked to set some limits on their vision of waterfront revitalization by defining what needs to change and what cannot be changed.

### No matter what, change...

- The functionality, aim, and purpose of portions of the property.
- The zoning to match the vision of the people.
- Access to amenities on the waterfront from boats.
- All but the dock.
- Need more development but continue asking for input from public.
- That we will not sell out for money.
- Must consider best management practices to maintain ecological sustainability.
- Has been good.
- Will happen.
- Highway frontage needs to be cleaned up!
- Has to happen to stay relevant.
- Public access.
- Upgrade basic systems and signage.
- The community access and engagement.
- What's going on right now!
- The lack of easy access to the river, especially at low tide.
- Lack of vision currently.
- Lack of access to city land.
- City dock!
- The fact that there are things to do in Kenai.
- The waterfront district by adding infrastructure and parks for all to enjoy.
- Our community sense of the area. It should be visible.
- All the rundown businesses. Road needs improvement.
- Healthy.
- Will happen so let's get in front.
- Needs to be positive for the citizens of Kenai.
- Will be inevitable.
- Is bound to come, so we can get involved and make sure it is sustainable for Alaskans.
- Will inspire the imagination, growth, ownership within our city.

## No matter what, do NOT change...

- Views of river and mountains.
- The health of the Kenai River.
- The Kenai history.
- The rich history of the area.
- Our vision for our future.
- Nature's beauty.
- Healthy habitat.
- Public access.
- The opportunity to grow and improve access to the riverfront.
- The views available to the public.
- Functionality of the waterfront and its history.
- No comment- I like change and progress 😊.
- The part of the river that reflects fish, nature, and how we can experience.
- The small town feeling.
- The fishing and canneries.
- Existing cultural, historical, and natural qualities.
- Without thinking all the way through the end of possibilities.
- The ecology of the waterfront. Develop with sensitivity to the environment.
- The natural beauty.
- The views of the area. Get public buy in for any project that moves forward.
- The view!
- Growth.
- The ideals of good stewardship for our beautiful river.
- Kenai's heart, and don't chase off the caribou.
- Access for the people and commerce.
- Views open to the public.
- Subsistence.
- Historical commercial fishing and public access.



## Exercise 5: Great Idea

The last exercise of the vision work session asked groups, *"My great idea for this project is..."*

- A walkable waterfront community that has something to offer visitors and locals all year round. A Brewery!! Kenai can make it happen.
- Should have mixed use - need to take advantage of commerce/industry with access to the river and mix with tourism initiatives.
- Animal conservation center.

- Walking trails and boardwalk.
- Park.
- Boardwalk.
- Large building for year-round use.
- Multi-function center.
- Convention center. (3X)
- Music venue in the park.
- Public space for city.
- Centralized event location.
- Review city basic plan every ten years.
- Usable buildings.
- Should be usable year-round - continued community input because it won't be successful without it.
- Convention/banquet facility to put Kenai on the map.
- Tax incentives by the city, so private development can make it happen.
- To finally see Kenai as another wonder of the world; groups like this need to keep up the push!
- Anchor business to bring people to the area (figurative anchor, not literal).
- Water taxis to deliver on the river (pizza and coffee to your boat!).
- Mixed use for commercial and personal access.
- Theme is Kenai centered, unique to our city.
- Pikes Place type area. This can happen if city and public work together.
- Food with the view! Renewable income every year.
- Incorporate the history and culture of Kenai.
- Shuttle around city, or bike rentals with map of city.
- Kenai River boardwalk. From bird viewing platform to bluff erosion zone. A co-op between City and private landowners.
- Working with, not against, those currently using the space.
- For the winter, build a toboggan run as a family activity. Kind of like a water slide.
- A high tower with restaurant and viewing platform.



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