

Rural Communities and Lifestyles

"The issue is not whether we want change – growth and change are likely inevitable. The real issue is whether and how residents, businesses and communities might guide this growth to benefit their communities." Ed McMahon, *Designing for Community Workshop*, 1998

"Why can't Alaska's built environment – its stores, shops, hotels, gas stations – come closer to matching the beauty, the quality of our natural environment?" Chris Beck, *Designing for Community Workshop*, 1998

"Sense of Place – What is It?... Places that have it: connected to local history and natural setting, authentic and memorable, interesting to explore, offer lots of choices, reward curiosity, reveal stories, reflect and celebrate what is special about a place." *Designing for Community Workbook*, 1999



Residents of the Denali Borough live amidst dramatic scenery in and around the Alaska Range. The Borough has a strong sense of place, dictated in part by its remoteness from urban areas and amenities and the extreme climate. People who choose to live here love the challenge, the rural lifestyle, the ability to harvest healthy, wild foods and the ready access to wild natural landscapes with few restrictions on their use of public lands or their ability to manage their own private land. But growth and development pose perpetual risks to the rural Alaskan lifestyle and sense of place treasured by residents. Those who have invested in homes on the edge of the Alaskan wilderness for the quiet, the wildlife, the lifestyle, and the public lands access want some assurance that these qualities will be protected. While there is a strong sense of community among Borough residents, there is a real desire for a physical community – a town center – that can serve as a gathering place and focal point of the larger community. DCC seeks to preserve and enhance the unique landscape and way of life in the Denali Borough and its constituent communities.

Design for Community

In 1998 and 1999, a broad spectrum of residents concerned about development in the Denali Borough held a series of workshops under the banner *Designing for Community*. DCC supports the strategies for community planning and development that were outlined in the [Designing for Community workshop and workbook](#). These eight strategies are:

1. Develop a shared community vision to guide growth.

2. Minimize regulations while emphasizing education and incentives. Land use regulation is an appropriate tool in instances where there is widespread agreement on the goals of regulation.
3. Develop sites and design buildings to contribute to community sense of place.
4. Promote the development of traditional town centers, particularly in Healy.
5. Promote trails and pedestrian connections within and between communities. Both motorized and non-motorized trail connections are important, along with a bike trail paralleling the Parks Highway through the Borough.
6. Build on and link to natural assets.
7. Manage highways to enhance sense of place and community.
8. Tell good stories: provide information on history, current life, and the natural environment to link people to place.

Design for the Denali Borough Municipal Land Entitlements

Upon becoming a Borough, by statute the Denali Borough became entitled to over [40,000 acres of state land](#) within the boundaries of the new municipality. The determination of those lands is now largely complete. The development of the municipal entitlements, many located in accessible areas near existing roads, will be one of the greatest factors influencing the character of the Denali Borough in the future. DCC believes development should follow the principles of *Designing for Community*. New subdivisions should be laid out thoughtfully, respecting the contours of the land and important areas of wildlife habitat and migration. Motorized and non-motorized trails should be platted along with roads. Consideration should be given to providing planning for future town centers. By taking such steps, the rural quality of life of the Denali Borough can be preserved even as the community grows.

Protect the Yanert Valley and Montana Creek, Wolf Townships, and Denali Highway

These three key chunks of public land (having a combination of federal, state, and Borough ownership) are important both for wildlife habitat and public recreation, and should be preserved for these uses. These scenic lands provide important recreational opportunities distinct from those offered in the national park, and are particularly important for locals and Alaskans. They also provide additional opportunities for out-of-state visitors who want to participate in activities not available within the Denali National Park. All three of these areas encompass important wildlife habitat for caribou and other animals that move back and forth across the national park boundary. DCC supports the habitat and public recreation designation of state lands under the *Yukon-Tanana Area Plan*, and believes the Denali Borough must be particularly careful in its management of municipal lands in the eastern Wolf Townships, surrounding Montana Creek, and along the Denali Highway.

Keep Natural Gas Exploration and Development out of Habitat, Recreation and Residential Areas

The [Usibelli Coal Mine's natural gas project](#) could result in an industrial infrastructure extending into local communities and lands important for local residents, recreation and wildlife habitat, such as the Wolf Townships. DCC believes such development is inappropriate west of the Nenana River, where most people live and where the most sensitive lands for recreation and habitat are found. In no instance should gas development infrastructure and impacts extend into people's yards. The Denali Borough is big enough to protect outstanding communities and residential areas while still having outstanding resource development projects; however they cannot be in exactly the same place if we are to achieve excellence in both.