



2015

# Elderberry Park Master Plan Assessment of Existing Conditions

Municipality of Anchorage

With assistance from Earthscape, LLC

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ELDERBERRY PARK MASTER PLAN ASSESSMENT OF EXISTING CONDITIONS

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## ELDERBERRY PARK MASTER PLAN ASSESSMENT OF EXISTING CONDITIONS

## Introduction

Elderberry is one of the few Anchorage Parks that is easily accessible from downtown Anchorage. It is unique in this aspect as it is seldom used for programmed activity and functions very much as a neighborhood park. It provides playgrounds, scenic views, and trail access that are embraced by Anchorage citizens, and more so by the local neighborhood. Also, it offers unparalleled views of Cook Inlet and Mt. Susitna and many visitors flock the park to take photos and enjoy spectacular sunsets and the changing landscape of Cook Inlet.

This document provides an overview of Elderberry Park as it exists today. It provides an evaluation of site features and site users, and offers an analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of current use within the park. Lastly, within an appendix it provides a photo tour of the site to help readers understand what features exist within the park.

## Physical Site Features

### Geology & Soils

Elderberry Park lies in the lower portion of the remnants of slide activity from previous earthquakes. This provides a bench from which views to the west provide an overview of the Tordrillo Mountains, Cook Inlet, and Mt. Susitna. Soils in the local area tend to be a mix of organics and silts that are typical of the coastal location in this part of Anchorage. The soils overlay deep layers of Bootlegger Cove Clay that have narrow pockets of sands and silts imbedded within the clay, owing to ancient estuarine deposits.

### Slope

The site is composed of two areas of slope, rough defined by the central walk/trail that runs from north to south. Areas on the eastern side of the site tend to feature slopes of approximately 10% (1 foot drop every 10 feet approximately) with a bench at the location of the central plaza/walkway. The site then drops relatively steeply west of the central walk, at an approximate slope of 35% or 1' vertical: 3' horizontal. This change is related to the slope that was installed when the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail undercrossing of the railroad tracks required substantial cut to traverse under the tracks. There is a retaining wall that runs along much of the trail as it descends to the tunnel with height that varies from 2 feet to approximately 4 feet.

### Drainage

Other than drainage at the entrance to the Alaska Railroad Crossing tunnel, drainage on site flows on the ground surface to the west. Soils are relatively free-draining, limiting the amount of ponding after rain events. The western facing slopes allow relatively quick drainage of accumulated ice and snow at breakup, making the site a relatively usable site by the public early in the spring season. A sub-drain with drain inlets addresses drainage for the tunnel under the railroad tracks.

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## Vegetation



Figure 1 Stressed birch near entry walk

Vegetation consists of ornamental plantings that include a mix of birch and spruce trees for most areas. The site is generally open, offering views throughout the park. A planting of Siberian pea provides a hedge between the playground and 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue. There are attractive mountain ash trees near the playground that provide some color and berries. There are also some ornamental shrubs that are scattered at various locations, primarily near the 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue sidewalk and near Oscar Anderson House.

Vegetation is in generally good shape. Exceptions are two birch trees near the western end of the diagonal walk that connects from the 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue/M Street intersection to the central plaza. Those two trees appear stressed with large cracks at the base of the trees. One tree also leans markedly, possibly a reaction to previous construction activity coupled with crowding by the adjacent tree.

## Utilities

### Electrical

Electrical service to the park is provided by ML&P from a power pole located on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue. From the power pole, the power drops from overhead service into a transformer south of the utility building near the parking lot on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue. The electrical service serves lighting and the utility building

### Lighting

Lighting is provided from wood poles with cobra head fixtures along the north side of 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue, from metal poles and luminaires along the main central walk/trail, and from metal poles and luminaires along the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail. Most of the luminaires are in working condition.

### Sewer and Water

A wastewater line is located in the M Street right-of-way. Water service is available in both M Street and 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue. An existing structure on the site previously served as a restroom thus water and sewer service was available. Water service is still available. The condition of the old sewer line is unknown.

### Fuel Pipeline

Construction plans for the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail indicate a “10” Tesoro” pipeline is located under the western side of the western tunnel entrance. According to plan drawings the line is approximately 7 feet below the tunnel trail surface.

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## User Groups

Following is a list of user groups who visit the park. Each is a generalization of a “use” group though the edges of the “groups” are blended and any one user may be a part of several of the identified “user groups.”

### Neighborhood families

Neighborhood families visit the park to use the playground and to “run around” the open space that is available within the park. The park is an opportunity to combine a shoreline exploration with stops at the playground, to hoot and holler in the tunnel, wave at trains, have a stop at the Hannah Cove overlook, and to view ships, wildlife, and people along the linear walk provided by the trail. Neighborhood users also use the park as a launch point for a bike ride as well. This group uses the park on a daily or weekly basis.

### Trail Users

Trail users begin and end many trips at Elderberry Park. Many are locals while many are visitors to Anchorage. According to trail counts in 2014, the Elderberry trailhead served 162,899 pedestrians and 87,339 cyclists between January 1 and December 24, 2014. Saturday is the busiest day of the week, with June and July being the busiest months. The Municipality of Anchorage and the Alaska Railroad Corporation are actively discussing connecting the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail with Ship Creek. This may increase the numbers of trail users who would consider beginning their trips at Elderberry Park since there would be more options on the direction of travel and available scenic views to the north. This group uses the park on a daily basis.

### Passive Users

This includes residents who visit the park to simply sit and enjoy the views, the setting western sun, or the floating ice. Passive users are particularly apparent on sunny days and when the sunset is colorful. While some seating is available on benches or at picnic tables, many simply sit on the sloping lawn. Some may bring a snack or lunch. Many passive users are noon visitors that are taking a break from the work day. These visitors are most apparent on warm summer days though many visit to watch the winter sky and landscape, including the floating ice as it moves up and down Cook Inlet/Knik Arm.

### Tourists/Visitors

The site is often visited by tourists that are staying or visiting the downtown area. Elderberry Park offers unobstructed views of Cook Inlet and is within easy walking distance of area hotels and restaurants. Also, tourists and visitors who rent bicycles are often directed to Elderberry Park as a point to reach the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail.

### History Interests

Many people visit the park in order to make a stop at the Oscar Anderson House and to view interpretive material about early Anchorage and Oscar Anderson that is located west of the house on a three-sided kiosk. Also, the basement of the Oscar Anderson House serves as the headquarters for The Alaska Association for Historic Preservation and some visitors are interested in stopping by the office to visit or get information. History buffs visit Elderberry Park on a daily basis, more often when the Oscar

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Anderson House is open, advertised as offering tours in the summer, Tuesdays through Sundays from noon till 4pm.

### Performance Uses

Elderberry Park offers a nice backdrop for art installations and performance art. In January 2015, Elderberry Park was the site of an installation by the artist's group "Light Brigade." The installation garnered interest from the press and the general public. Light Brigade used a collection of art pieces installed both in the park and in the tunnel to inspire visitors with light and sound.

### Dog Walkers

Dog walkers are typically neighborhood users and use Elderberry Park as a location to walk dogs and to embark on a walk with their dogs on the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail. Thus it is a subset of both "neighborhood families" and "trail users". They typically have "doggie bags" for waste cleanup and often use Elderberry Park as part of a loop to Westchester Lagoon or downtown. Dog walkers are daily users.

### Nuisance Activity

"Nuisance Activity" includes activity that is not in concert with the intended use of the parkland.

Anchorage Police Department reports for the park indicate 12 reports in 2014, 10 in 2013, 17 in 2012, 10 in 2011, and 12 in 2010. The chart below groups the reported police calls by category. "Miscellaneous" includes graffiti, parole violations, warrant arrests, found property, agency assistance, medical calls, and missing persons.

*Table 1 Police Reports, Years 2010-2014*

Year	Disturbance	Liquor	Drug	Theft/Robbery	Assault/Rape	Miscellaneous
2014	2	2	1	2	2	3
2013	2	1	1	2	3	1
2012	1	1	1	1	2	11
2011	3	2	0	1	1	3
2010	0	0	0	4	1	7



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## Strengths/Weaknesses/Opportunities/Threats

Uses in the park as designed include the following, with a listing of the conflicts and opportunities posed by the uses or to those uses:

### Parking Area



Figure 2 Parking lot

Avenue right-of-way.

The parking area provides spaces for 12 vehicles. There is no charge for parking. The parking area is used both by park users and by those making trips to downtown and needing a parking space for a short period of time. Parking is limited to two hours thus the parked cars are encouraged to move on a routine basis. Handicap spaces are not provided and curb cuts are available only on the corners of the curb returns at the east and west ends of the parking lot. The parking lot is on parkland, not within the 5<sup>th</sup>

**Strengths:** The parking area recognizes the “community” character provided by the park and recognizes that it is a full community asset. Thus it provides parking for a demand within the community. Also, given that the park functions as one of the limited trailheads to the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail, it provides parking for that use.

**Weaknesses:** The parking lot could be much larger and still there would be more demand. On the other hand, the presence of a parking lot at all changes the venue to some degree from a “neighborhood” park to a “community” park.

**Opportunities:** Requiring payment for parking may discourage non-park related use from parking in the lot. Paid parking may also generate revenue for Municipal purposes. Depending on the direction of public input, charging for parking may discourage use by non-neighborhood visitors, encouraging more neighborhood use.

**Threats:** While the parking lot is intended for use by park users who drive to the park, it is often used for short periods of time by visitors to downtown who are avoiding paying for parking that is available across the street.

### Playground

The playground does not meet current national guidelines for playgrounds, having changes in elevations between play functions, non-accessible play functions that do not meet accessibility guidelines, and having a surface that does not meet fall requirements. Accessible play surfacing is provided to the northernmost piece of play equipment and that surface was installed to both provide accessible surfacing while also meeting fall requirements.



Figure 3 Mountain Ash trees near playground

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Figure 4 Tunnel allows passage of coastal trail under railroad tracks

**Strengths:** The playground provides a clear and important service to the neighborhood. There are few neighborhood parks within the immediate area that provide play apparatus with the nearest playground being approximately ½ mile away at Pioneer Park or Inlet View Elementary School.

**Weaknesses:** The play area is not readily seen from the street due to the presence of vegetation. Also, the equipment is aging and the play surfacing does not meet current playground safety requirements. Further, the changes in elevation do not provide for an accessible playground.

**Opportunities:** The play area is important to maintaining the “neighborhood” function of the park. It also provides one of the few “tot” lots in the community.

**Threats:** At some point the playground will require upgrading. Replacing the play equipment will be expensive and at a time of decreasing revenues and a focus on other park funding priorities, it may be difficult to find adequate funding for replacement.

## Open Areas

The open areas provide relatively level picnic grounds in the eastern portions of the park and near the northern trail junction. The areas nearer the main trail are relatively steeply sloping, graded towards the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail and its tunnel crossing of the ARRC tracks. There are numbers of trees in the park, most of which are in good shape. The trees near the lower end of the diagonal path that leads from the 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue/M Street intersection are stressed.

**Strengths:** The open areas provide outstanding views and a natural surface upon which to sit and enjoy the views that are available. There is some level area available for picnicking in the eastern portion of the open area.

**Weaknesses:** While there is some picnic area available, the demand for places to have a picnic is high and the available level terrain is low in quantity. The sloped area west of the main trail is too steeply sloping for anything other than sitting on the grass and enjoying the view. Children can enjoy running up and down the sloping areas but risk crashing into the fence above the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail. That fence is in disrepair at its southern end posing a safety hazard and requiring installation of a temporary warning fence.



Figure 5 Open area in eastern portion of park

**Opportunities:** The slope is an asset of the park and allows for viewing the spectacular landscape over the heads of others due to the elevation difference. Also, visitors enjoy running up the hills and tumbling down the slopes. The slopes provide an opportunity for tiered picnic and view sites if desired by the master plan process.

**Threats:** The eastern area tends to get overused for viewing and picnicking, especially near the central plaza. Trees at the southern end of the diagonal



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entry walk may be in a deteriorating stage. The western side of the area, at the low end of the slope, may pose a safety problem at some point should the fence fall in disrepair, a condition that exists at its southern end. The increasing numbers of visitors to the site may detract from the overall park experience at some point and may produce further degradation of turfed surfaces.



Figure 2 Park entry at 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue/M Street



Figure 3 Central walkway

### Circulation

There are several walks and trails within the park. There are 5-foot wide sidewalks on both 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue and M Street, on the south and east boundaries of the park. A 5-foot wide diagonal concrete walk extends from the 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue/M

Street intersection northwest to the central plaza and is marked with a park entry sign. That walk does not comply with accessibility codes, with slopes that exceed requirements. Further, it has steps that would preclude wheelchair use. A second 5-foot wide diagonal walk extends from M Street heading southwest to connect to the central plaza. This walkway appears to comply with accessibility criteria and has a curb cut on M Street to facilitate wheelchair access.

There is a sidewalk that connects from M Street to the Oscar Anderson House and provides access down steps to the central walkway. It also provides a connection to the north

side of Oscar Anderson House where the Alaska Association for Historic Preservation is housed. That walk generally has acceptable grades but has cross slopes that would be challenging for wheelchair travel. The steps have handrails but the handrails do not strictly comply with accessibility criteria.

The central walkway/trail is approximately 10-feet wide, providing a link from the parking lot to the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail. The walkway provides a connection to the play area and passes by the central plaza. This trail is the designated route from the parking lot to the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail and provides signing designating it as such. The trail generally meets accessibility criteria with the exception of approximately a 100-foot long stretch just north of the central plaza.

**Strengths:** The circulation system provides for most pedestrian needs within the park as indicated by the general lack of social trails in the park. The system protects vegetated areas from degradation for the most part and the walks are placed in locations that have prevented most short-circuiting.

**Weaknesses:** The park in its current configuration is now 30 years old and the walkways are in various stages of degradation. The central walkway has been repaired but other walks are not in good shape for the most part. There is not a fully “accessible route” through the park that provides access to the Tony

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Knowles Coastal Trail, as grades or steps preclude full accessibility. Curb cuts are provided at the parking lot, at the M Street walk noted above, and at Oscar Anderson House. However, none of these



Figure 4 Amenities along central trail

are clear locations at which cyclists would expect to gain access to the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail. Wayfinding from the street to the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail is thus poor until users gain access to the central walkway which has signage indicating the direction to the trail.

**Opportunities:** The various topography is challenging but provides the opportunities for using terrain to create interesting trail layouts while accommodating user needs. Also, the length of the park relative to key locations allows enough distance to achieve accessible routes should the park be redeveloped. This park is one of the few trailheads for the

Tony Knowles Coastal Trail and this setting and its proximity to downtown has the potential to create a very strong trailhead. In particular, there should be a suitable location for the trailhead to the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail that provides a direct and easily-found beginning that does not infringe on other use within the park.

**Threats:** The walkway/trail uses within the park create conflicts between those wishing to stand and linger along the trail and those looking to “get to” the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail. This could result in accidents or simply in uncomfortable confrontations between user groups. Also, that same use of the trail as a conveyance to the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail also conflicts with the other neighborhood uses within the park.

### Central Plaza

The central plaza was a focal point of the park and was to be the primary viewing location for park users. It originally featured benches, wood retaining walls, and a wood platform, all of which have deteriorated and been removed. At present it is a worn piece of concrete that has little purpose other than providing a location that is in the center from which a number of people could gather. Benches along the main trail provide seating opportunities which are not available in the plaza.

**Strengths:** The plaza is a central gathering place and a delivery point for the two diagonal walks that enter the park. It is level whereas much of the park is rolling or sloped. People can sit in the plaza and not be in the path of travel. All other benches are directly adjacent to the trail and are subject to vagaries of passing people interrupting their view, dogs nosing along the trail, or small children wandering aimlessly.

**Weaknesses:** The plaza lacks amenities or any definition as to its intended purpose. While it previously provided seating, that no longer exists. The plaza seems to be a focal point without a function.

**Opportunities:** The plaza is at the center of the park and is an outstanding location for amenities such as viewing scopes, seating, and interpretive material, possibly including the “Planet Mars” planet walk kiosk.

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**Threats:** If poorly conceived and not carefully organized, the plaza could turn into the focus of a confusion of tourists looking for views, parents watching children at the playground, and a constant parade of cyclists and walkers trying to get to the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail.



Figure 5 Kiosk near Oscar Anderson house

### Amenities

There are numbers of amenities within the park that serve park users. Those amenities include the following:

- Entry signage denoting the entrance to Elderberry Park
- A utility building that previously was a men's and women's restroom
- Seating along the main access trail
- Planet Mars—interpretive material as part of the planet walk
- Oscar Anderson House interpretive material
- A whale play piece at the north end of the park
- Miscellaneous picnic tables
- Tony Knowles Coastal Trail map that includes Anchorage trail system

**Strengths:** These pieces are fundamental to providing a usable park. The interpretive material in particular is well viewed by hundreds and even thousands of people. The picnic tables and benches are well-used and important to the park use. The whale piece is a nice “find” by people as they travel from south to north within the park. The Oscar Anderson House interpretive material is a nice introduction to the house and entices people to investigate further, possibly visiting the house museum. The park is a key connection to the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail and an orientation map is needed and heavily viewed.



Figure 6 Planet Mars kiosk and interpretive material

**Weaknesses:** Other than the Oscar Anderson House interpretive material, the other interpretive pieces present lost opportunities. The Planet Mars kiosk is not viewed since it is not on a main walkway. The Tony Knowles Coastal Trail map is directly adjacent to the trail and those viewing the map often cause congestion at a location where people are watching for multiple trail users, some of which are unseen and around the corner as cyclists near the tunnel. Benches are directly adjacent to the trail and do not offer much separation for those sitting on them from trail users. Picnic tables have no sense of permanence and appear scattered as opposed to logically placed. The whale structure seems unassociated with other park features.

**Opportunities:** Amenities are important to users within the park. The park entry sign should be located at a fully accessible entry point or a second sign should provide some direction to users. While seating along the trail is reasonable and suitable, other seating should be located such that there is refuge from trail users. Additional interpretive material should be provided to explain the spectacular scenery evident at the site. A viewing scope could be an appropriate amenity.

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The trail map of Anchorage should be located at a suitable trailhead that provides a point of beginning for exploration of the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail, separated from other park uses.

Threats: Continued maintenance of existing patterns will continue conflicts and may result in accidents or confrontations between user groups.

## Appendix A—Photo Inventory of Elderberry Park



## ELDERBERRY PARK MASTER PLAN ASSESSMENT OF EXISTING CONDITIONS



1. The Elderberry Park entry sign as seen from the 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue and M Street intersection. It is difficult to determine that this is actually the park entrance. The walkway from this location is not in compliance with ADAAG requirements due to slopes exceeding 5% and steps that restrict access by the disabled.



2. The 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue and M Street intersection provides views into the park which is good for security and entices people into the park.



3. The sidewalk along 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue is against the back of curb. Traffic volumes are generally low and traffic speed is relatively slow.

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4. The Mars interpretive kiosk is a link in the Planet Walk and is located along 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue, just west of the park entrance corner. Its location tends to be missed by most people. It would benefit from a more prominent location where there are more people present.



5. The utility building was a former restroom that is no longer used for that purpose. The building has water service and provides storage. It is heated but is not usable by park visitors.



6. The parking lot is located along 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue. It is almost always occupied and many users are not parking in order to use the park. Some are using the parking lot for undesirable activities and some use the parking lot to gain access to the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail.



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7. The central trail starts from the parking lot at the south and connects to the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail. It is the designated route to the trail but carries cyclists through an area that is the central plaza and a gathering point for pedestrians.



8. Play area as seen from the walkway that connects from the 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue/M Street intersection. The playground is not accessible and does not meet current playground standards for much of the equipment and surfacing. Play equipment includes two climbing structures and one swingset. Grade changes between play equipment limits use by the disabled.



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9. The slope from the central walkway and parking area leads to a fence that prevents accidental falls to the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail. The fence is in need of repair. The slope is little used though does provide a slope from which to enjoy the view and sunbathe in the summer.



10. The walkway from the park entrance at the 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue intersection to the park central plaza exceeds ADAAG handicapped accessibility requirements. Steps provide further problems from an accessibility standpoint and are deteriorating as noted by paint.



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11. View of picnic area located near 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue and M Street intersection, above (east of) central plaza and walkway.



12. View of slope north of the plaza. It is primarily used for viewing Cook Inlet and sunning on sunny summer days.



13. View to Mt. Susitna from central plaza and walkway. This view entices many residents and tourists to visit the park and enjoy the view.



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14. A picnic table and “whale play element” are located near the intersection of the main walkway and the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail, near Oscar Anderson House.



15. A kiosk provides information about Oscar Anderson and his family’s residence, as well as other historical information.

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Cut-through traffic  
near Oscar Anderson  
House

16. A cut-through near the Oscar Anderson House entrance provides direct access to the Tony Knowles Coastal Trail and is used by both foot traffic and cyclists who do not want to haul bicycles down the stairs that provide the only access down the slope at this location.

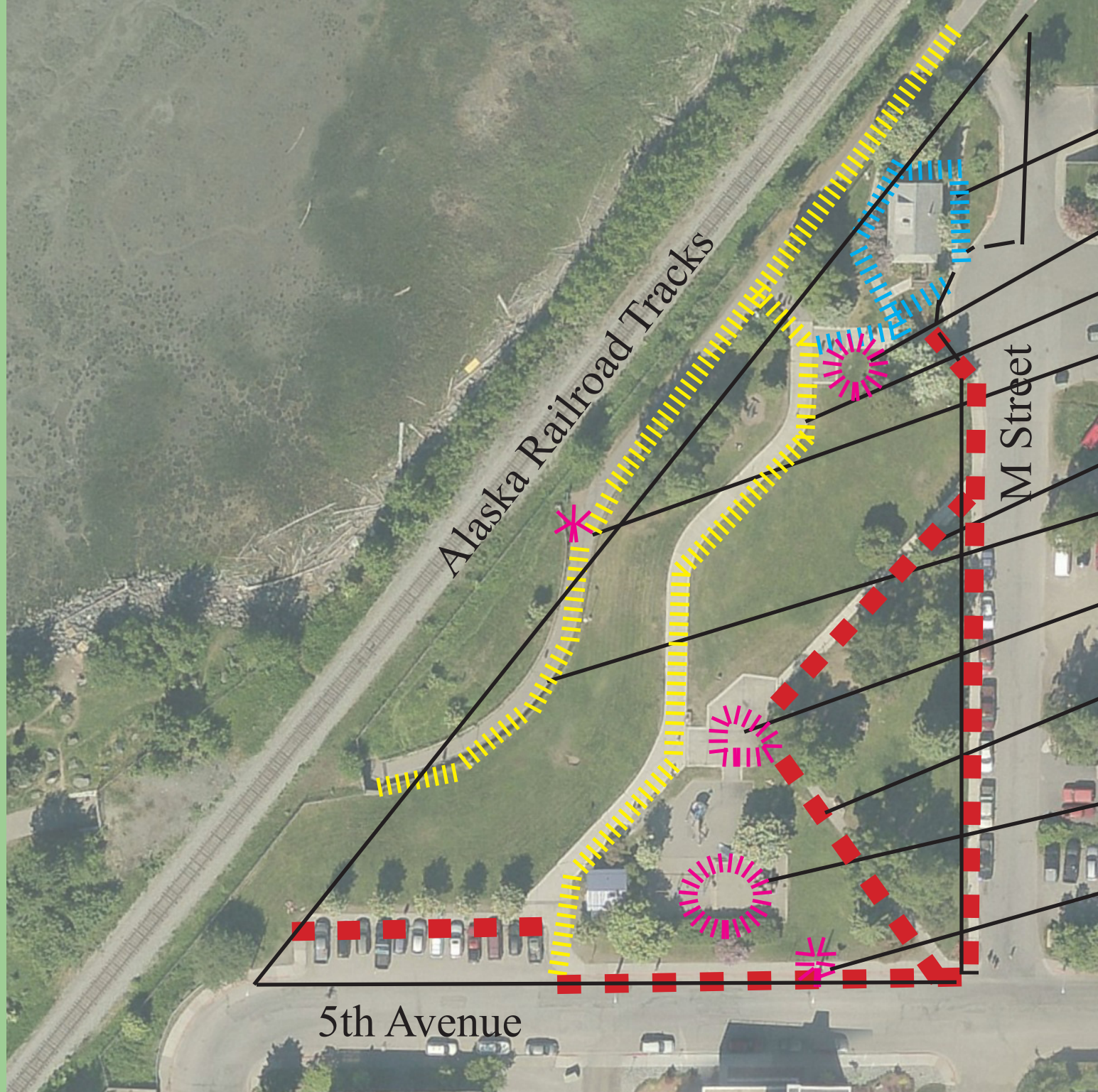


Oscar Anderson House

17. The Historical Oscar Anderson House. The main entrance is to the right. Stairs provide access down the slope. The walkway in view on the left side of the photo provides access to the basement which serves as an office for the Alaska Association for Historic Preservation. That walkway also provides access to the northern end of M Street.



# Site Circulation



Sidewalks for Oscar Anderson House

Oscar Anderson House Kiosk

Central Walkway

Trail Map

M Street Diagonal Walk

Tony Knowles Coastal Trail

Main Plaza

5th Avenue/M Street Intersection  
Entry Walk

Playground

Planet Mars Interpretive Kiosk

## Legend

 Activity Node

 Main Circulation Route

 Oscar Anderson House Walks

 Sidewalks and Walkways

 Property Line

# Elderberry Park



  
100 Feet



# Site Strengths



Oscar Anderson House

Interpretive Materials

Spectacular Views

Picnicking

Slopes for Linger

Playground

Parking

Elderberry Park



100 Feet



# Site Weaknesses



- Hidden Areas
- Conflict between Traffic to TKCT and Passive Use
- Short-Circuit Social Trails
- Slopes Limit Use
- Trails Do Not Conform w/ ADA Accessibility
- Conflict between Traffic to TKCT and Passive Use
- Site Visibility to Play Area Restricted
- Parking Often Occupied by Non-Park Use

Elderberry Park



100 Feet



# Site Opportunities



- Better 'Front Yard' to Oscar Anderson House
- Separate TKCT Traffic from Passive and Internal Use
- Increase and Make Permanent Picnicking Opportunities
- Capitalize on View
- Use Slopes to Advantage
- Upgrade Play Area
- Keep Neighborhood Use
- Manage Parking Better

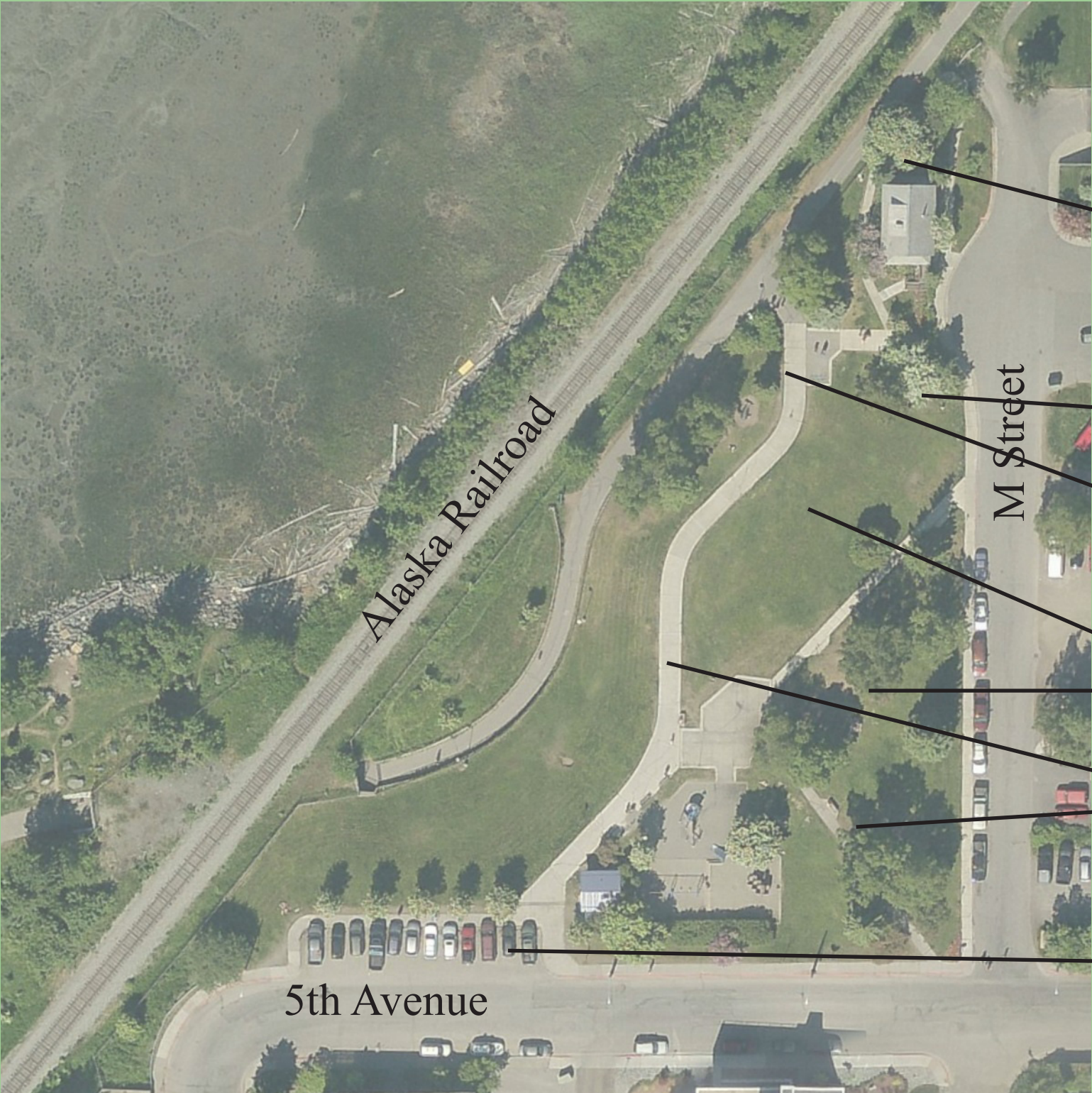
Elderberry Park



100 Feet



# Site Threats



- Vagrancy in Vicinity of Oscar Anderson House
- Continuation of Social Trails
- Conflicts between Trail and Park Users
- Overuse of Lawn Areas
- Grades Limit Access to Some Disabled Users
- Parking Conflicts

Elderberry Park



100 Feet