

Sitka Trail Plan 2023



Welcome

Dear community member,

The new Sitka Trail Plan is built from the input of thousands of public comments from Sitkans, the dedicated effort of the Trail Plan Committee, and consistent oversight by public land managers. This Plan is a direct descendant of the landmark 2003 Sitka Trail Plan and owes much of its structure and content to the work of those original planners. The tremendous success of that first collaborative planning document is shown on the ground, in the form of trails that cross jurisdictions and connect Sitkans from neighborhoods to outdoor destinations.

We seek to continue this success through a reinvigorated direction for maintaining, developing, and promoting Sitka's trails. These trails enhance public health, boost quality of life, and provide opportunities to interpret cultural heritage. Through partnerships with Sitka Trail Works, public agencies can leverage volunteerism, private philanthropy and grants, in-kind trail expertise, and shared maintenance resources, delivering the myriad public benefits of a diverse trail system at a lower cost.

Thank you,



Don MacKinnon, President
Sitka Trail Works



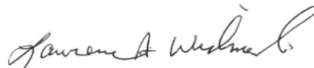
John Leach, Administrator
City and Borough of Sitka



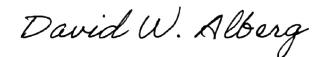
Eric Garner, Sitka District Ranger
USDA Forest Service



Ricky Gease, Director
Division of Parks & Outdoor Recreation
Alaska Department of Natural Resources



Lawrence "Woody" Widmark, Tribal Chairman
Sheet'ká Kwáan
Sitka Tribe of Alaska



David W. Alberg, Deputy Regional Director
Alaska Region
National Park Service

Executive Summary

The 2023 Sitka Trail Plan focuses on the greater Sitka area, the entire City and Borough of Sitka on Baranof, Kruzof, southern Chichagof and outlying islands, encompassing over 50 formal trails. The Sitka Trail Plan calls for 13 new trails and 11 trail reconstructions. The Plan also includes recommendations for policy, programming, and infrastructure to enhance outdoor recreation in Sitka.

This Plan is based on the 2003 Sitka Trail Plan, which had considerable success in expanding and diversifying the trail network, creating some of Sitka's most popular outdoor destinations. The previous plan proposed 13 trail reconstructions, and 11 of them were at least partially completed. Additionally, 22 new trails were proposed, and half of these projects were fully or partially completed, resulting in the construction of over 18 miles of new trails. The new infrastructure, largely funded by federal grants, has greatly benefited the community by improving public health, promoting economic development, and enhancing overall quality of life. Millions of dollars in federal grants have helped to stimulate

the local economy through increased wages and spending, while the new trails have created business opportunities for local guiding companies and attracted more visitors to Sitka.

This new Trail Plan comes at an opportune time with the recent surge in federal infrastructure spending. With well-researched, concrete trail proposals ready to present to public and private investors, Sitka can leverage upcoming grant opportunities for community development.

The town of Sitka (est. population 8,000) is a small island community surrounded by rainforest. Residents live close to the land, with far higher rates of outdoor recreation and subsistence harvesting than national averages. Given this affinity, and the limited road system, infrastructure to better access public lands commands exceptionally high levels of public support. A community survey garnered responses from over ten percent of the adult population, which helped inform and guide this 2023 Sitka Trail Plan.

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TABLE OF ACRONYMS

City and Borough of Sitka

CBS

Alaska Department of Natural
Resources

DNR

United States Department
of Agriculture Forest Service

USDA FS

Sheet'ká Kwáan Sitka Tribe of Alaska

STA

Alaska Dept. of Transportation
and Public Facilities

DOT&PF

Southeast Alaska Land Trust

SEALT

Shee Atiká, Incorporated

SAI

Federal Energy
Regulatory Commission

FERC

National Environmental Policy Act

NEPA

Halibut Point Road

HPR

Sawmill Creek Road

SMC

University of Alaska

UAS

Project List / Maintenance

| TRAIL PROJECT | PAGE | LENGTH | ESTIMATED COST* | RESPONSIBLE AGENCIES & PROJECT PARTNERS |
|--|------|-----------|-----------------|--|
| Cross Trail to <u>Kaasda Héen</u> (Indian River) | 38 | 0.3 mile | \$187,462 | CBS, USDA FS, DNR, Baranof Island Housing Authority (BIHA) |
| Gavan Hill Reroute | 40 | 2.1 miles | \$3,382,813 | USDA FS |
| Upper Cross Trail | 42 | 1.2 miles | \$459,914 | USDA FS, CBS |
| Verstovia Reroute | 44 | 0.75 mile | \$427,450 | USDA FS, CBS |
| Fort Rousseau Causeway | 46 | 1.5 miles | Not Available | DNR |
| Mosquito Cove | 48 | 1.5 miles | \$336,177 | DNR, USDA FS |
| Medvejie Lake Trailhead Reroute | 50 | 0.2 mile | \$167,383 | CBS |
| Sealion Cove | 52 | 2.5 miles | \$589,352 | DNR |
| Lake Suloia | 54 | 0.65 mile | \$364,803 | USDA FS |
| Baranof Lake & Grotto Trail | 56 | 0.5 mile | \$292,452 | CBS, DNR, Baranof Property Owners Association (BPOA) |
| Port Alexander Trails | 58 | 1.6 miles | \$5,272,129 | USDA FS, DNR, Municipality |

*These conceptual level cost estimates are provided for planning purposes only. The total amount does not reflect inflation beyond 2023.

Project List / New Development

| TRAIL PROJECT | PAGE | LENGTH | ESTIMATED COST* | RESPONSIBLE AGENCIES & PROJECT PARTNERS |
|--|------|---------------|-----------------|---|
| North Swan Lake Connector | 60 | 0.2 mile | \$630,351 | CBS |
| Sitka High 5K Loop | 62 | 0.7 mile | \$964,571 | CBS, Sitka School District |
| <u>Kaasda Héen Underpass & Flume Trail</u> | 64 | 0.25 mile | \$504,811 | DOT&PF, NPS, SEALT |
| Price-Hillside Neighborhood Connector | 66 | 0.1 mile | \$1,255,578 | CBS |
| Mills Street Land Trust Connector | 68 | 0.05 mile | \$43,436 | CBS, SCLT |
| Halibut Point Road Improvements | 70 | 4.9 miles | \$30,869,540 | DOT&PF, CBS |
| Starrigavan Recreation Enhancements | 72 | Not Available | Not Available | USDA FS, CBS, DNR |
| Starrigavan Ridge Trail | 74 | 3.8 miles | \$1,770,916 | USDA FS, CBS |
| Eagle Dip Lake | 76 | 1.4 miles | \$1,216,324 | USDA FS |
| South Fork Starrigavan to Harbor Trail | 78 | 2.7 miles | \$1,682,146 | USDA FS |
| Harbor Mountain Lookout Tower Trail | 80 | 0.1 mile | \$221,433 | USDA FS |
| Lucky Chance Historic Trail | 82 | 9 miles | \$3,426,857 | USDA FS, CBS, FERC |
| South Sitka Sound Coastal Trail | 84 | 21 miles | \$16,804,763 | USDA FS, CBS, DNR |
| Marine Trails | 86 | Not Available | Not Available | USDA FS, CBS, DNR |
| Cabin Network | 87 | Not Available | Not Available | USDA FS, CBS, DNR |

*These conceptual level cost estimates are provided for planning purposes only. The total amount does not reflect inflation beyond 2023.

Chapter 1 / Why Sitka's Trails?

Benefits

In the last twenty years, the number and popularity of trails in Sitka has grown significantly. The 2022 General Survey¹ showed Sitkans recreate outdoors at rates far higher than the national average. Since time immemorial, the people of Sheet'ká have thrived from the abundance of the land. As a small town surrounded by vast natural areas, Sitkans engage in outdoor activities for exercise, subsistence harvesting, human connection, cultural practice, and spiritual renewal. Travelers from around the world recognize the inherent beauty of this place, and their desire to visit creates a means of financially supporting the community. To ensure the myriad benefits of access to public lands are afforded to future generations, Sitkans must work together to steward this shared ecosystem and recreation infrastructure.

The increasing popularity of outdoor recreation is evidenced on the ground. Areas like Starrigavan Ridge and Bear Lake, formerly backcountry zones used primarily by hunters, have become popular hiking destinations. The accessibility of information and the navigational aid of mobile

phone GPS applications encourage greater numbers of residents and visitors to venture onto the trail system and beyond. The 2022 Survey showed Sitkans crave more trail opportunities. Trails serve a vital role in exercise and entertainment for an island-bound community with limited recreational options. When polled on the types of trails they would most like to see, the 2022 Survey revealed Sitkans are seeking more challenging day hikes, easy loop trails, and multi-day backpacking trails.

Demand for trails is also growing from the visitor industry. An exponential increase in cruise passengers has created new opportunities and challenges. Several new hike-guiding businesses were founded in 2023, growing the number of local jobs based on facilitating appreciation of Sitka's trail network. Preventing trail overcrowding may require expanding the existing network and reviewing commercial use permitting across jurisdictions.² Expanding the trail network provides more opportunities to know and love Sitka.

¹ See Chapter 2 for more information on survey information (p. 19)

² See Chapter 6 for more discussion of this topic (p. 92)

Photo: Lee House



Health Benefits

Increased interest in trails is good news for the health of Sitkans. According to the 2022 Survey, 73% of respondents stated exercise was a primary reason for using trails. Trails provide significant public health benefits through increasing physical activity and providing safer transportation routes.³ Decades of scientific research shows active lifestyles reduce the prevalence of heart disease, diabetes, and other leading causes of premature mortality.⁴ Furthermore, increased physical activity on trails correlates to significantly reduced healthcare costs, a benefit that far outweighs the costs of trail construction.⁵

Time spent outdoors provides positive effects on mental health as well. Engaging in nature-based activities like hiking or biking can be an effective therapy for people with mental health conditions. Additionally, interacting with nature has been found to improve the cognition of children with attention deficits as well as the mood and cognition of adults.⁶ Some say just 10 minutes in nature can result in noticeable improvements in mental health and well-being, including reduced stress and anxiety, and an overall increase in positivity and comfort.⁷

Economic Benefits

Outdoor recreation infrastructure generates a multitude of economic benefits. Trails not only attract and retain local businesses and residents but also stimulate economic activity directly and indirectly. Trail development directly contributes to the local economy through construction spending on materials and wages. The over two dozen projects implemented from the 2003 Trail Plan brought in tens of millions of dollars to Sitka in State and Federal funding, providing good-paying jobs and supporting local businesses and contractors. Public investment in trail infrastructure has a ripple effect throughout the economy.

Outdoor economies are proven to bring significant benefits to local communities. Nationwide, outdoor recreation generates \$788 billion in economic output and supports over 5 million jobs.⁸ Specifically in Alaska, the tourism industry is rapidly growing, with particular interest in active, outdoor experiences. These outdoor, activity-motivated visits account for over \$3.2 billion in spending at Alaskan businesses and provide 1 in 10 jobs in the state.⁹ An investment in trails results in a high return. While there is limited data local to Sitka, case studies on other places in Alaska show that for every \$1 spent on public open space, there is a \$5.31 return on investment.¹⁰ Sitka offers a compelling destination as a small gateway town surrounded by spectacular natural areas, unique geology, abundant wildlife, and vast undeveloped coastline. More and higher-quality trails encourage visitors to stay longer and spend more money in the community. Research has shown that property values increase in communities with diverse recreation choices and trails have been shown to increase the value of nearby homes.¹¹

“..for every \$1 spent on public open space, there is a \$5.31 return on investment..”

— Alaska Department of Natural Resources

³ Megan Lawson. “Measuring Trail Benefits: Public Health,” *Headwaters Economics* (Spring 2016). headwaterseconomics.org

⁴ Twohig-Bennett, Caoimhe, and Andy Jones. “The health benefits of the great outdoors: A systematic review and meta-analysis of greenspace exposure and health outcomes.” *Environmental research* vol. 166 (2018): 628-637. doi:10.1016/j.envres.2018.06.030 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6562165/>

⁵ IBID

⁶ Jennifer D. Roberts, DrPH, MPH, Micaela S.D. Ada, BA, and Shannon L. Jette, PhD. “NatureRx@UMD: A Review for Pursuing Green Space as a Health and Wellness Resource for the Body, Mind and Soul,” *American Journal of Health Promotion* 35(1) (2020): 149-150.

⁷ IBID

⁸ Chris Perkins. “Rural Development Toolkit,” *Outdoor Recreation Roundtable*, 2021.

⁹ Alaska Trails. “Tongass National Forest Sustainable Trails Strategy,” 2023.

¹⁰ Alaska Department of Natural Resources. “Southeast Alaska,” *Alaska’s Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan 2023-2027*, Chapter 3, (January 2023): 35-39.

¹¹ David P. Racca. “Property Value/Desirability Effects of Bike Paths Adjacent to Residential Areas,” University of Delaware, 2006.

Trails provide immense value to the community by improving quality of life, which is of increasing economic importance. With the rise of remote jobs, workers have more freedom to choose where they live, making access to amenities like trails increasingly important. For in-person jobs, research indicates people are willing to pay higher housing prices and accept lower wages in towns that offer a higher quality of life, which includes access to recreation opportunities that a robust trail system provides.¹² By improving recreation opportunities and boosting the quality of life in Sitka, pay-restricted public entities like the Sitka School District can better recruit talented employees.

Social Benefits

Trails provide an excellent opportunity for Sitkans to engage in outdoor activities alone or with friends, fostering community building and camaraderie. Research suggests spending time in the natural environment positively impacts social cohesion, social interaction across all ages, and social empowerment.¹³ In addition, low-barrier activities like walking, hiking, and running make outdoor recreation on Sitka's trails an affordable option. As a result, many people in this small town can see recurring faces

on trails that can lead to lifelong friendships. Sitka Trail Works also organizes community hikes, which provide opportunities to bring people together on trails. Since the COVID-19 Pandemic, when many were isolated inside, there has been a higher demand for outdoor activities. A robust trail system ensures Sitkans and visitors have ample opportunities to enjoy the social interaction it can provide.

Environmental Benefits

Well-designed trail infrastructure provides an array of environmental benefits. By directing traffic When trails are properly sited and built to last, they reduce impact on the surrounding physical environment because they channel traffic into one zone.¹⁴ Conversely, improperly located or constructed trails, or popular user routes without constructed trails, may lead to standing water or mud on the tread; this degradation forces hikers to an ever-widening fringe, damaging a large swatch of vegetation and accelerating erosion.

Infrastructure that improves access to the outdoors encourages people to enjoy and develop an affinity toward nature. Spending time outdoors has been shown to lead to increased behavior and attitudes toward environmental protection.¹⁵ Additionally, when users have access to a multitude of trails and grow attached to them, they develop a sense of ownership which motivates them to steward the land so they and their families can use it for years to come. This passion is crucial as the climate changes and environmental protection becomes more urgent.



Photo: Lee House

¹² John C. Austin, et al. "Improving Quality of Life—Not Just Business—Is the Best Path to Midwestern Rejuvenation," Brookings, January 2022.

¹³ Roberts JD, Ada MSD, Jette SL. NatureRx@UMD: A Review for Pursuing Green Space as a Health and Wellness Resource for the Body, Mind and Soul. Am J Health Promot. 2021 Jan;35(1):149-152.

¹⁴ Marion & Wimpey. "Assessing the influence of sustainable trail design and maintenance on soil loss," Journal of Environmental Management, 2017.

¹⁵ Nicole V. DeVille, et al. "Time Spent in Nature Is Associated with Increased Pro-Environmental Attitudes and Behaviors," International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, July 2021.

Traditional Stewardship

Lingít people have stewarded these lands and waters since time immemorial, making it possible for Sitkans to appreciate and enjoy this environment today. Public land managers have much to learn from a society that sustained itself for over 10,000 years by following the guidance of traditional Tribal values. These values uplift stewardship, service to the community, respect for one another and the land, collaboration, and holistic health. The community can follow this proven model for sustainable living as Sitka charts a future for how Sitkans interact with nature through trails.

As a sovereign Tribal government, the Sheet'ká Kwáan Sitka Tribe of Alaska holds rights and responsibilities for the land that intersects all aspects of public land management. Sitka Trail Works has successfully partnered with the Tribe on recent projects, and this partnership will continue to be prioritized when developing new trails by consulting with Tribal staff and Council early and often. As Sitka Trail Works and partner agencies decide which trails to construct and where, protecting and supporting subsistence harvest remains a priority. By improving access to forests and muskegs, trails can help elders harvest traditional foods with fewer barriers.

“Tlingit people have walked in these forests and paddled these waters since time immemorial, and we know that a connection to nature is vital to physical, mental, and spiritual health.”

— Lawrence "Woody" Widmark, Tribal Chairman, Sitka Tribe of Alaska



Challenges to Trail Plan Implementation

Construction & Maintenance

Designing and maintaining trails in Sitka presents a unique set of challenges due to the abundance of rainfall, organic soils, and steep terrain. Unlike drier ecosystems where trails can be cut directly into the underlying mineral soil, most trails in Sitka require armoring by laying gravel or building boardwalk to avoid a buildup of mud. Boardwalk was often used by early trail builders because of the ease of moving lumber by hand compared to gravel and the ability to quickly span muskeg ponds and streams. However, the constant moisture of the rainforest accelerates the decay of wood structures, and land managers frequently choose to replace failing structures with gravel to reduce the maintenance burden. While gravel does not rot, it is more susceptible to surface water. Ideally, gravel trails contour along a hillside with a slightly out-sloping tread and regular-grade reversals to shed water. However, that design is not always possible in a topography marked by flat wetlands and steep mountains. Using large stones to pave tread or construct stairs is generally the most durable solution against the elements when available but require exceptional labor effort to install. These considerations are becoming more important as studies show atmospheric rivers and high rainfall events will continue to increase in Southeast Alaska.¹⁶

Covering the length of a trail with rock or lumber is expensive, especially for an island community with a small road system. The logistics of distributing materials to trails inaccessible by road requires barges



Photo: Ben Hughey

and helicopters, which quickly increase project budgets. Coordinating these complex logistics consumes staff attention and project time, making material acquisition and transport a major challenge for the island trail system.

Once materials are obtained and distributed, it is often difficult to find laborers to implement the maintenance or new construction. Sitka is a small town of about 8,000 people with high living costs. The job is manual labor in a rainforest where workers must endure hours of intense work in the rain. Recruitment outside of Sitka presents challenges due to these conditions. Additionally, both the Forest Service and Alaska State Parks have predetermined pay scales that supervisors typically cannot adjust. The legislature sets pay scales, which restricts supervisors' ability to negotiate and compete for talent. As a result, it is difficult for agencies to hire and retain skilled employees.

¹⁶ A.R. Sharma and S.J. Dery. "Contribution of Atmospheric Rivers to Annual, Seasonal, and Extreme Precipitation Across British Columbia and Southeastern Alaska," *JGR Atmospheres*, Volume 125, Issue 9 (May 2020).

Visitor Use

Tourism in Sitka has grown exponentially in recent years, creating economic opportunity while also affecting trail infrastructure and user experience. An influx of cruise ship passengers and independent visitors following the COVID-19 pandemic has led to concerns about overcrowding and conflicts between user groups. Heavier foot traffic increases erosion, causing damage at higher rates on trails and adding to the deferred maintenance. Additionally, the influx of visitors raises concerns about altering the pristine appearance and desired user experience. Sitkans expect a higher degree of solitude when out hiking than residents of many areas of the Lower 48.

The Sitka Tourism Task Force is creating a Tourism Best Practice Management plan in which operators will agree to certain agreements about how to operate. This plan will help inform how to address etiquette, dispersal, and maintenance of Sitka's trails to help mitigate some of the challenges that come with increased trail users.

Funding

Most trails in Sitka are located on federal, state, and municipal lands, which are managed and maintained by the staff of these agencies. However, the funding for these agencies is highly dependent on the political climate and legislative bodies in power. This reality can result in a fluctuation of investment in trails, putting the infrastructure at risk of being abandoned. As a non-profit, Sitka Trail Works also relies on these legislative bodies as much funding comes from government grants. At any point, if these grants are no longer a priority, the trails may be left unattended by the land managers and Sitka Trail Works for an uncertain amount of time.

While Sitka Trail Works fundraises outside of grants, it is challenging in a small town where many residents have already donated or do not have the means to give. Additionally, competing demands of other non-profits in this community make it difficult to prioritize trails. This lack of consistent donation flow combined with the fragility of Sitka Trail Works' federal funders means non-profits struggle to build sustainable funding for trail crews.

Even trails with immense foresight and strategic planning require maintenance over time. With Sitka's high rainfalls and tough winters, these trails need consistent upkeep to remain accessible. This issue creates a gap in the trail process since maintenance costs are not typically calculated as ongoing expenses in agency budgets. As part of the solution, Sitka Trail Works and the Forest Service are partnering to launch a volunteer program where a talented volunteer force is built that can facilitate maintenance on their own. Providing key skills training to committed volunteers will lift the burden on land managers who cannot keep up with the demand from trail users in Sitka.

Peer cities often invest more in trail maintenance than the City and Borough of Sitka. In fall 2022, Juneau voters passed a \$6.6 million General Obligation Bond for parks and recreation, including approximately \$1 million for trails. In the Fiscal Year 2023 Capital Improvements Plan, the City and Borough of Juneau dedicated \$350,000 of sales tax revenue to trail maintenance and \$1 million of Marine Passenger Fees for a Seawalk Expansion. The CBJ Parks & Recreation Department receives operational funding from property tax and commercial user fees. In addition, \$60,000 in commercial user fees are designated annually for the nonprofit Trail Mix to conduct brushing, clearing, and emergency maintenance.

Cultural Resources

As a part of honoring traditional stewardship, trail development should highlight cultural heritage while minimizing impacts on cultural resources. Trails are a primary vector of engagement with public lands, so offer an opportunity to educate the public about the history and ongoing relationships of Indigenous people with the land. Trailhead maps, trail descriptions, trail names, and other media about outdoor recreation are venues through which traditional place names can be elevated and stories told, when appropriate and approved by Clans holding ownership. Alongside respect for the environment, outdoor recreation programming and tours should incorporate education about Tribal sovereignty and lifeways intrinsic to the land.

Given that this land has been occupied continuously for over ten thousand years, many undocumented archeological sites exist on public lands. Therefore, it is still possible to encounter unrecorded sites of cultural and archeological sensitivity during the design and construction phase of trail projects. The National Historic Preservation Act mandates archaeological surveys before federally funded construction.

Through this planning process and throughout future development, Sitka Trail Works has and will continue to coordinate directly with the Sheet'ká Kwáan Sitka Tribe of Alaska and local elders to ensure cultural significant sites and resources are protected.

Signage and Information

In the spring 2022 General Survey, trail signage got the highest percentage of votes (37.1% of respondents selected this as a priority) when asked about the amenities respondents would like to see more of on trails in Sitka. To address this feedback, there is a plan to increase signage and descriptions on trails as well as to increase access to trail information on all platforms. Sitka Trail Works currently has all the established trails outlined on the Sitka Trail Works website, and staff are committed to keeping this list updated with access information and any new trail updates. There is also an increased Sitka Trail Works social media presence that shares information and highlights local trails for residents and visitors to enjoy. In addition, Visit Sitka has a brochure that includes a map of the hikes around town, which many visitors use to navigate the trail system.



Equity

To improve public health, trails should be accessible to all members of the community with the fewest barriers possible to active transportation and exercise. This accessibility was made possible for many communities through the construction of the Cross Trail, which has neighborhood connectors throughout. Unfortunately, neighborhoods south of Kaasda Héen (Indian River) lack connectors to the Cross Trail. The Jarvis-Price-Hillside neighborhood, with high-density and mixed-income housing, lacks safe pedestrian infrastructure and is separated from the nearest walking paths by a busy commercial strip and highway. Although the dynamic river channel and steep terrain on Verstovia's flank present challenges, this Plan includes two proposals to help improve trail connectivity to this neighborhood.

Building an inclusive trail system is a priority of Sitka Trail Works and seeking feedback from people with disabilities could guide future design decisions. Many structural barriers prevent users with disabilities from accessing trails. For example, the placement of large rocks or boulders at the entrance of trails to restrict motorized vehicles makes trail access difficult for wheeled users as well as people who are aging, using walkers, pushing strollers, or experiencing temporary disabilities (i.e., broken legs or sprained ankles). Other barriers may include trail grade and even trailhead signage for those with vision disabilities. Sitka's existing trail system includes a diverse array of trails with varying distances and elevation gain to accommodate varying levels of difficulty, but many still have barriers limiting access for people with disabilities. Additionally, implementing changes needed to reach a more equitable trail network poses some inherent challenges. While the Cross Trail is the widest trail by far and flat in many areas, some sections are steeper and narrower, making access to the entire trail challenging for some users; widening the trail is one way to improve accessibility, though it's important to consider the ecological impacts of wider trail construction.

Photo: Lione Clare



Regional Planning

Sitka Trail Works is one of many entities working on trails in Sitka.

The USDA Forest Service, the City and Borough of Sitka, and Alaska State Parks all hold multiple trails on their lands, in addition to smaller land trusts and private landowners that have allowed public trails to wind through their property. Many of these agencies are drafting their own action plans with individualized goals for Sitka's trails. The aim of this Trail Plan is to provide guidance to ensure all organizations work together towards the same goals and combine resources whenever possible.

A recent example of this collaboration is the Southeast Alaska Sustainability Strategy (SASS). SASS is a plan spearheaded by the US Department of Agriculture to support a diverse economy, enhance community resilience, and conserve natural resources in Southeast Alaska. The strategy includes four core components, including identifying opportunities for investments reflecting the diverse needs in this region. The Secretary of Agriculture has already committed \$25 million to this plan, with hopes of more funding in the future. Sitka Trail Works and other local non-profits have been identified as key partners for the implementation of this strategy.

The Tongass Sustainable Trails Strategy (TSTS) is another success story that has benefited Southeast Alaska. Alaska Trails implemented this strategy with funding from the USDA Forest Service, which provided a platform for Southeast Alaska communities to share local priorities for trails and recreation with the Forest Service. This public engagement led to a concrete report with data on what communities want and need. The information from this report has been used to develop this Trail Plan, and Sitka Trail Works will continue to reference this strategy to guide trail

development in Sitka. This collaborative process is also helpful with the Tongass National Forest Sitka Ranger District currently developing their District-level recreation plan. There is a clear desire for trail infrastructure to remain a priority across the region, and this trail plan can help lead this process for Sitka.

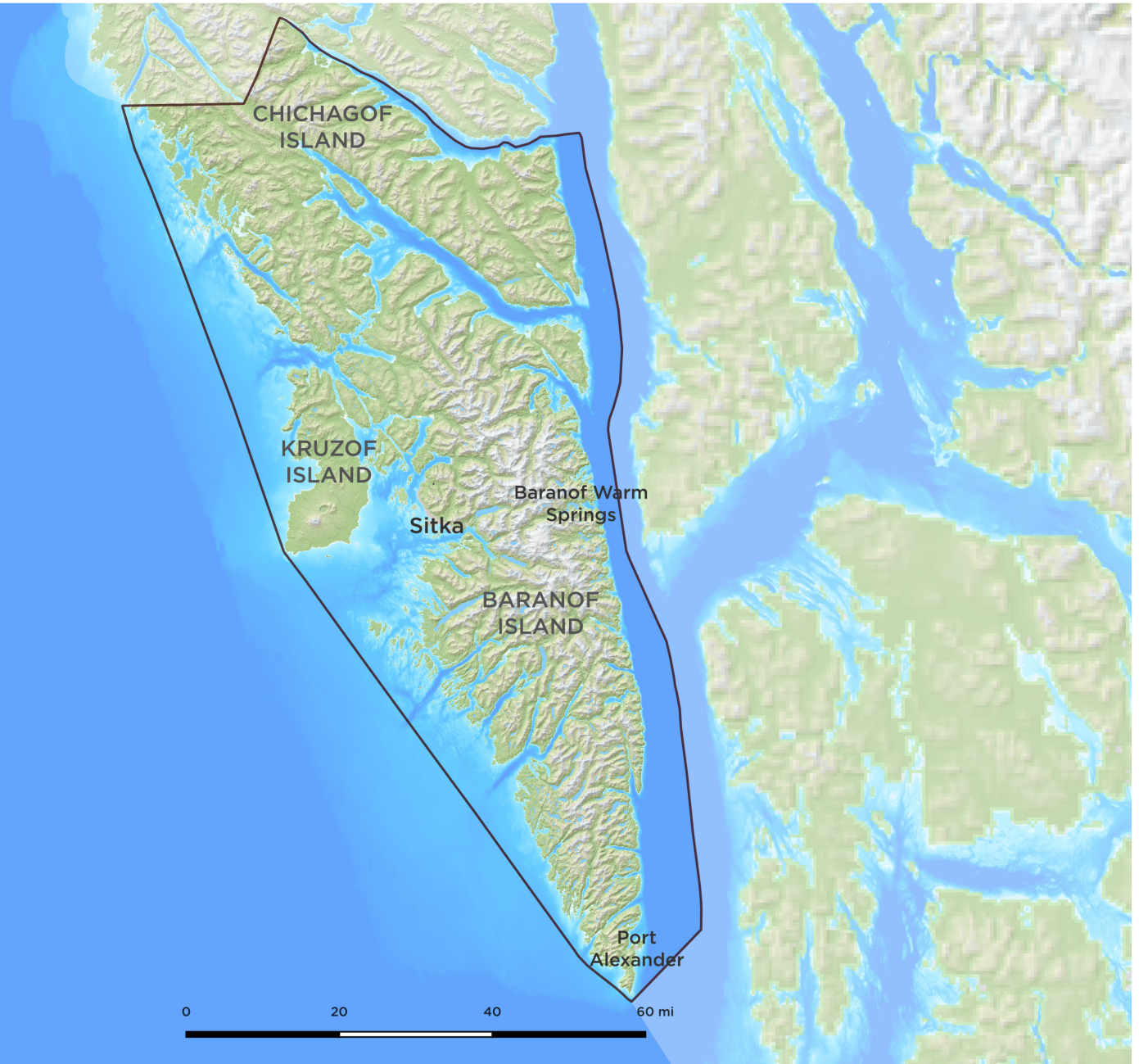
In addition to federal and regional partners, the City and Borough of Sitka has also ensured the success of the original trail plan projects and the development of Sitka's recreation. The Cross Trail, which is the largest project from the original trail plan, winds through multiple easements owned by the City, and the success of this continuous trail was made possible by the City's support. Sitka Trail Works continues to receive support from the City on projects, through grants and planning, maintaining strong partnership and shared goals for Sitka's trails.

Sitka Trail Plan Area

The 2023 Sitka Trail Plan encompasses the entire breadth of Baranof, Kruzof and Island, and the Southern half of Chichagof Island.

This region includes the entire City and Borough of Sitka, encompassing Baranof Warm Springs and Port Alexander. All these communities were engaged through outreach Trail Plan surveys and offered their opinions on the needs of the target areas. New trail proposals are being pursued in each of these communities.

**Sitka Trail
Plan Area ▶**



Chapter 2 / Planning Process

The vision outlined in this Trail Plan was guided by a set of adopted goals and a robust public engagement process. Chapter 2 outlines the timeline and components of the public process as lead by the Trail Plan Committee.

The Trail Plan Committee was formed at the onset of the Trail Plan initiative as a citizen advisory board to guide the planning process and trail project selection. Chartered by the Sitka Trail Works Board of Directors, the Committee was composed of Board members and community members with expertise in outdoor recreation with the purpose of scoping the plan, engaging the public, selecting priority projects, and drafting the plan. The first task of the Committee was to establish goals of the planning process, which were framed to ensure that outreach conducted and projects selected would engender the greatest possible community benefit. The Committee Chair and Sitka Trail Works staff developed a detailed plan for methods and timeline for public engagement, which was reviewed and approved by the Committee.

Selection Process

After the 2022 General Survey revealed community desires for types of trails and identified over one hundred unique trail projects, staff reviewed all submitted ideas for feasibility, halving the initial list. The Committee then ranked feasible ideas against selection criteria based on the five goals of the Plan. The remaining trail project ideas not eliminated by the Committee were then advanced to the public in the 2023 Trail Concepts Survey, in which respondents numerically rated each

concept. The Committee reviewed public response and removed two trail concepts from further consideration. At several stages throughout the process, agency partners were consulted to guide project development, which led to some trail concepts being eliminated and some modified. The final trail proposals compiled into the 2023 Sitka Trail Plan have been thoroughly vetted by public land managers and the public and represent shared community priorities.

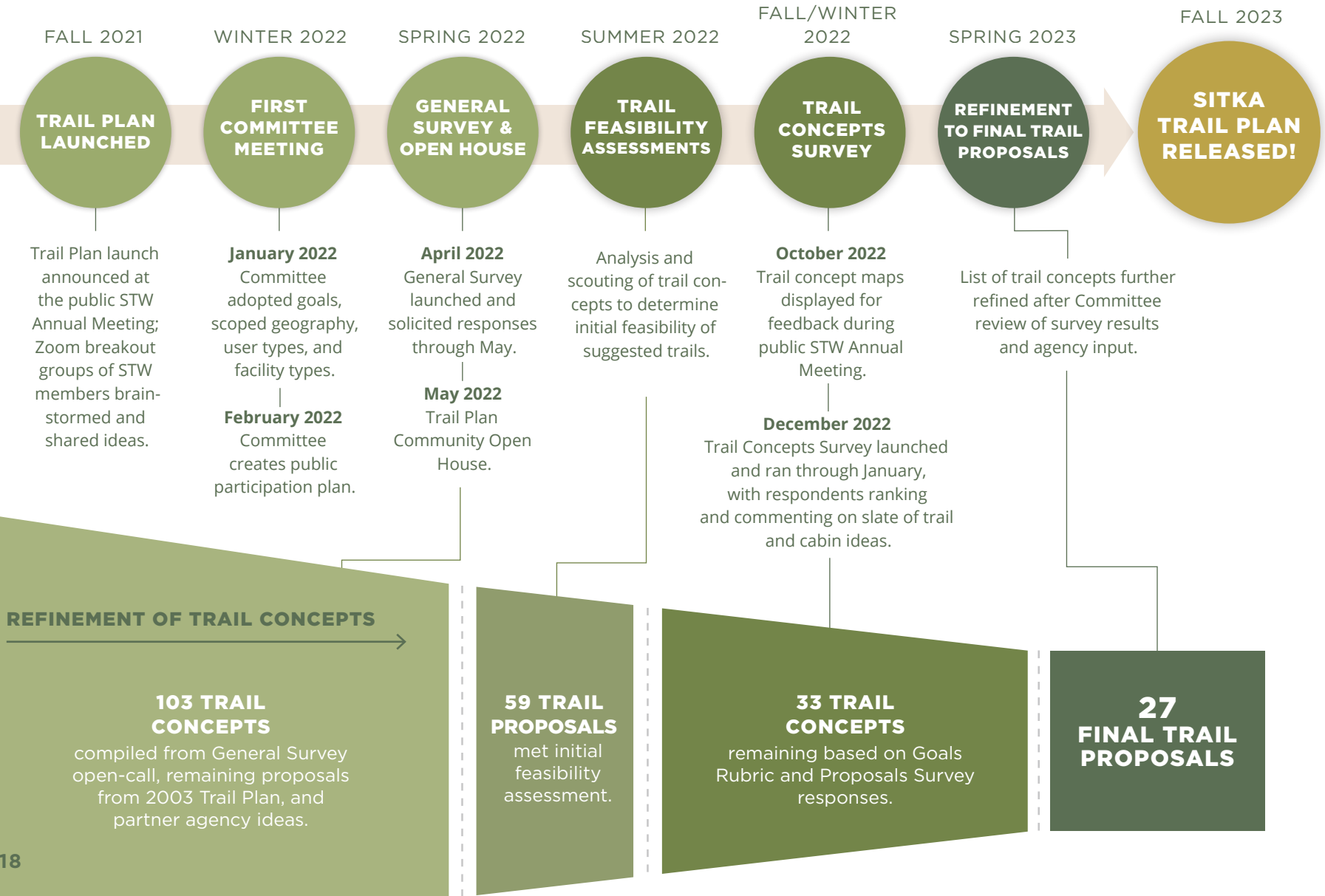


Photo: Lione Clare

Goals of the Sitka Trail Plan



Planning Process & Outreach Timeline



The Committee pursued both formal and informal methods to gather ideas, feedback, and concerns from the public. Informal engagement included informational interviews with community members and project partners. Formal touch points included two public surveys and two open house meetings at Centennial Hall. Learnings from all public engagement efforts were used to (1) compile all initial trail & cabin ideas (2) alter or eliminate proposed trail designs and (3) prioritize between proposed

trails and cabins. Below is a review of the two public surveys launched in the community.

The advantages of the internet and social media allowed far greater public engagement than the 2003 Trail Plan. However, the increased public attention can also be attributed to the growth in trail users after the significant expansion in the trail network in the last two decades.

Public Surveys

2022 GENERAL SURVEY

| | |
|--------------------------------|--|
| SURVEY GOAL | To understand community priorities for engaging with outdoor recreation infrastructure and gather new trail development and maintenance ideas. |
| DATES RAN | April 8, 2022 – May 31, 2022 |
| SAMPLE SIZE | 787 responses |
| SAMPLE TYPE | Convenience Sample (open to all) |
| OUTREACH METHODS | Local print & radio news, flyers, social media advertising, paper copies of survey at library |
| SURVEY WRITING PARTNERS | Trail Plan Committee, Forest Service Recreation Staff, Public Land Managers, McKinley Research Group |

2023 TRAIL CONCEPTS SURVEY

| | |
|--------------------------------|--|
| SURVEY GOAL | To assess level of community benefit and relative priority between 25 trail proposals and gather detailed feedback and concerns on initial geographic route designs. |
| DATES RAN | December 9, 2022 – February 1, 2023 |
| SAMPLE SIZE | 567 responses |
| SAMPLE TYPE | Convenience Sample (open to all) |
| OUTREACH METHODS | Local print & radio news, flyers, social media |
| SURVEY WRITING PARTNERS | Trail Plan Committee |

Chapter 3 / Partnerships

Land Management Agencies & Community Partners

Stakeholders in Sitka's trails must work together to maintain and enhance a beautiful and diverse trail system. With less than a dozen employees in Sitka dedicated to maintaining over 75 miles of trail, collaboration is of utmost importance. Federal, state, and local land managers each execute a different mandate with varying resources, so working together requires creativity in design and flexibility in implementation. Each agency bears responsibility for more than just the maintenance of trails and must allocate resources across a portfolio of competing needs.

Agency recreation budgets are subject to legislative funding cycles, and over the past twenty years, have been consistently insufficient to address all maintenance issues, leading to an accumulation of deferred maintenance. Greater investment in recreation infrastructure will produce benefits for communities, so Sitka Trail Works will continue to educate lawmakers and the public about the need to dedicate resources to maintain access to public lands.

Sitka Trail Works is committed to serving a coordination role between agencies to facilitate work across the multi-jurisdictional trail system. A higher standard of trail maintenance can be achieved through more frequent collaboration between land management agencies to share resources and expertise. Occasionally, expanding the trail network requires acquiring approval from agencies whose mandates do not include outdoor recreation, including land managers like the US Geological

Photo: Alex Kelsey



Survey, the Alaska Mental Health Trust, and the City of Sitka Electric Department or permitting agencies like the Army Corps of Engineers and the Environmental Protection Agency. In those cases, Sitka Trail Works is well positioned to represent the broader public interest in public lands and navigate bureaucratic process. Other public agencies have leverage or resources to support the trail system if appropriately involved. The US Coast Guard frequently volunteers labor and flight time to support mobilization and logistics on remote projects, an enormously valuable contribution.

In addition to public agencies, a wide range of other stakeholders and civic institutions support public access to outdoor recreation. As just a few examples, the Sitka Conservation Society (SCS) partners with the USDA Forest Service in Wilderness monitoring, recreation infrastructure projects, and planning. Southeast Alaska Independent Living (SAIL) provides resources and programming to empower people with disabilities

“Sitka Trail Works, through its work with a diverse group of partners and agencies, built a model for the creation of an incredible public trail resource other Southeast communities can emulate. The Tongass National Forest is a proud partner in these efforts and hopes to share the insights and successes of our collaboration with other communities in Alaska. Through this type of work, we can bolster and demonstrate the social, economic and ecological benefits of accessible public lands.”

— Jason Anderson, Staff Officer for Recreation, Minerals,
Lands & Heritage, Tongass National Forest, Forest Service

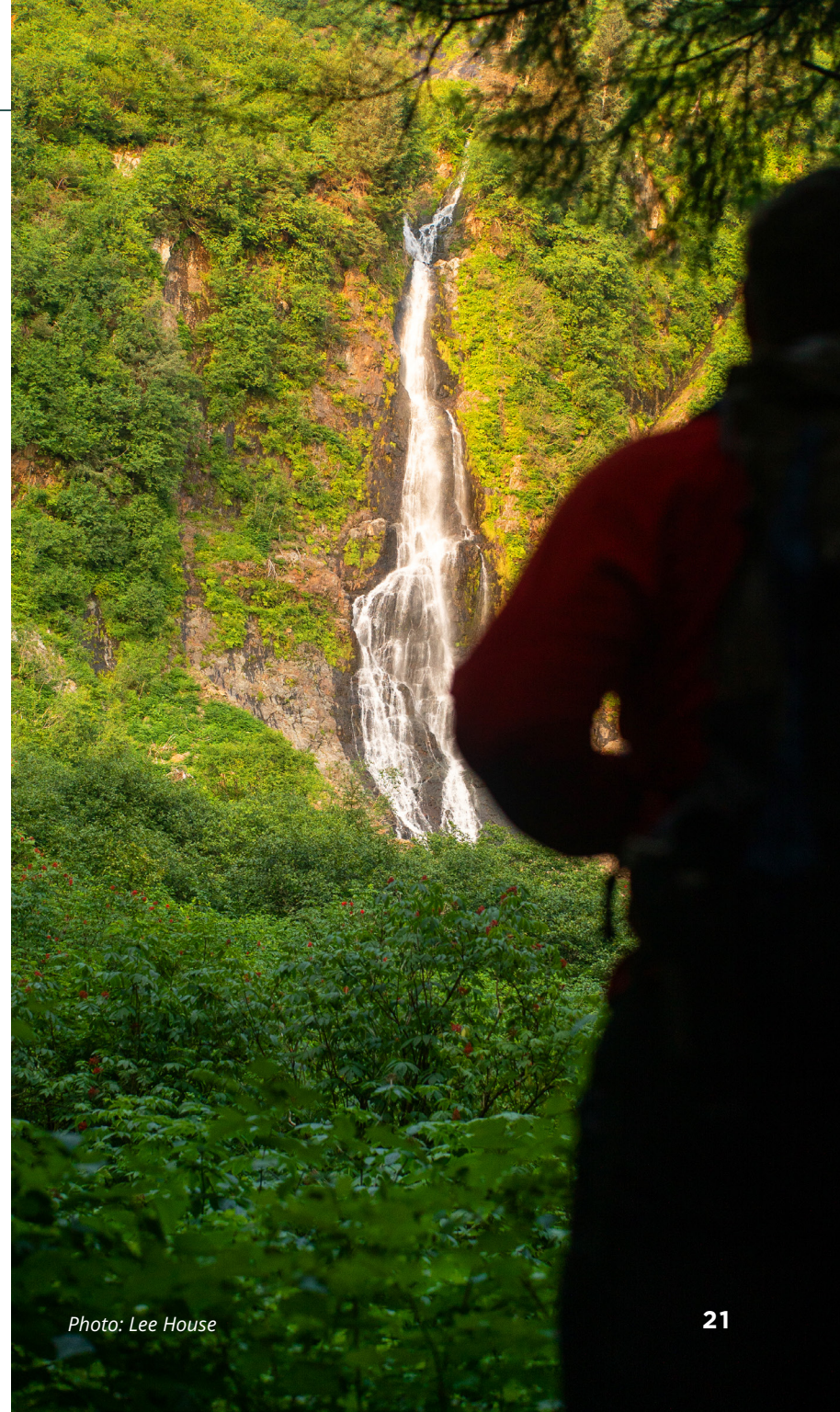


Photo: Lee House

to live, work, and play outdoors. For years, the Sitka chapter of the Rotary Club has invested significant resources and volunteer hours into the maintenance and improvement of the City-owned Goddard Hot Springs.

Whether affiliated with an organization or not, local volunteers can significantly aid in public trail maintenance, as long as Sitka Trail Works and agencies dedicate sufficient capacity toward coordination. Several local institutions are well suited to recruiting and facilitating volunteerism, like AmeriCorps, the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, the Student Conservation Association, or local schools. Outer Coast College emphasizes service as a key part of their curriculum, and Outer Coast students provide a strong base of volunteer power for the Sitka community each semester.

Sitka Trail Works created a Trail Condition Rubric¹⁷ in collaboration with the City of Sitka to identify the Miles of Trail by Condition grading metric for each public land manager. This identification aims to establish a standard way to measure trail quality among all land managers, which allows Sitka Trail Works to better analyze and communicate the needs¹⁸ of Sitka’s entire trail system. For the purposes of this planning process, the rubric was applied as an estimated average across the length of a trail to convey a rough sense of each agency’s maintenance needs. Applying grades to smaller segments of the trail would provide higher precision data.

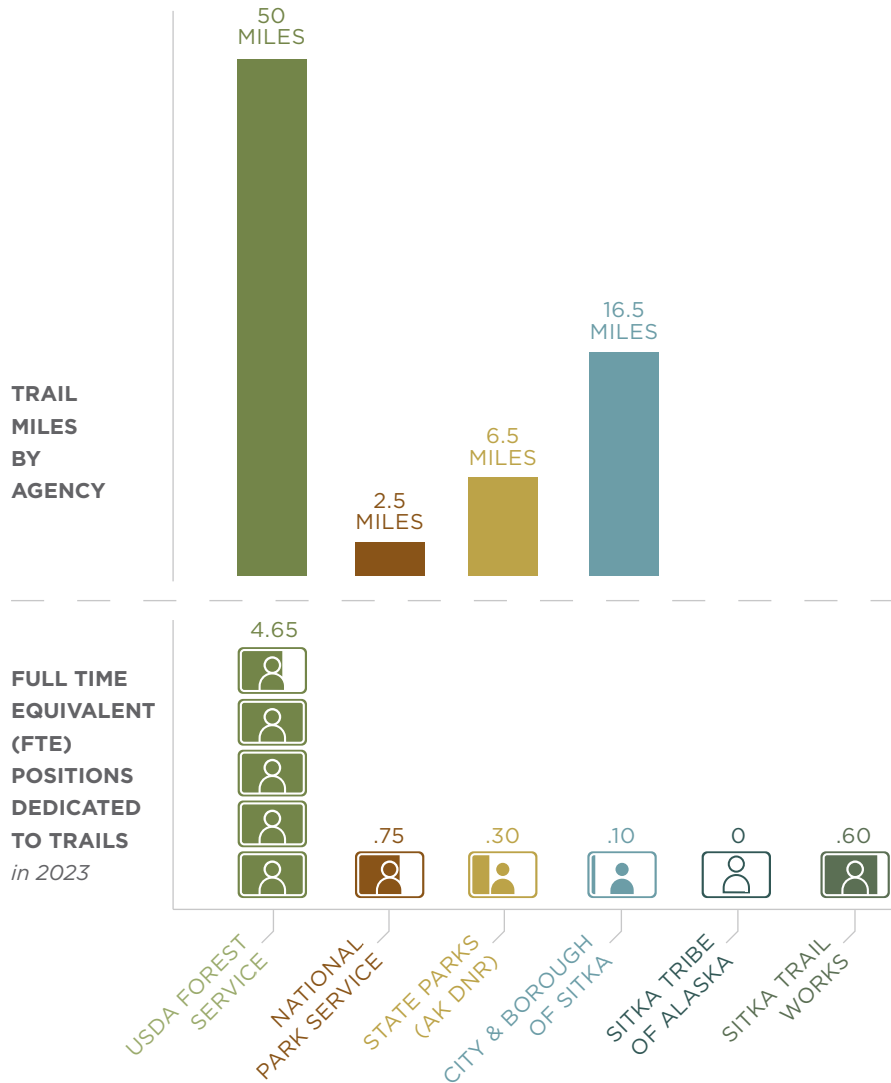
¹⁷ Sitka Trails Condition Assessment in Appendix A (p. 102)

¹⁸ Trails mapped by condition shown in Chapter 4 (p. 37)

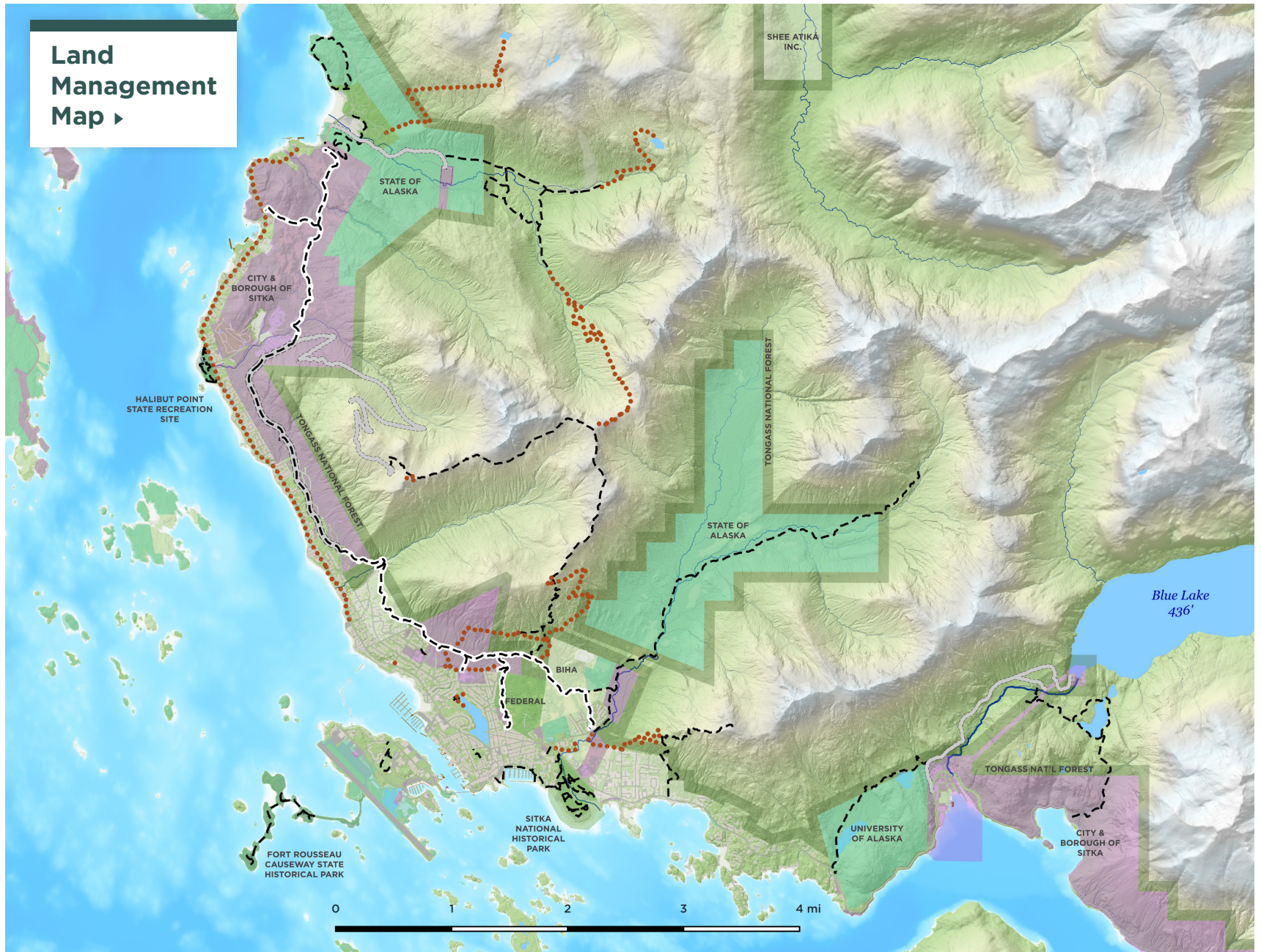
TOTAL TRAIL NETWORK

54 TRAILS

78 MILES OF TRAIL



Land Management Map ▶



Memorandum of Understanding

This memorandum of understanding (MOU)¹⁹ continues the interagency collaboration established in the 2003 Trail Plan to efficiently maintain and develop the multi-jurisdictional trail system.

**Implementation
Memorandum of Understanding
12/1/23 Between**

**Alaska Department of Natural Resources Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation,
City and Borough of Sitka,
National Park Service,
Sitka Trail Works, Inc,
Sitka Tribe of Alaska,
and
USDA Forest Service Sitka Ranger District,**

To: Create a process of interagency cooperation to complete the projects listed in the Sitka Trail Plan.

Article 1 – Background and Objectives

This Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) is entered into by the City and Borough of Sitka (CBS), the Sitka Tribe of Alaska (STA), Alaska Department of Natural Resources Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation (DNR), USDA Forest Service Sitka Ranger District (SRD), National Park Service (NPS), and Sitka Trail Works (STW), hence forth referred to as the “Trail Plan Partners” or “The partners”. The purpose of this understanding is to guide and define the working relationship between these organizations with respect to the implementation and execution of the Sitka Trail Plan.

The partners first formalized this working relationship in the 2003 agreement as part of the original Sitka Area Trail Plan. That agreement facilitated successful collaboration on several multi-jurisdictional projects. This MOU reconvenes the same parties to reinvigorate interagency cooperation for planning, funding, cultural heritage protection and interpretation, construction, reconstruction, and maintenance of recreational infrastructure.

The Antiquities Act, the Archeological Resource Protection Act, the National Historic Preservation Act, the Native American Graves Protection Act, the Alaska Historic Preservation Plan, Alaska State Statutes AS 9.25.120 and State regulation 11 AAC 16.010, all set forth policies for the protection of cultural heritage sites. Under these acts and regulations, the Trail Plan partners intend to work together to further the goals laid out in this document. However, nothing in this MOU or the appendices obligates a partner to any funding or action.

Article 2 – The Trail Plan Partners agree to the following:

- A. Interagency Cooperation Meetings** – The partners will meet regularly to coordinate efforts to achieve the goals of the Sitka Trail Plan.
- 1.) A minimum of two (2) meetings per year will be held.
 - 2.) Sitka Trail Works will schedule and facilitate these two meetings, distribute a draft agenda beforehand and meeting notes with decisions after.
 - 3.) Each partner will send at least one representative to each meeting.

- B. Commitment to share expertise** – The partners will share resources, including but not limited to, personnel and equipment, and to assist in the planning, design, and implementation of trail construction projects, to the extent determined by the partners on a case-by-case basis.
- C. Amendments** – The Sitka Trail Plan may be amended at interagency cooperation meetings where all partners are represented.
- 1.) The amendment process is a tool to allow flexibility in implementation.
 - 2.) If a substantive plan amendment is proposed the partners will solicit public and agency comment. If comments indicate unresolvable dissent or controversy, the suggested amendment will be dropped or deferred.
- D. Cultural Resources Protection** – A National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) section 106 review will be completed for every new trail prior to its construction and for trail maintenance that significantly alters the footprint of the original trail. The partners will collaborate on the review to ensure the protection of cultural resources.
- 1.) If the Section 106 review identifies a high potential for inadvertent discoveries within the project’s area of potential effect archaeological monitoring will occur in accordance with the Cultural Resource Monitoring Plan (Appendix A).
 - 2.) Should inadvertent discoveries be identified during construction all work in the area will cease. The partners will use the Inadvertent Discoveries of Cultural Resources document (Appendix B) or the Inadvertent Discoveries of Human Remains document (Appendix C) to meet obligations under this section.
- F. Trail Maintenance Program**– The partners will identify trail maintenance priorities annually and share priorities at interagency cooperation meetings.
- 1.) The partners will annually inventory maintenance needs on priority trails and develop a plan of work to share resources, including in-kind contributions, and to collaborate on implementation.
 - 2.) Sitka Trail Works will coordinate a volunteer program to assist in trail maintenance.
 - 3.) The interagency trail maintenance program will supplement and complement existing trail maintenance programs that may be in place.
- G. Funding Strategy** – The partners will collaborate to raise funds for the projects listed in the Final Trail Plan. To take advantage of funding opportunities, the partners will refine cost estimates, monitor grant availability, coordinate grant applications, and may enter financial agreements that facilitate implementation. Sitka Trail Works will continue to leverage private support from businesses, individual donors, and foundations.
- H. Funding Obligation** – This instrument does not obligate funds. Any endeavor involving reimbursements, contributions, or transfer of anything of value between the partners will be handled in accordance with applicable laws, regulations, and procedures including those for Government procurement and printing. Such endeavors will be outlined in separate agreements in writing by representatives of the parties and shall be independently authorized by appropriate statutory authority.

- I. **Other Issues** – The partners will utilize the interagency cooperation meetings to work on topics including, but not limited to, trail signage, trail information distribution, trail etiquette, and user conflicts.
- J. **Commencement & Expiration Date.** This MOU is executed as of the date of the last signature and is effective through December 31, 2028, at which time it will expire.

Article 3 – Standard Clauses

- A. **Civil Rights:** Partners will not discriminate against any person because of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. The participants will take affirmative action to ensure that applicants are employed without regard to their race, color, religion, sex or national origin.
- B. **Officials Not to Benefit:** No member or delegate to Congress, or resident Commissioner, shall be admitted to any share or part of this agreement, or to any benefit that may arise therefrom, but this provision shall not be construed to extend to this agreement if made with a corporation for its general benefit.
- C. **Consistency with Public Laws:** Nothing herein contained shall be deemed to be inconsistent with or contrary to the purpose of or intent of any Act of Congress establishing, affecting, or relating to the Agreement.
- D. **Nonbinding agreement.** This MOU creates no right, benefit, or trust responsibility, substantive, or procedural, enforceable by law or equity. The parties shall manage their respective resources and activities in a separate, coordinated and mutually beneficial manner to meet the purpose(s) of this MOU. Nothing in this MOU authorizes any of the parties to obligate or transfer anything of value. Specific, prospective projects or activities that involve the transfer of funds, services, property, to a party requires the execution of separate agreements and are contingent upon numerous factors, including, as applicable, but not limited to: agency availability of appropriated funds and other resources; cooperator availability of funds and other resources; agency and cooperator administrative and legal requirements (including agency authorization by statute); etc. This MOU neither provides, nor meets these criteria. If the parties elect to enter into an obligation agreement that involves the transfer of funds, services, property, and/or anything of value to a party, then the applicable criteria must be met. Additionally, under a prospective agreement, each party operates under its own laws, regulations, and/or policies, and any Forest Service obligation is subject to the availability of appropriated funds and other resources. The negotiation, execution, and administration of these prospective agreements must comply with all applicable law. Nothing in this MOU is intended to alter, limit, or expand the agencies' statutory and regulatory authority.

Article 4 – Authorizing Signatures



 City and Borough of Sitka
 Administrator
 John Leach

12/15/2023


 Date



 Sitka Tribe of Alaska
 Tribal Chairman
 Lawrence Widmark

12/18/2023

 Date



 USDA Forest Service, Sitka Ranger District
 District Ranger
 Eric Garner

12/1/2023

 Date



 USDOI National Park Service, Alaska
 Region Deputy Regional Director
 David W. Alberg

12/19/2023


 Date



 State of Alaska, Division of Parks & Outdoor Recreation
 Director
 Ricky Gease

12/5/2023

 Date



 Sitka Trail Works
 President
 Don MacKinnon

12/6/2023

 Date



USDA Forest Service

Mission: The mission of the Forest Service is to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the nation’s forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations.

| | |
|----------------------|--------------------|
| Acres of Public Land | 1.7 million |
| Miles of Trail | 50 |

As the manager of the Tongass National Forest, the United States Department of Agriculture Forest Service oversees most public land in the Sitka area. Recent increases in federal recreation budgets, like the Great American Outdoors Act and the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, create an opportunity for large reconstruction or new construction projects, but annual maintenance capacity is still inadequate to maintain all existing trails or to construct the new trails identified in this plan. The agency is focused on achieving sustainability of the trail system by reconstructing unsustainable routes and elevating existing trails to a standard that will accommodate current and future levels of use.

Staff at the Sitka Ranger District engaged and supported trail planning at all stages of the process, providing input on survey design, project selection, and final draft development. In addition, the Forest Service contributed staff time toward the writing of the Plan.

> Capacity & Challenges

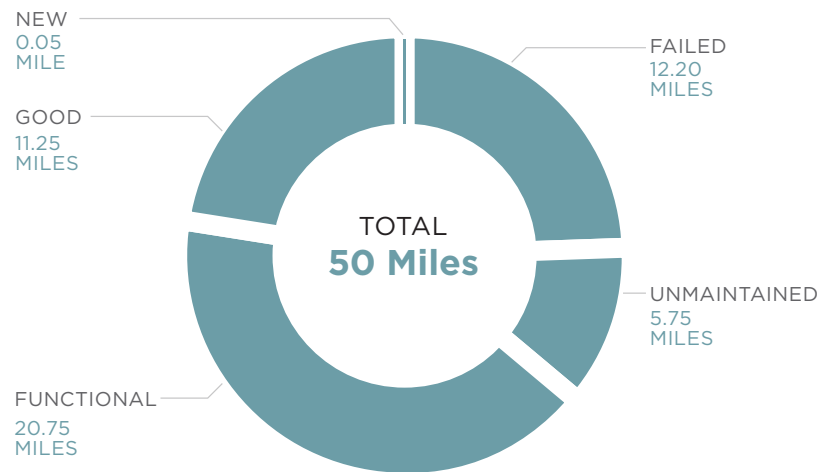
Encompassing 1.7 million acres, the Sitka Ranger District is a massive jurisdiction with over 100 miles of trail and road infrastructure, over

two dozen public use cabins, two campgrounds, a popular beach site, and a variety of other facilities.

Despite fluctuating federal budgets, the Sitka Ranger District has been able to address some of its annual and deferred maintenance needs around the District with its seasonal trail crew, but the backlog exceeds existing capacity. A 2007 Travel Management Plan redesignated the roads as recreational trails (referred to as “Troads” colloquially), doubling the maintenance responsibility of the recreation department.

To address these challenges, the Forest Service established an agreement with the nonprofit Alaska Trails to develop the Tongass Sustainable Trails Strategy (TSTS) in 2021. The final draft was released in June 2023. The planning process for the TSTS occurred concurrently with this Trail Plan with an open flow of ideas, public engagement, and resources between the two processes. The TSTS advances a series of recommendations also included in the Sitka Trail Plan.

> Miles of Trail by Condition



> Projects on National Forest Lands

| TRAIL PROJECT | PAGE | PROJECT TYPE | LENGTH | ESTIMATED COST | PARTNERS |
|---|------|----------------|---------------|----------------|--|
| Gavan Hill Reroute | 40 | Reconstruction | 2.1 miles | \$3,382,813 | CBS |
| Upper Cross Trail | 42 | Reconstruction | 1.2 miles | \$459,914 | CBS |
| Verstovia Reroute | 44 | Reconstruction | 0.75 mile | \$427,450 | CBS |
| Lake Suloia | 54 | Reconstruction | 0.65 mile | \$364,803 | |
| Port Alexander Trails | 58 | Reconstruction | 1.6 miles | \$5,272,129 | DNR, Municipality, Private Landowners |
| Starrigavan Recreation Enhancements | 72 | Expand | Not Available | Not Available | CBS, DNR |
| Starrigavan Ridge Trail | 74 | New | 3.8 miles | \$1,770,916 | CBS |
| Eagle Dip Lake | 76 | New | 1.4 miles | \$1,216,324 | |
| South Fork Starrigavan to Harbor Trail | 78 | New | 2.7 miles | \$1,682,146 | |
| Harbor Mountain Lookout Tower Trail | 80 | New | 0.1 mile | \$221,433 | |
| Lucky Chance Historic Trail | 82 | New | 9 miles | \$3,426,857 | CBS, FERC |
| Sitka Sound Coastal Trail | 84 | New | 21 miles | \$16,804,763 | CBS, DNR |



Alaska DNR State Parks

Mission: The Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation provides outdoor recreation opportunities and conserves and interprets natural, cultural, and historic resources for the use, enjoyment, and welfare of the people.

| | |
|----------------------|------------|
| Number of park units | 7 |
| Miles of Trail | 6.5 |

Alaska State Parks manages some of the most popular recreation sites in Sitka as well as spectacular destinations accessible by boat. The agency does not have a vessel to access their own marine access trails, so their trails off the road system have received no regular maintenance. Over the past two decades, Sitka Trail Works has received several grants to conduct major renovations of the Causeway, Sealion Cove, and Mosquito Cove, but the lack of regular maintenance takes its toll.

> Capacity & Challenges

Alaska State Parks has experienced volatile budget cycles in the past decade that have undermined the ability to adequately maintain Park facilities. In 2015, the Ranger position in Sitka was eliminated due to budget cuts, leaving all State Parks in the area unmaintained. Staffing was partially restored in 2018 but still does not have full-time permanent staff. Additionally, the State sets wages at pre-determined levels that may not adequately account for cost of living in Sitka, adding an additional barrier to hiring.

In the Sitka area, State Parks manages Baranof Castle State Historic Site, Old Sitka State Historical Park, Halibut Point State Recreation Site, Fort Rousseau Causeway State Historical Park, Big Bear/Baby Bear State Marine Park, Magoun Island State Marine Park, and Sealion Cove State Marine Park. Given the large portfolio and limited capacity, deferred maintenance is accumulating rapidly in Sitka’s State Parks. For example, the elevated boardwalk on the Ben Grussendorf Forest & Muskeg Trail in Old Sitka State Historical Park has accelerated decay in recent years with decking beginning to cave in.

> Miles of Trail by Condition

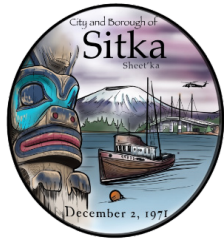




Photo: Lione Clare

> Projects in State Parks

| TRAIL PROJECT | PAGE | PROJECT TYPE | LENGTH | ESTIMATED COST | PARTNERS |
|-------------------------------|-------------|---------------------|---------------|-----------------------|-----------------|
| Fort Rousseau Causeway | 46 | Rehabilitation | 1.5 miles | Not Available | |
| Mosquito Cove | 48 | Rehabilitation | 1.5 miles | \$336,177 | USDA FS |
| Sealion Cove | 52 | Rehabilitation | 2.5 miles | \$589,352 | |



City & Borough of Sitka

Mission: The mission of the City and Borough of Sitka Public Works Department is to provide, control, and maintain reliable and cost-effective public works facilities and systems in a manner that emphasizes customer satisfaction, public service, and the long-term best interest of the community.

| | |
|----------------------|-------------|
| Acres of Public Land | 109 |
| Miles of Trail | 16.5 |

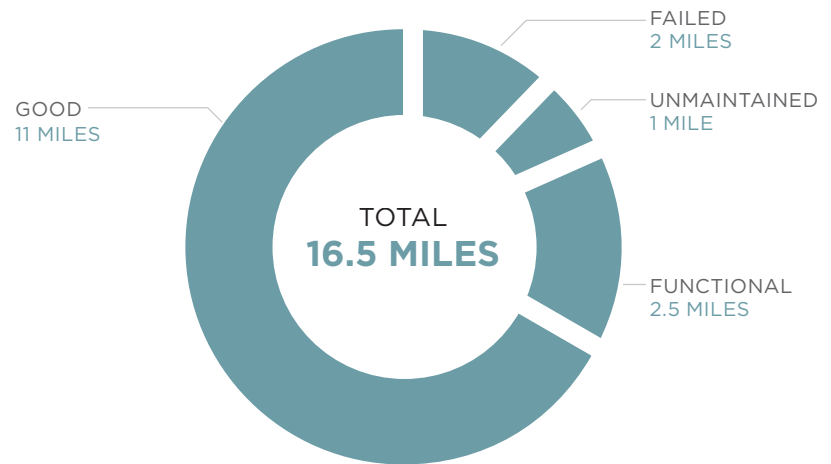
For a small municipality, the City of Sitka manages an enormous amount of public land. When the Parks & Recreation department was subsumed within the Public Works department in 2015, staffing dedicated to trail maintenance was significantly reduced. The Assembly reestablished a Parks & Recreation staff position in fiscal year 2023, but the role has largely been focused on providing recreation programming formerly provided by Community Schools. The Sitka Parks & Recreation Committee, an Assembly appointed body of volunteers, received monthly updates on the Trail Plan throughout the planning process. Public Works staff reviewed and provided feedback on project selection on several occasions through the process. The Committee has a planning document in progress that would outline a vision for key park facilities, complementing recommendations from this Trail Plan.

> Capacity & Challenges

Public Works maintenance staff are responsible for all open space, fields, grounds, and buildings—a large portfolio including far more than trail maintenance. The upkeep of public buildings is generally prioritized over trail maintenance.

In addition to the projects identified here, major bridge replacements are needed on the Thimbleberry and Herring Cove trails. At each trail, bridges will be nearing the end of their lifespans soon, and their failure would result in loss of access to beloved segments of trail.

> Miles of Trail by Condition



> Projects on City & Borough Lands

| TRAIL PROJECT | PAGE | PROJECT TYPE | LENGTH | ESTIMATED COST | PARTNERS |
|--|------|----------------|-----------|----------------|--|
| Cross Trail to Kaasda Héen (Indian River) | 38 | Reconstruction | 0.3 mile | \$187,462 | USDA FS, DNR, Baranof Island Housing Authority (BIHA) |
| Medveje Lake Trailhead Reroute | 50 | Reconstruction | 0.2 mile | \$167,383 | Northern Southeast Regional Aquaculture Association (NSRAA) |
| Baranof Lake & Grotto Trail | 56 | Reconstruction | 0.5 mile | \$292,452 | USDA FS, DNR, Baranof Property Owners Association, Inc. (BPOA) |
| North Swan Lake Connector | 60 | New | 0.2 mile | \$630,351 | |
| Sitka High 5K Loop | 62 | New | 0.7 mile | \$964,571 | Sitka School District |
| Price-Hillside Neighborhood Connector | 66 | New | 0.1 mile | \$1,255,578 | |
| Mills Street Land Trust Connector | 68 | New | 0.05 mile | \$43,436 | SCLT |
| Halibut Point Road Improvements | 70 | New | 4.9 miles | \$30,869,540 | DOT&PF |



National Park Service

Mission: The National Park Service preserves unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the National Park System for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations. The Park Service cooperates with partners to extend the benefits of natural and cultural resource conservation and outdoor recreation throughout this country and the world.

| | |
|----------------------|------------|
| Acres of public land | 113 |
| Miles of Trail | 2.5 |

The National Park Service manages the Sitka National Historical Park, one of the most popular visitor destinations in town and a year-round recreational asset for Sitkans. The wide wheelchair-accessible trails at sea level attract users of all ages and abilities to the conserved old growth forest and historic battle sites.

> Capacity & Challenges

Park Service staff maintain buildings, gardens, landscaping, as well as the well-constructed gravel trails, the Russian Memorial, Totem, River View, and Beach Spur trails, all in good condition. Relatively stable budgets from the Department of Interior allow the Park to retain sufficient staffing to keep up with annual maintenance and occasionally expand the network with internal funding opportunities. The Kaasda Héen Underpass project seeks to connect the River View Trail to the Sawmill Creek Pathway and the sidewalk on the north side of the road.

> Project National Park Service Lands

| TRAIL PROJECT | PAGE | PROJECT TYPE | LENGTH | ESTIMATED COST |
|--|------|--------------|-----------|----------------|
| Kaasda Héen Underpass & Flume Trail | 64 | New | 0.25 mile | \$504,811 |

> Miles of Trail by Condition





Sheet'ká Kwáan Sitka Tribe of Alaska

Mission: To exercise sovereign rights and powers, to preserve the integrity of tribal society, and to improve the lives of individual Tribal Citizens.

The holistic vision of community well-being advanced by the Sheet'ká Kwáan Sitka Tribe of Alaska, and their inherent rights to this land intersect with every project in this Plan. Trail Works staff provided drafts of the proposed trail projects to committee members and staff from the Cultural Resources and Natural Resources departments at several stages of the

planning process. Opportunities abound on the trail system to better highlight cultural heritage through improved interpretation. Signs and information about the trail system can uplift Lingít culture by using traditional place names. Any new trail development proposed in the future will initiate additional consultation with staff, committees, and the Tribal Council.



Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities

Mission: Keep Alaska Moving through service and infrastructure.

The Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOT&PF) is an essential partner in the planning, permitting, funding, design, and implementation of recreational trails and active transportation routes. As the largest state agency, DOT&PF holds robust professional capacity and resources in planning, engineering, construction, and maintenance, essential skillsets for advancing the priorities of the Sitka Trail Plan. In 2023, the DOT&PF launched an initiative, named The Last Frontier, aimed at improving access to outdoor recreation.

From north to south, Sitka's primary transportation corridors are Halibut Point Road and Sawmill Creek Road, state highways managed

by DOT&PF. In 2006, DOT&PF developed one of Sitka's most popular trails, the Sawmill Creek Road Separated Pathway, a priority project identified in the 2003 Trail Plan. The Sawmill Creek Road Separated Pathway provides opportunities for active lifestyles to a wide range of users, including people commuting, exercising, whale watching, guiding visitors, walking dogs, and enjoying the scenery year-round. Halibut Point Road connects downtown to neighborhoods to the north, the cruise terminal, the ferry terminal, and several recreational destinations. Improving walking and biking along Halibut Point Road was the highest scoring project in the 2023 Trail Concepts Survey, as members of the community touted a wide range of potential health and safety benefits.



Sitka Trail Works

Mission: The Sitka Trail Works Board of Directors, staff and membership is dedicated to working efficiently and supportively with our partners to create, maintain and promote a beautiful, diversified, and accessible trail system, as our gift to future generations. These trails will provide a wide range of opportunities for physical activity, economic development, cultural enrichment, and spiritual renewal.

Since its inception, Sitka Trail Works has played a vital role in the development and maintenance of the local trail system. Established as a 501(c)3 nonprofit in 1997, Sitka Trail Works (STW) facilitated the creation of the first area-wide, multi-jurisdictional trail plan. By convening federal, state, and local land managers, the Sitka Tribe of Alaska, and other stakeholders, STW forged a way for a trail network best suited for the needs of the community.

> Capacity & Challenges

As a nonprofit, STW does not own or directly manage any public land and trails, freeing the organization to focus wherever the need is greatest. Without an official jurisdiction, STW can address issues across the breadth of the community trail system. However, STW has no source of dedicated public funding for operations, so the ability to hire trail crews and contractors is dependent on competitive grants.



Photo: Caitlin Blaisdell. Sitka Trail Works Board of Directors at Starrigavan Cross Trail Extension Grand Opening on July 1, 2023.

An aerial photograph of a river flowing through a dense, green forest. The river is light-colored, possibly due to sand or silt, and winds through the trees. In the lower right, there is a small, rocky island or bend in the river with a small orange structure. The text 'CHAPTERS 4 & 5' is centered over the river.

CHAPTERS 4 & 5

Maintenance and New Development

Chapter 4 / Maintenance:

Taking Care of What Sitka Has

Maintaining Sitka's beloved trails is a top priority. In the 2022 General Survey, Sitkans shared their desire for future investments in the trail system to be evenly split between the maintenance of existing trails and the development of new routes.

Sitka's natural environment, history of trail construction, tourism industry, and workforce capacity factor into the maintenance burden on trails. Heavy rainfall and organic soils create drainage issues and threats to tread even on the best-designed trails. Several trails in the system, including Verstovia and the Upper Cross Trail, were not constructed using sustainable design techniques, so they face constant issues of structure decay and tread erosion. Newer trails constructed to a higher standard, like the Cross Trail, still require preventative maintenance to address drainage issues before they cause damage. Even the strongest infrastructure cannot withstand the force of a landslide.

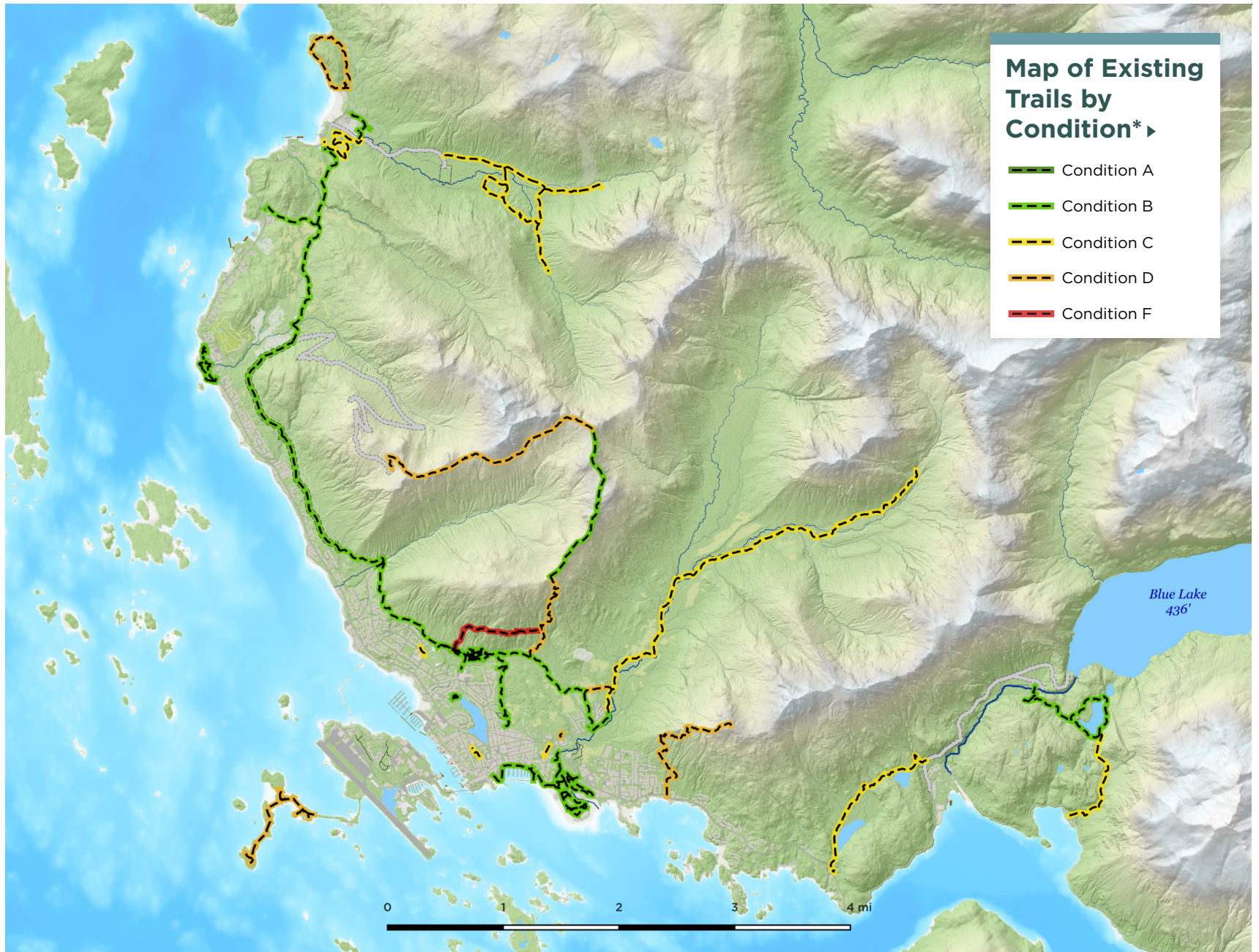
Heavier trail use from growth in tourism and use among residents can accelerate erosion. Each agency has a system to collect commercial use fees from hiking guides, but the scale and designation of revenue varies between agencies.²⁰ More visitor trail use should lead to more funding to address impacts on existing trails and expand trails to reduce overcrowding. However, current revenue streams are insufficient or undesignated, so trail managers lack the resources to respond to growth in trail use.

Regular maintenance is a critical component to trail longevity but often gets sidelined in public budgets in favor of new construction. Sitka Trail Works and land management partners should continue to educate the public on the importance of trail maintenance. Maintenance upholds the environmental, economic, and social sustainability of the trail system.

Effective maintenance across the trail system will require determining the strategy for each trail, establishing upkeep standards, and prioritizing projects. While many existing trails are well designed and just require annual maintenance, some trails may not be sustainable in their current alignment and will require rerouting or reconstructions to meet standards. Establishing the standard to which the trail system should be built and maintained will facilitate the multi-jurisdictional approach needed. When prioritizing renovation projects, a tier system should incorporate safety hazards, resource protection, popularity, consequence of deferring, and significance of the trail segment.

Volunteers are essential to addressing the trail maintenance burden on public lands. With Sitka's small population, it is important to focus on volunteer training and retention to cultivate a cohort of experienced trail workers. Regular educational opportunities like the annual Trail Master training offer networking and skill building. An Adopt-a-Trail program would allow dedicated trail users to become stewards of the places they love. Special volunteer recognition events can market volunteer opportunities, recruit supporters, and celebrate shared stewardship. Developing a system of identifying, scoping, and prioritizing trail maintenance issues would make volunteer crew efforts more effective.

²⁰ Further discussion of commercial use in Chapter 6 Recommendations (p. 90)



* Sitka Trails Condition Assessment in Appendix A (p. 102)

Reconstruct Cross Trail to Kaasda Héen (Indian River)

| | |
|----------------|-----------------|
| Reroute Length | 0.3 mile |
| Trail Surface | Gravel |

> Project Description

The short segment of the Cross Trail from Yaw Drive to the Indian River (Kaasda Héen) Trail is the only portion that has not been upgraded to modern standards. The narrow pathway constructed directly on the muskeg is subsiding, frequently leaving long stretches of the tread under water. In addition, stairs and other trail structures built into the route are beginning to fail and need to be replaced. These issues result in a higher ongoing maintenance burden which could be addressed by a reconstruction.

Since this segment intersects with the footpath along Kaasda Héen, it should not be rebuilt to the same eight-foot profile of the rest of the Cross Trail. Instead, keeping the trail at a narrower width and tapering down as it approaches the riverside intersection, will provide a more cohesive experience.

> Public Needs Met

This project requested by the City of Sitka Public Works, addresses the deferred maintenance backlog and reduces future maintenance. Revamping this segment of the Cross Trail will improve accessibility,

enhancing a walking loop opportunity for more community members—a stated desire in surveys.

> Planning & Design

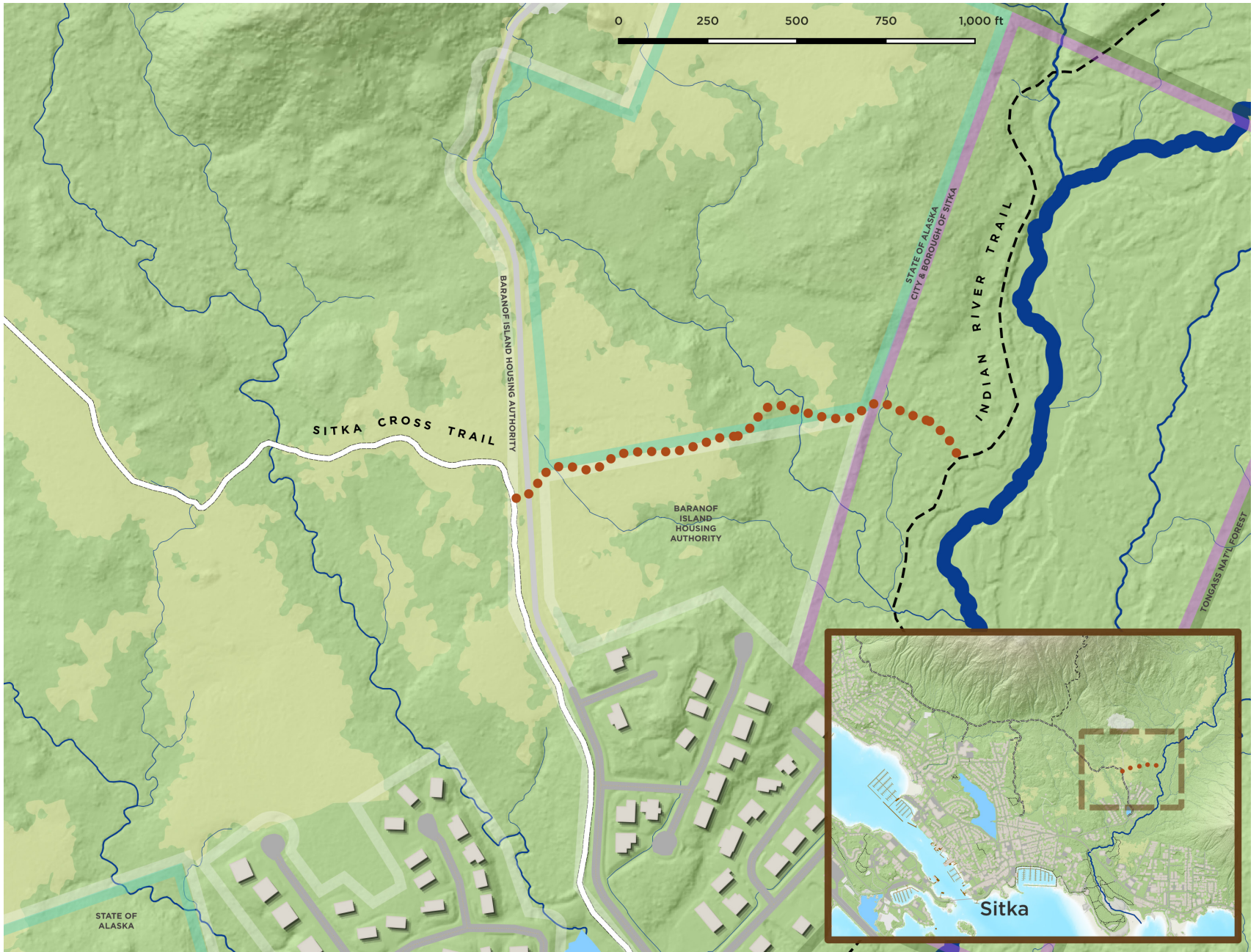
Efficiently reconstructing this route with machinery will necessitate a small reroute to find lower grades around the steep section currently constructed with stairs. Since the current route with stairs appropriately bicycles from the walking only Kaasda Héen Trail, an approach to user management is needed before final design. This route traverses between properties owned by Baranof Island Housing Authority (BIHA) and the Department of Public Safety. BIHA plans a housing development to the south, so rerouting northward could provide a better buffer from residences.

> Responsible Agency & Participants

Baranof Island Housing Authority (BIHA), State of Alaska, Forest Service, City & Borough of Sitka

> Cost Estimate

| ITEMS | TOTAL |
|----------------------------------|------------------|
| Planning, Design, Admin, Permits | \$7,126 |
| Tread | \$130,785 |
| Crossings | \$23,600 |
| Signs & Information | \$1,500 |
| Unaccounted Items | \$24,452 |
| Total Project Cost | \$187,462 |



Gavan Hill Reroute

| | |
|----------------|------------------------|
| Reroute Length | 2.1 miles |
| Trail Surface | Gravel, natural |

> Project Description

The infrastructure of Sitka’s most popular alpine trail is failing. The trail constructed in 1993 replaced a user-built fall-line chute but maintained the steep character by constructing dozens of wooden staircases. The stairs at higher elevation began to crumble under snow loads soon after installation and maintenance needs of the structures has been constant. In areas of the trail without stairs, severe erosion has stripped sections of native tread down to bare rock making the hike far more challenging than originally intended.

Though the iconic stairs have their popular following, the difficulty level constrains the number of people able to enjoy the spectacular alpine scenery. The reconstruction proposes a new alignment that ascends at a lower grade with improved drainage to reduce future maintenance and increase accessibility.

> Public Needs Met

By improving access to the alpine for all residents and visitors, addressing the environmental impact of erosion, and reducing long-term maintenance, this proposal scores well across all goals of the planning process.

> Planning and Design

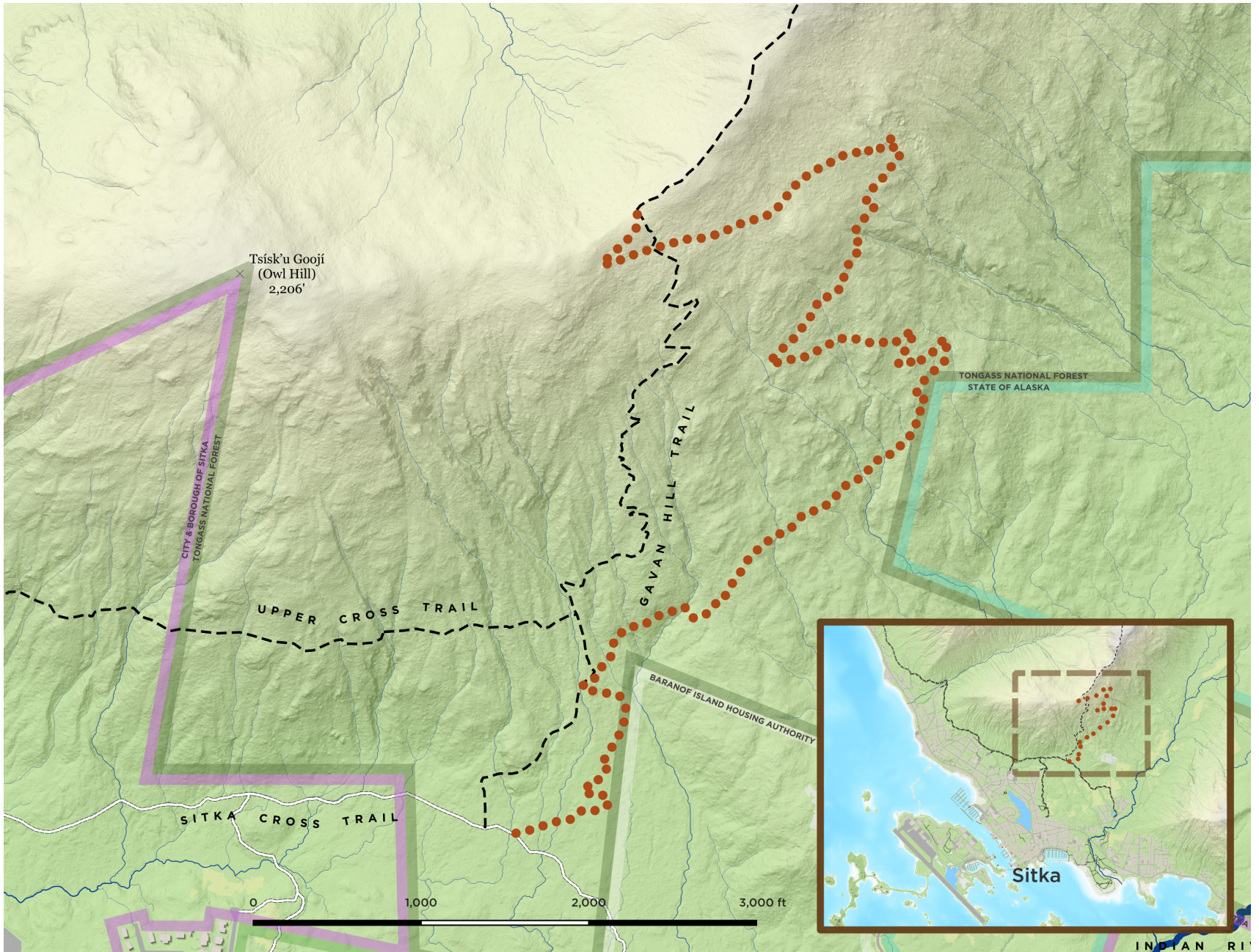
Permitting and design are mostly complete, positioning this project as the most shovel-ready among the major reconstruction projects. Public comment revealed a desire to maintain the existing steep route for winter ascents after decommissioning. Public support for maintaining a connection to the Upper Cross Trail also exists. Given that trailhead is located on the multi-modal Cross Trail, an aesthetically appropriate bike rack should be installed at the turnoff to the foot traffic only Gavan trail. The cost estimate includes an engineered bridge spanning a wide ravine around 1,400 foot of elevation. The bridge will need to be designed to safely accommodate foot traffic during snow. The route traverses steep slopes that could pose landslide risk, but no homes exist below.

> Responsible Agency & Participants

Forest Service

> Cost Estimate

| ITEMS | TOTAL |
|---------------------------|--------------------|
| Design, Admin, Permits | \$84,000 |
| Tread | \$1,362,550 |
| Crossings | \$1,207,700 |
| Amenities | \$40,000 |
| Signs & Information | \$12,000 |
| Unaccounted Items | \$676,563 |
| Total Project Cost | \$3,382,813 |



Upper Cross Reconstruction

| | |
|----------------|------------------------|
| Reroute Length | 1.2 miles |
| Trail Surface | Gravel, natural |

> Project Description

The Upper Cross Trail holds popularity beyond that expected of a short, unmarked, and unmaintained route. The mile-long trail was constructed in the 1970s by the City of Sitka and contractors Jay Stelzenmuller and Kevin Kambak, who felled large diameter trees to bridge three deep ravines. Volunteers have led sporadic maintenance efforts over the years, but the trail has received no regular maintenance and is not designated as a system trail by the City or the Forest Service. Two of the three bridges have failed and the Forest Service, who recently acquired the eastern end of the trail from Alaska Mental Health Trust, plans to remove the final one. Additionally, the steep grade of the trail's western ascent is vulnerable to erosion, and slope stability has been further undermined by recent, heavy blowdown. Restoring the trail merits consideration given the strong public support.

> Public Needs Met

The Upper Cross Trail meets the public priorities for challenging trails and loops stated in the 2022 General Survey. It is accessible from downtown, offers views and elevation gain for exercise, but is low enough to be snow-free most of the year. The weaving single-track offers solitude and nature immersion not possible on the multi-modal Cross Trail below, contours through interesting rock features, and includes a viewpoint tent site. With a connection from the mainline Cross Trail, hikers and trail

runners can commute by trail and start from either end. The experience and accessibility offered by the Upper Cross Trail fulfills a unique niche in the diversity of local trail offerings.

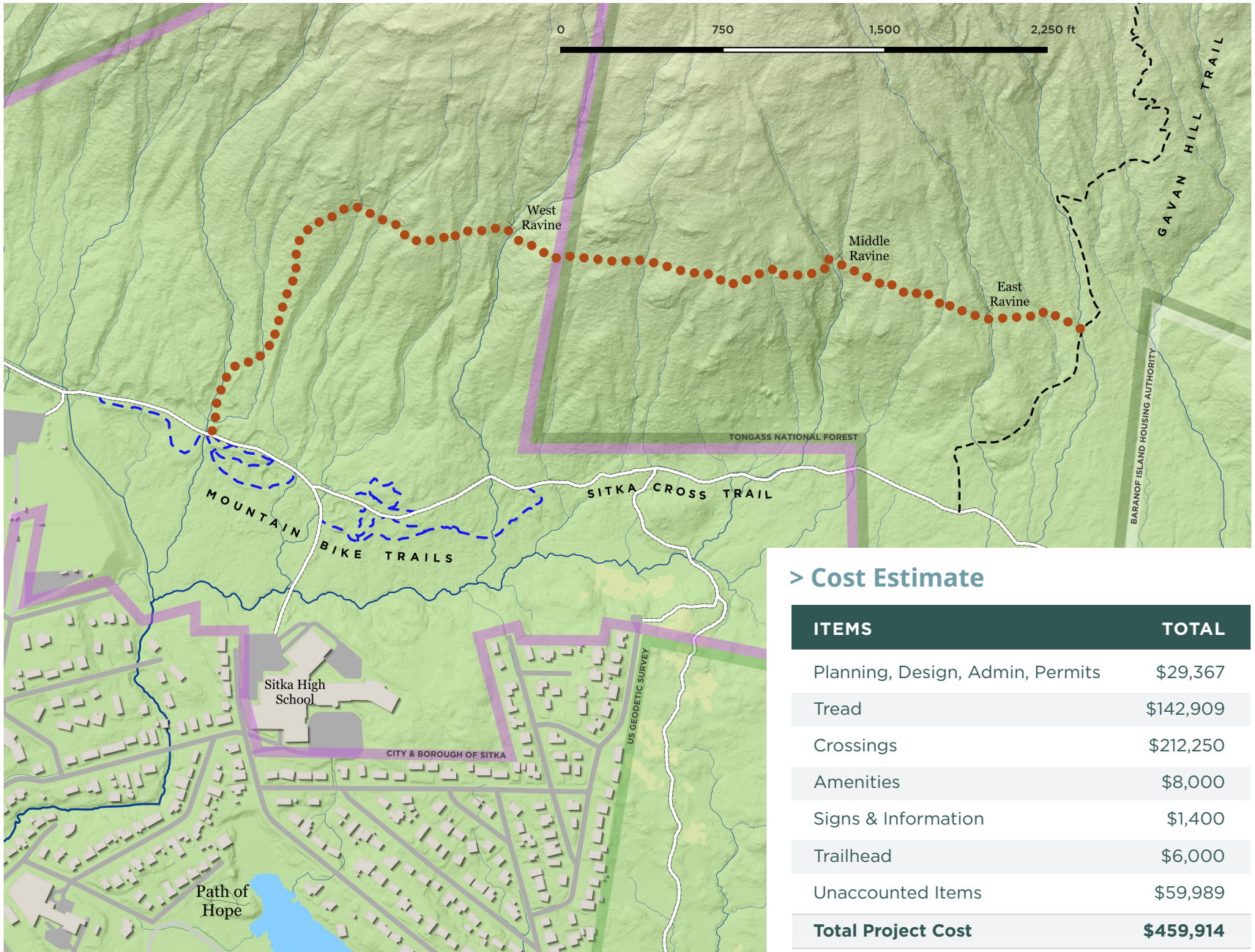
> Planning & Design

The cliff-sided ravines present the greatest feasibility challenge. Helicoptering in engineered bridge stringers would be cost prohibitive and felling of nearby trees would significantly impact the trail's intended experience. A reroute above the ravines might be the most sustainable option, but more analysis of the crossing is needed. Reducing the grade of the western ascent may be possible through a reroute, but the current route follows one of the only bands of old growth timber as adjacent ridges were clearcut.

The route currently intersects the Gavan Hill Trail above the point where it will be rerouted, so the eastern end of the Upper Cross Trail may need to be realigned or some segment of the old Gavan Trail retained to ensure the connection is maintained.

> Responsible Agency & Participants

Forest Service, City & Borough of Sitka



> Cost Estimate

| ITEMS | TOTAL |
|----------------------------------|------------------|
| Planning, Design, Admin, Permits | \$29,367 |
| Tread | \$142,909 |
| Crossings | \$212,250 |
| Amenities | \$8,000 |
| Signs & Information | \$1,400 |
| Trailhead | \$6,000 |
| Unaccounted Items | \$59,989 |
| Total Project Cost | \$459,914 |

Verstovia Reroute

| | |
|----------------|------------------------|
| Reroute Length | 0.75 mile |
| Trail Surface | Gravel, natural |

> Project Description

The trailhead to this beloved alpine ascent is located on private land with insufficient parking on a dangerous highway corner. People seeking exercise appreciate the challenging ascent, but the steep grade has suffered from significant erosion. Shifting the trailhead to the top of Price or Jarvis Street would allow for a slightly more gradual ascent, while addressing access and safety.

> Public Needs Met

The proposal to reconstruct the trail was ranked among the top five projects in the public survey, likely because it satisfies many of the demands from local recreationalists. Those seeking a challenge can pack a lot of exercise into a short distance, arriving at stunning alpine views with low mileage. The north-facing bowl beyond Picnic Rock offers the most accessible and reliable non-motorized skiing opportunity in Sitka, frequented by a growing number of local skiers and snowboarders.

> Planning & Design

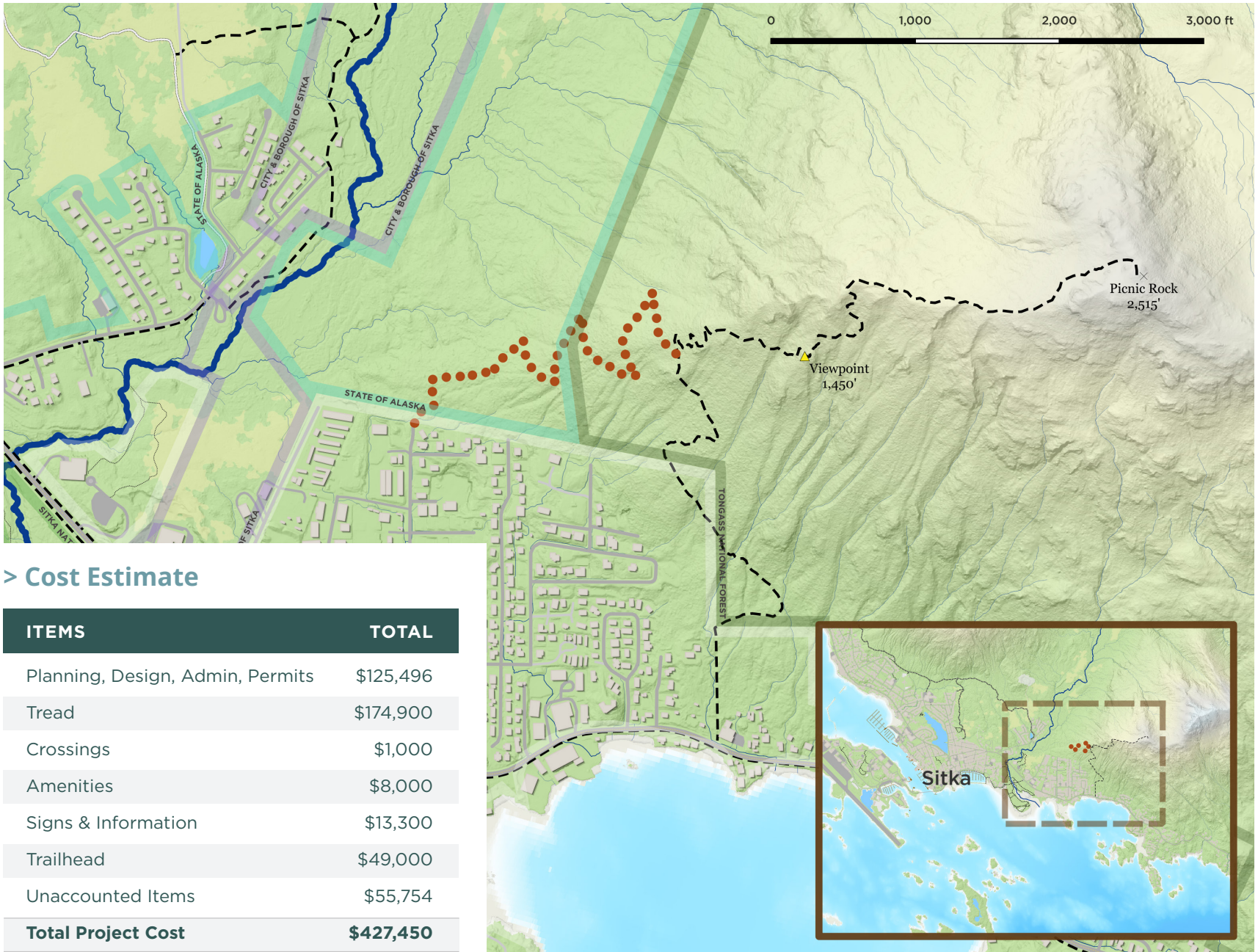
The optimal location for a new trailhead depends on the final route selected and land use concerns. A full design narrative could locate the best ascent of the unavoidably steep slopes.

When presented with three options for ascending to Picnic Rock, a focus group of winter recreationalists (the Sitka Snow Report Facebook group) stated a preference for shorter, more direct routes, but there was not consensus. The long south slope from Thimbleberry Lake offers hikers more sun exposure and the most gradual ascent, but the trailhead would be beyond the reach of those walking from downtown. Cliffs at higher elevations along the route still present a potential obstacle, and the trail would end in the saddle of the mountain, unfortunately encouraging more hikers toward the formidable 1,000-meter peak of Verstovia. A gradual ascent up the north ramp from Indian River provides better connectivity to downtown, but a large cliff band presents a potential feasibility challenge. The shortest route tackles the west ridge head on, likely requiring more built structures with higher maintenance needs. If the west ridge is selected, designers will need to decide between a partial rebuild that connects early with the existing trail (as shown on the map) or a more extensive rebuild that eliminates the steep and eroded upper sections of the trail.

A trailhead at the top of Jarvis Street is congruent with current adjacent commercial use but would need to be designed to respect the Sitka Homeless Coalition's proposed housing development. The top of Price Street is more residential, and more excavation is required for a parking lot. Purchasing an existing nearby lot may be less expensive than building a new one. If a longer route is selected, the design narrative should identify an approach to maintain a direct winter route.

> Responsible Agency & Participants

Forest Service—all uplands, City & Borough of Sitka—Haley Way ROW



> Cost Estimate

| ITEMS | TOTAL |
|----------------------------------|------------------|
| Planning, Design, Admin, Permits | \$125,496 |
| Tread | \$174,900 |
| Crossings | \$1,000 |
| Amenities | \$8,000 |
| Signs & Information | \$13,300 |
| Trailhead | \$49,000 |
| Unaccounted Items | \$55,754 |
| Total Project Cost | \$427,450 |

Fort Rousseau Causeway

| | |
|------------------|-----------------------------|
| Total Length | 1.5 miles |
| Difficulty Level | Easy, ADA Accessible |
| Trail Surface | Gravel |

> Project Description

The Fort Rousseau Causeway earned designation as a State Historical Park in April 2008 after years of effort in rehabilitation by Sitka Trail Works and the Sitka Tribe of Alaska. During that era, overgrown roads were reopened, beaches were cleaned of hazardous debris, and bunkers were uncovered. Picnic tables and an outhouse now provide comfortable day-use facilities. The Causeway is a part of a National Historic Landmark designation for World War II sites in Sitka.

Constraints to access and maintenance limit use to this scenic, historic site. Since public access across the airport runway was halted in the 1980s, visiting requires boat travel. Army Corps clean-up removed hazardous materials, but in doing so, eliminated a kayak landing on a protected south beach on Virublennoi. On the north side, Whiting Harbor offers anchorage, but an invasive tunicate *D.vex* can be spread when boats land at low-tide or set anchor.

While maintenance of additional infrastructure like a dock or mooring buoy would be a challenge for State Parks, improved boat landings with natural materials would be a durable solution. Better signage and information, both on the ground and online, could help more users know how, where, and why to access the site.

Alaska State Parks performs no maintenance at the site, and the lack of upkeep has taken a toll on facilities. Wave erosion threatens the breakwater rock in several places along the man-made linkages between islands, and travel to the farthest island, Makhnati, requires a low-tide scramble across slick boulders. The Causeway still has the potential to be the best and most informative World War II historic walk in Southeast Alaska, with fascinating intact artifacts from an era that dramatically transformed the region. A cabin on the Causeway would likely be very popular.

> Public Needs Met

Coastal trails were the type of environment most desired in response to the 2023 General Survey. The causeway provides stunning coastal views along with an immersive historical experience, all within a trail system without elevation gain.

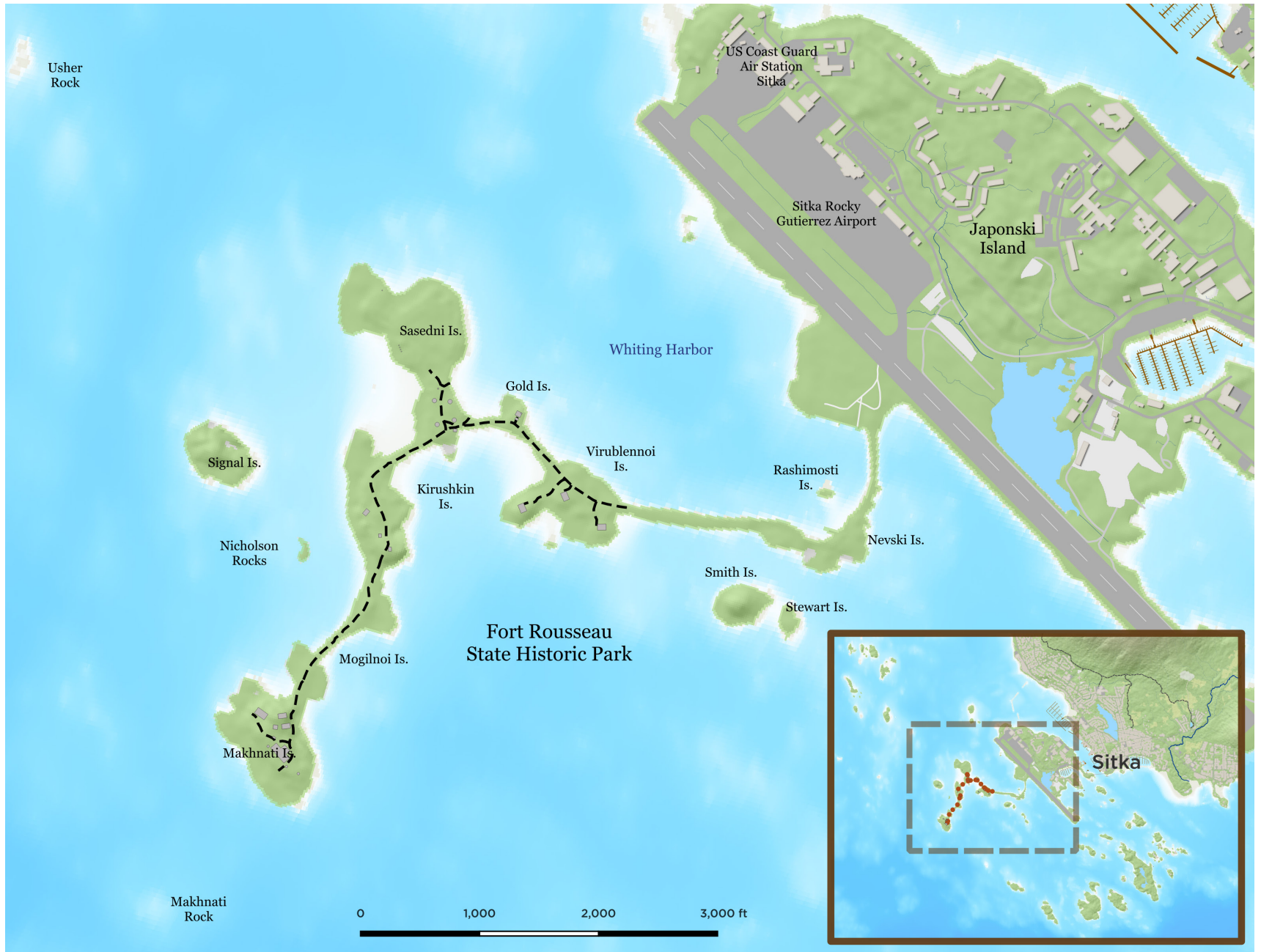
> Planning & Design

Vegetation removal and other deferred maintenance is most needed to maintain access. Other improvements could greatly enhance the visitor experience, including restoring gravel, shoring up the breakwater, and adding signage or improving facilities.

> Responsible Agency & Participants

Alaska State Parks, Sitka Tribe of Alaska, Army Corps of Engineers, National Park Service

> Cost Estimate *(not applicable)*



Mosquito Cove Rehabilitation

| | |
|---------------|-----------------------------------|
| Trail Length | 1.5 miles |
| Trail Surface | Natural, gravel, boardwalk |

> Project Description

Before the construction of the Katlian Bay Road, the Mosquito Cove Trail offered the only coastal walk in a wilderness setting accessible from the road system. Despite the intrusion of a clearcut road corridor in the viewshed of the trail, the trail remains popular for residents and visitors.

After the road corridor was cleared, a series of catastrophic blowdown events flattened the forest on the peninsula knob, covering the adjacent trail with massive trees and uprooting tread. In addition to needed blasting work and tread reconstruction on that south contouring route, the wooden structures and hill climbs on the northern inland half are in decay and will need replacement. Given the scale of repairs, the increasing volumes of traffic, and the now disturbed scenery, a higher level of development may be appropriate. Widening the bench cut into the south slope contour would make it easier for tour groups to pass. Replacing wooden boardwalks with synthetic grate decking would reduce future maintenance.

> Public Needs Met

Coastal environments are the most sought-after ecosystem for trail users and loop trails are the favored design, according to the 2022 Survey. Mosquito Cove offers a family-friendly, low-effort, high-reward destination for residents and visitors.

> Planning & Design

Sitka Trail Works conducted maintenance with Recreation Trails Program grants in 2016 and 2017. State Parks only has capacity to perform light maintenance, so blowdown has remained blocking the trail for over two years now. The cost estimate is conceptual and further refinement of design will dictate actual costs.

> Responsible Agency & Participants

Alaska State Parks, Forest Service

> Cost Estimate

| ITEMS | TOTAL |
|---------------------------|------------------|
| Planning, Design, Admin | \$13,168 |
| Tread | \$266,050 |
| Crossings | \$10,110 |
| Amenities | \$2,000 |
| Signs & Information | \$1,000 |
| Unaccounted Items | \$43,849 |
| Total Project Cost | \$336,177 |

A photograph of a forest trail. The trail is made of log steps and gravel, winding up a mossy hillside. The forest is lush with green foliage and tall trees. A wooden signpost is visible on the left side of the trail.

LEAVING
Tongass
National Forest
Starrigavan
Recreation Area
ENTERING
Alaska State
Park

Medvejie Lake Trailhead Reroute

| | |
|----------------|------------------------|
| Reroute Length | 1000 feet |
| Trail Length | 0.2 mile |
| Trail Surface | Gravel, natural |

> Project Description

Maintaining and improving access to the Medvejie Lake Trail is a priority because it allows Sitkans to enjoy the spectacular scenery of this pocket of central Baranof Island. A flood in the fall of 2020 washed out the log that had been serving as a bridge to the start of the trail, requiring hikers to now ford an occasionally deep and fast stream or walk upstream to hop between slick rocks. A reroute of the beginning of the trail could keep hikers on the north side of the stream for the entirety of the route to mitigate the hazardous crossing and avoid the nuisance of visitors wandering through the hatchery grounds. This reroute would require the clearing of a small trailhead, ideally with a small kiosk and a bike rack.

> Public Needs Met

This priority responds to the public demand for challenging day hikes and backcountry access and offers a unique experience. The trail connects with an established backcountry backpacking route that ascends the valley along the inlet to Medvejie Lake to arrive at Camp Lake and the base of Mount Bassie. The upper valley is known for outstanding “Yosemite-like” geology. As the beginning of the mountaineering route across Baranof Island, the trail provides an experience of adventure and solitude

not offered in closer to town trails. The difficult-to-find trailhead and risky stream crossing impedes some users, so improvements would increase safety and access.

> Planning & Design

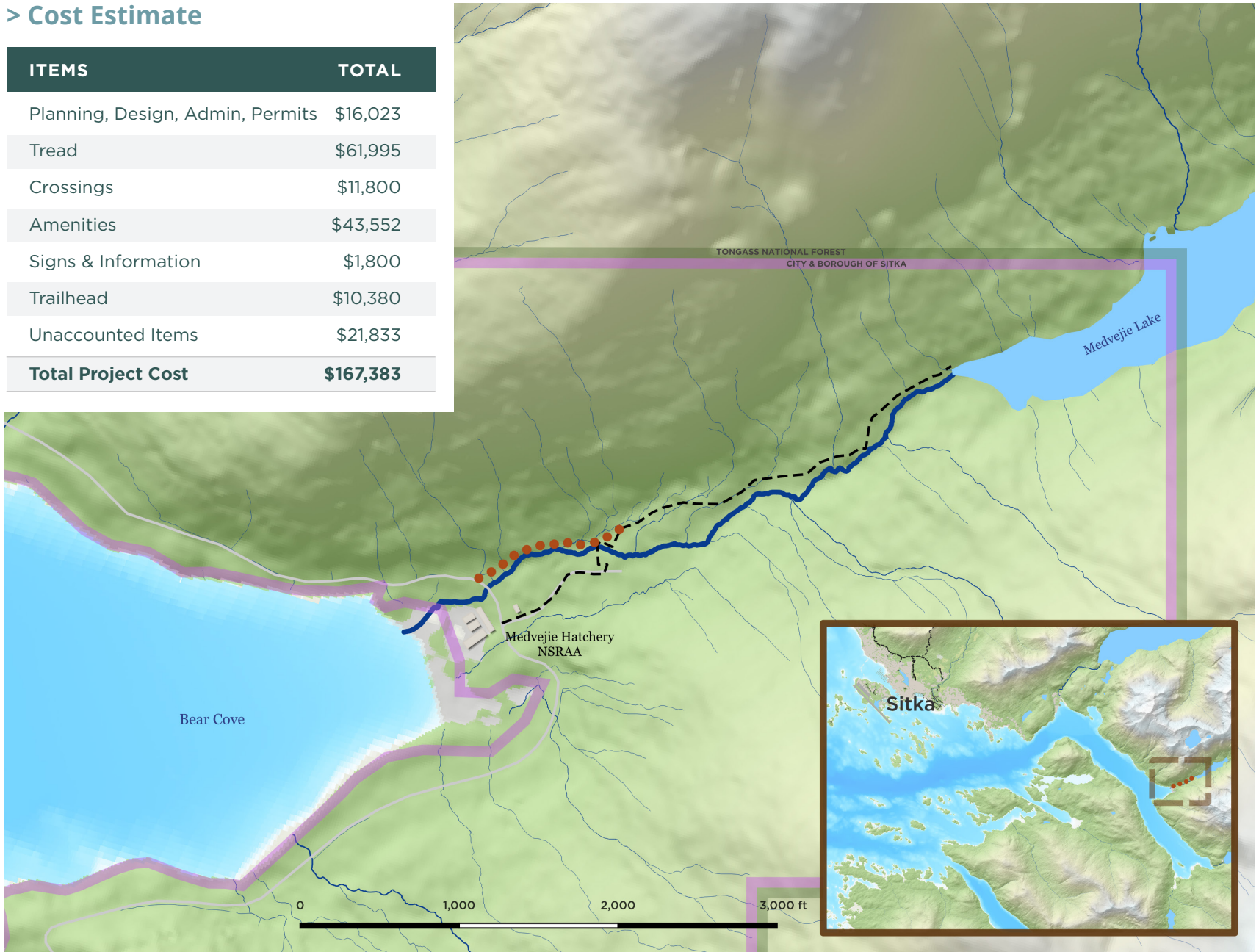
The majority of the Medvejie Valley is an active avalanche and landslide zone, making sustainable trail design challenging. With limited maintenance capacity at the City and Borough of Sitka, identifying a durable route and design is paramount. Without Northern Southeast Regional Aquaculture Association (NSRAA) staff performing volunteer trail maintenance over the years, the trail would have become unusable due to frequent blowdown. The route to Camp Lake should be kept as minimally developed and rustic, as specified in 2003 Plan, to maintain the wild character of the area. Competent mineral soils in the upper Valley will hold an undeveloped trail with minimal erosion. Camping pads could be installed at Camp Lake only if needed to prevent erosion.

> Responsible Agency & Participants

City & Borough of Sitka, Northern Southeast Regional Aquaculture Association

> Cost Estimate

| ITEMS | TOTAL |
|----------------------------------|------------------|
| Planning, Design, Admin, Permits | \$16,023 |
| Tread | \$61,995 |
| Crossings | \$11,800 |
| Amenities | \$43,552 |
| Signs & Information | \$1,800 |
| Trailhead | \$10,380 |
| Unaccounted Items | \$21,833 |
| Total Project Cost | \$167,383 |



Sealion Cove Rehabilitation

| | |
|----------------|------------------|
| Trail Length | 2.5 miles |
| Trail Surface | Natural |
| Elevation Gain | 500 feet |

> Project Description

This popular traverse of Kruzof Island needs extensive maintenance and reconstruction. Sitka Trail Works rebuilt much of the route in 2003 and 2006, then performed a maintenance project in 2022, but many sections of the route require rehabilitation due to a lack of ongoing maintenance.

Ideally, the trailhead would be improved to ease skiff access at all tides. Trailhead signs need replacement. The tidally influenced start of the trail needs extensive rock and gravel work. Several sections of the climb in the first mile need full stair replacement. Twenty-year-old log stringer stairs are beginning to decay. Steep sections of natural tread have eroded out to a tangle of routes. Rerouting the climb to a more sustainable grade could circumvent the need for structures and continuing erosion issues. The passage around the lake needs full bench cut in several areas where blowdown or water have eroded the tread.

The descent from the lake was improved in 2022 with rockwork, but bedrock at the top poses a construction challenge. Rerouting options are limited in the steep valley, so building stone stepping throughout may be the most sustainable solution to the erosion facing steep sections. Boardwalk in the long muskeg needs regular maintenance. Duckbill anchors will hopefully reduce board displacement from flooding.

Mud on the path through the coastal fringe forest could be mitigated by gravel from the adjacent stream.

> Public Needs Met

The Sealion Cove Trail is exceptional, as the only trail to access an outer coast beach in a wilderness setting in Southeast Alaska. En route to a mile-long white sand beach, the trail passes through a salmon-filled estuary, old-growth forest, expansive muskegs, and under towering cliffs. These features make the trail popular for residents and visitors, providing a well-positioned shore excursion for small boat commercial operators. The beach appeals to backpackers, picnickers, beach combers, and surfers.

> Planning & Design

The remote location, difficult landing, and rugged terrain significantly increase mobilization costs. Landing craft and helicopters are required to transport lumber or gravel. High bear density threatens material caches and campers. Future projects should consider the addition of a cabin, but this cost estimate just incorporates a tent pad. The 2022 Survey determined hike-in cabins are the most sought-after, and respondents to the 2023 Survey ranked Sealion Cove as the 4th most desirable location for a new cabin.

> Responsible Agency & Participants

Alaska State Parks



Photo: Ben Hüghey

> Cost Estimate

| ITEMS | TOTAL |
|-----------------------------|------------------|
| Mobilization, Design, Admin | \$46,500 |
| Tread | \$444,250 |
| Crossings | \$5,930 |
| Amenities | \$14,000 |
| Signs & Information | \$1,800 |
| Unaccounted Items | \$76,872 |
| Total Project Cost | \$589,352 |

Reconstruct Lake Suloia

| | |
|---------------|------------------|
| Trail Length | 0.65 mile |
| Trail Surface | Natural |

> Project Description

At a little over a half-mile to a remote lake, the Lake Suloia Trail provides a unique backcountry experience. The current poor condition of the trail makes it impassable for many, decreasing usage. A reconstruction of the route would allow more locals and visitors to experience this inland lake in the West Chichagof-Yakobi Wilderness. Restoring the trail could also increase use of the Forest Service cabin at the far side of the lake from the trail terminus, which is one of the lowest used cabins on the District.

> Public Needs Met

The 2022 Survey showed hike-in cabins were the most in demand, so improving access to an existing hike-in cabin could help satisfy this desired user experience. A consistent theme in outreach to outfitters & guides was the need for additional shore-based activities in the North Baranof zone, to disperse use from the crowded Lake Eva trail. Ideally, a new destination would be closer to Lake Eva, have an anchorage sufficient for medium-size cruise operators, and have the opportunity for multiple group recreational activities. The proposal for a trail at Lindenberg Head was considered by the Trail Plan Committee but removed due to insufficient local interest. Lake Suloia offers a compromise serving small boat operators through an investment in trail maintenance that benefits residents. The existing Shoreline Management Plan prohibits guided use of the Suloia Trail until it is reconstructed.

> Planning & Design

The design, construction effort, and management of the trail must adhere to Wilderness regulations. The use of any motorized equipment would be prohibited unless a waiver could be secured. Infrastructure design and materials used must retain the Wilderness aesthetic. Small groups of private and guided visitors could be managed to be consistent with Wilderness character as long as group size and frequency adheres to regulations and intent.

To ensure users without packrafts can still access the cabin, the public skiff should be stored at the trailhead side of the lake. Alternatively, extending the trail around the lake could be explored, but the muskeg presents a sustainability challenge.

> Responsible Agency & Participants

Forest Service

> Cost Estimate

| ITEMS | TOTAL |
|-----------------------------|------------------|
| Mobilization, Design, Admin | \$24,500 |
| Tread | \$291,720 |
| Signs & Information | \$1,000 |
| Unaccounted Items | \$47,583 |
| Total Project Cost | \$364,803 |



Reconstruct Baranof Lake & Grotto Trail

| | |
|----------------|---------------------------------|
| Reroute Length | 0.5 mile |
| Trail Surface | Raised boardwalk, gravel |

> Project Description

Improvements to the pathway connecting the municipal dock and community in Warms Springs Bay to Baranof Lake and the Grotto hot springs are needed to withstand the high and increasing levels of visitation. Baranof has been a mecca for recreational users for over 100 years, attracting visitors wanting to experience the 3-mile-long Baranof Lake and the hot springs, impounded into a natural granite bathing pool, located directly alongside the river from the Lake.

The Baranof Lake Trail commences from the end of the City's boardwalk from the Townsite and extends another 2,000 feet uphill to Baranof Lake on State land, gaining approximately 200 feet in elevation above the Bay. Visitors arriving by boat or seaplane, whose numbers increase annually and now exceed 5,000 persons per year, can walk up the ramp to the City's boardwalk and then up the Lake Trail. Most of the trail is over worn ground cover, in some areas covered in exposed roots and others deteriorating to mud or pools after heavy rains. Some areas feature improvements consisting of gravel or wooden plank runners which are in various stages of deterioration. One 800' segment of raised boardwalk rises over a swampy area and was improved with a strong, raised-trestle boardwalk with railings, constructed in 2004 by STW at the request of Baranof Property Owners Association (BPOA).

> Public Needs Met

With a protected harbor, dock facilities, free public bathhouse, and fresh water, Baranof Warm Springs is one of the more popular marine destinations in the Chatham Strait area. Baranof Lake is a recognized recreational jewel within the Tongass National Forest. Without use of a seaplane, the Baranof Lake Trail is the only means of access to it. The Grotto is now of national, even international fame; nowhere else is there a natural hot spring beneath a canopy of forest, a few feet from whitewater rapids of a river canyon.

> Planning & Design

The cost of mobilizing materials and labor is significantly higher to the isolated town site 30 miles due east of Sitka. The DNR's Area Plan calls for maintain the scenic value and protecting the trail , but the State has not performed maintenance. The many visitors drawn to these attractions cause erosion, but few commercial operators adhere to use fee regulations. Better signage and peer enforcement could increase commercial use revenues, especially if funds were designated toward trail maintenance. The scope, details and improvement costs to the Baranof Lake Trail should be made in consultation with experts and interested representatives of the City, USDA FS and the BPOA.

> Responsible Agency & Participants

**State of Alaska, City & Borough of Sitka,
Baranof Property Owners Association (BPOA)**

> Cost Estimate

| ITEMS | TOTAL |
|-----------------------------|------------------|
| Mobilization, Design, Admin | \$68,626 |
| Tread | \$70,180 |
| Crossings | \$112,100 |
| Signs and Information | \$3,400 |
| Unaccounted Items | \$38,146 |
| Total Project Cost | \$187,462 |



Reconstruct Port Alexander Trails

| Segment | Landowner | Length |
|-----------------------------|-----------------|----------|
| A. Town to Back Lagoon | State & Private | 0.8 mile |
| B. Back Lagoon to Tract B | State, City | 0.5 mile |
| C. Back Lagoon to Ship Cove | USDA FS, State | 0.3 mile |

> Project Description

A small trail network connecting Port Alexander with Back Lagoon, Ship Cove and the western half of the town would improve access to recreation and subsistence resources for the small, isolated community and visitors. The USDA FS is pursuing construction of the Ship Cove Trail, but additional efforts will be needed to reconstruct the route around Back Lagoon and the spur to Tract B. The historic Ship Cove Trail was built by the Forest Service in 1925 and improved by the CCC in the 1930s. Segments A and B pass through private and state land and connect the two sides of the Port Alexander community around Back Lagoon. Several missing bridges impede access and resulted in the route being abandoned for decades. Recently, locals have cleared the corridor, but need bridges as parts of the trail are impassable at high tide.

> Public Needs Met

This project would improve safety and accessibility by connecting all residents to the school, post office, and city hall, providing an emergency evacuation route in the case of a tsunami.

> Planning & Design

Port Alexander acquired a Federal Lands Access Program (FLAP) award in 2019 for the USDA FS to conduct a National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) review and construct the Ship Cove Trail, Segment C. The USDA FS published a Categorical Exclusion permitting the trail in May 2023. While Segments A and B are off federal land, additional federal permitting would be required if a federal grant, like FLAP, is obtained for construction. The trail has an existing easement through private land.

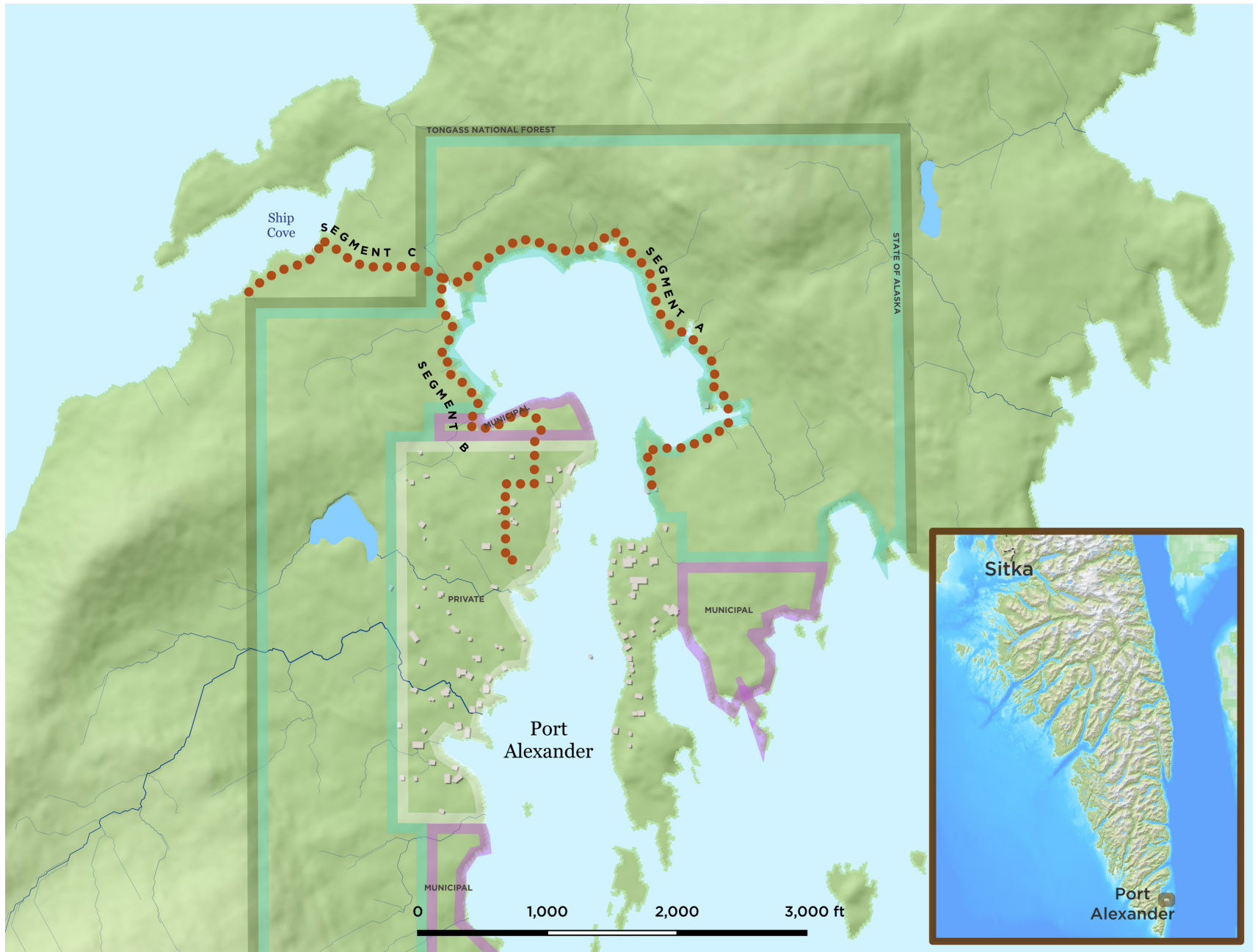
This cost estimate assumes the construction of a 5-foot-wide multi-use trail for Segment A, with a smaller, 2-foot hiking trail on Segments B and C, requiring full federal permitting and design process.

> Responsible Agency & Participants

Forest Service, State of Alaska, Municipal

> Cost Estimate

| ITEMS | TOTAL |
|---------------------------|--------------------|
| Design, Admin, Permits | \$407,000 |
| Tread | \$1,761,960 |
| Crossings | \$2,368,500 |
| Amenities | \$12,000 |
| Signs & Information | \$35,000 |
| Unaccounted Items | \$687,669 |
| Total Project Cost | \$5,272,129 |



Chapter 5 / New Development: Enhancing the Network

North Swan Lake Connector

> Project Description

Swan Lake is a large municipal park in Sitka with a mostly forested fringe and spectacular views of surrounding peaks. When frozen, the Lake acts as the town's Central Park, bringing out hundreds of Sitkans to ice skate, play hockey, and socialize. However, when thawed, it's rarely visited due to the lack of insufficient access. The only developed access is a small peninsula off Lake Street with no parking and no buffer from the road to provide an immersive nature experience.

The project seeks to establish an additional lake access point, via a short connector trail from Moller Field to Lake Street, all on municipal land. The new trail could connect to the Path of Hope or pass by underneath. While the north and south ends of the lake shore are public, private residents own the northeast and northwest banks, with private property extending into the lake. If property owners were willing to sell easements along the Lake's shore, a full loop trail of Swan Lake could be developed.

> Public Needs Met

Enhancing access will take advantage of underused public land in the downtown core, creating a new, accessible outdoor destination for all abilities. The connection would enhance a walking route for exercise, improve safety for ice skaters accessing the lake, and provide a wildlife

viewing opportunity in a secluded portion of public open space. A more fully developed trail around Swan Lake, or at least at its southern end, could provide seniors and people with disabilities an accessible way to experience the natural beauty and wildlife of the lake. Developing Swan Lake into a destination would also help with visitor dispersal, reducing downtown summer congestion.

Connecting lower Moller Avenue to Lake Street would create a shortcut for Sitka High students to the Moller ball fields. The new dock would provide a safer alternative for winter access to Swan Lake than the small park along Lake Street because it includes parking and does not require users to cross a busy street.

> Planning & Design

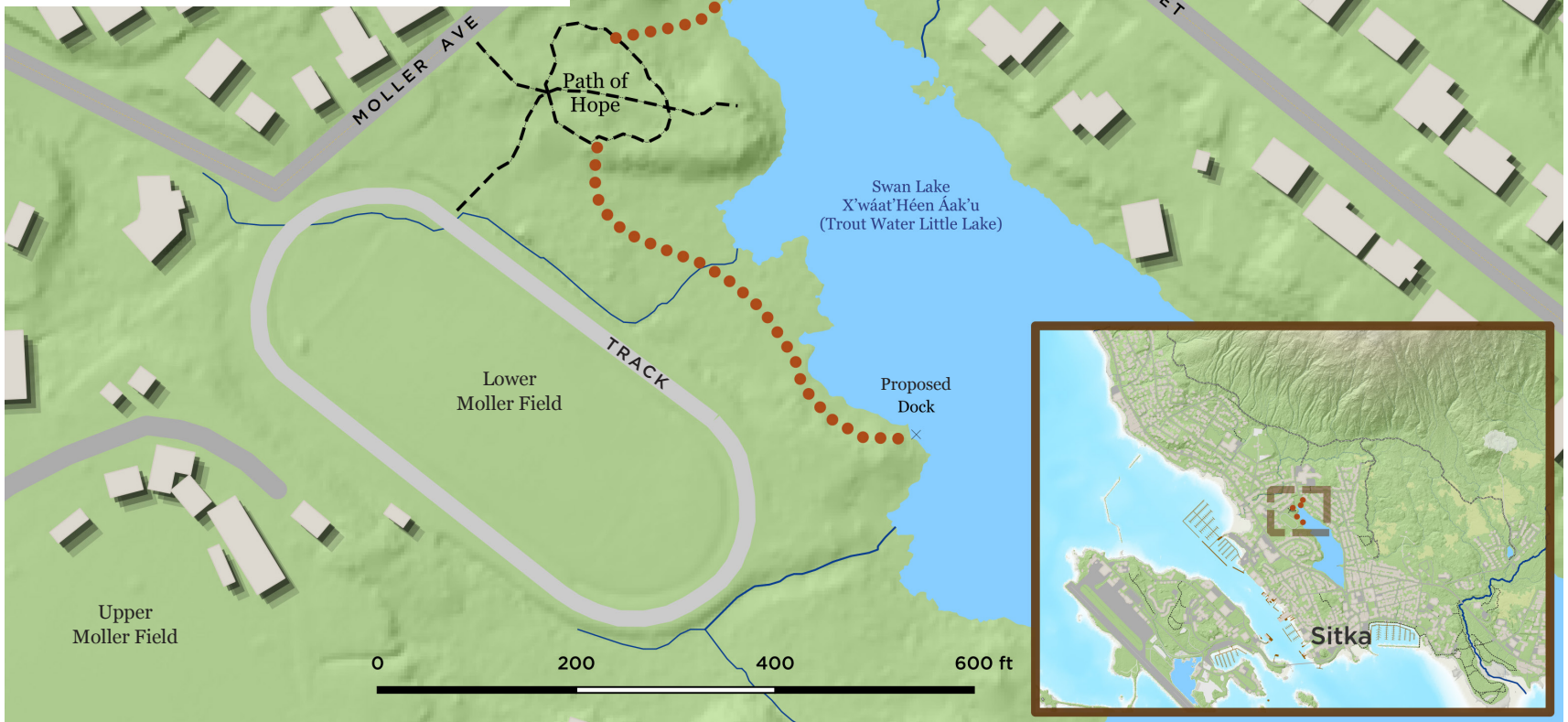
The City holds some preliminary plans for the project. The trail design should aim to ensure privacy of adjacent homeowners while protecting the aesthetic experience of the Path of Hope. Construction of the route may require helical pilings or a pounded galvanized pipe substructure to reduce costs. Survey feedback suggested greater support for a full lake boardwalk loop, but that project was not scoped in this plan as it would require private property owners' support.

> Responsible Agency & Participants

City & Borough of Sitka

> Cost Estimate

| ITEMS | TOTAL |
|----------------------------------|------------------|
| Planning, Design, Admin, Permits | \$191,411 |
| Tread | \$32,560 |
| Crossings | \$232,100 |
| Amenities | \$82,860 |
| Signs and Information | \$9,200 |
| Unaccounted Items | \$82,220 |
| Total Project Cost | \$630,351 |



Sitka High 5K Loop

| | |
|-------------------------|-----------------|
| New Construction Length | 0.7 mile |
| Difficulty Level | Easy |
| Trail Surface | Gravel |

> Project Description

Sitka lacks a 5-kilometer course that adheres to the National Federation of State High School Associations’ (NFHS) standards so cannot host state-wide cross country competitions. Regional competitions hosted in Sitka use the National Park trails, which requires blocking off a road. The Park is increasingly congested with visitors for longer into the fall.

> Public Needs Met

The 2022 Trail Survey determined easy loop trails were the second most in-demand type of trail. This project serves to address the specific need for a regulation 5k course, while providing multiple other benefits. A connection to Tilson Street creates a safe route to school between neighborhoods, improving accessibility to the tsunami evacuation point at Sitka High. Creating shorter walking routes could also reduce parking needs for events at the school and the Performing Arts Center.

> Planning & Design

A professional design will be required to determine the best alignment to traverse a muskeg, cross a stream, and navigate rough terrain while meeting cross-country route specifications. The trail design should seek

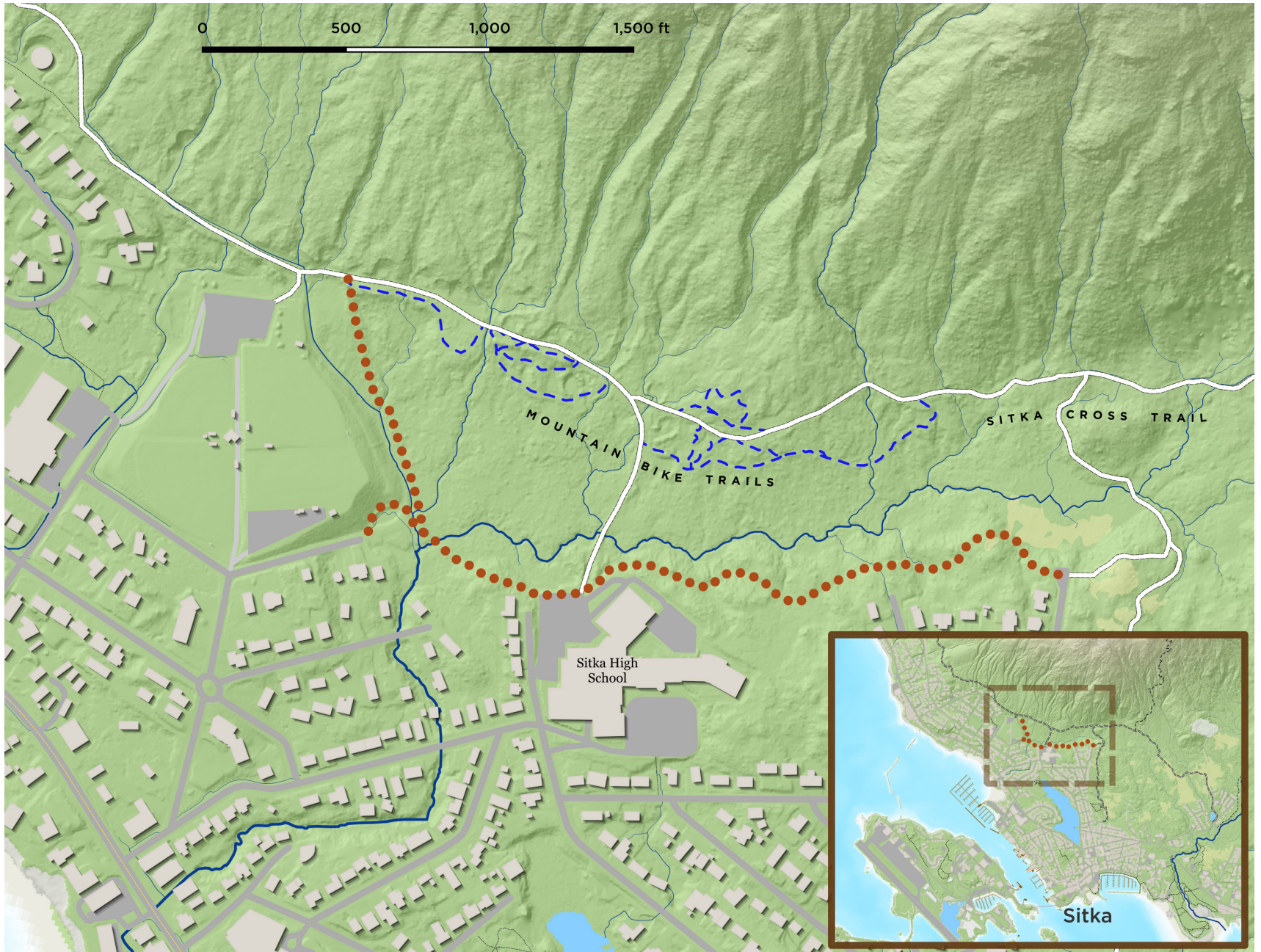
to ensure privacy of nearby homeowners. Trail design should proceed in close coordination with CBS Planning to ensure compatibility with potential housing development in the area.

> Responsible Agency & Participants

City & Borough of Sitka, Sitka School District

> Cost Estimate

| ITEMS | TOTAL |
|----------------------------------|------------------|
| Planning, Design, Admin, Permits | \$57,377 |
| Tread | \$665,280 |
| Crossings | \$94,800 |
| Amenities | \$16,000 |
| Signs and Information | \$5,300 |
| Unaccounted Items | \$125,814 |
| Total Project Cost | \$964,571 |



Kaasda Héen Underpass and Flume Trail

| | |
|-------------------------|------------------|
| New Construction Length | 0.25 mile |
| Difficulty Level | Easy |
| Trail Surface | Gravel |

> Project Description

Opening access to one of the most beautiful sections of Kaasda Héen (Indian River) would provide a vital pedestrian linkage in the heart of Sitka’s transportation system. Taking advantage of the natural underpass below the Sawmill Creek Bridge is the lowest risk path to cross the highway, with significant co-benefits of creating attractive outdoor space and better connecting the trail system. This proposal would formalize existing public access along the Flume pipeline path and construct a pedestrian highway underpass with connection ramps to the Riverview Trail, the SMC multi-use pathway, and the north sidewalk.

> Public Needs Met

An underpass facility was recommended in the CBS 2002 Non-Motorized Transportation Plan and the 2003 Sitka Trail Plan. Collision risk is increasing as growing numbers of tourists cross Sawmill Creek Road illegally from the National Park to the Raptor Center, drawing more agency attention.²¹ An underpass may not alleviate all illegal crossings but would provide an attractive and safe alternative. Before design, a hydrological study of infrastructure impacts, incorporating the Riverview trail bridge, would be needed to ensure no adverse downstream changes in the National Park.

Clear signage prohibiting bicycle riding on the underpass and National Park would be posted at trail entrances.

> Planning & Design

Tread construction along the Flume would need to ensure safety of the Sitka Sound Science Center’s water supply pipeline. Additionally, formalizing the trail must concentrate public use on the existing footprint to reduce traffic elsewhere on the Southeast Alaska Land Trust’s conservation easement. The northern access would need to maintain privacy of Sitka Counseling’s supportive housing on Flume Circle. A maintenance and management plan would need to identify responsible parties for each segment before proceeding.

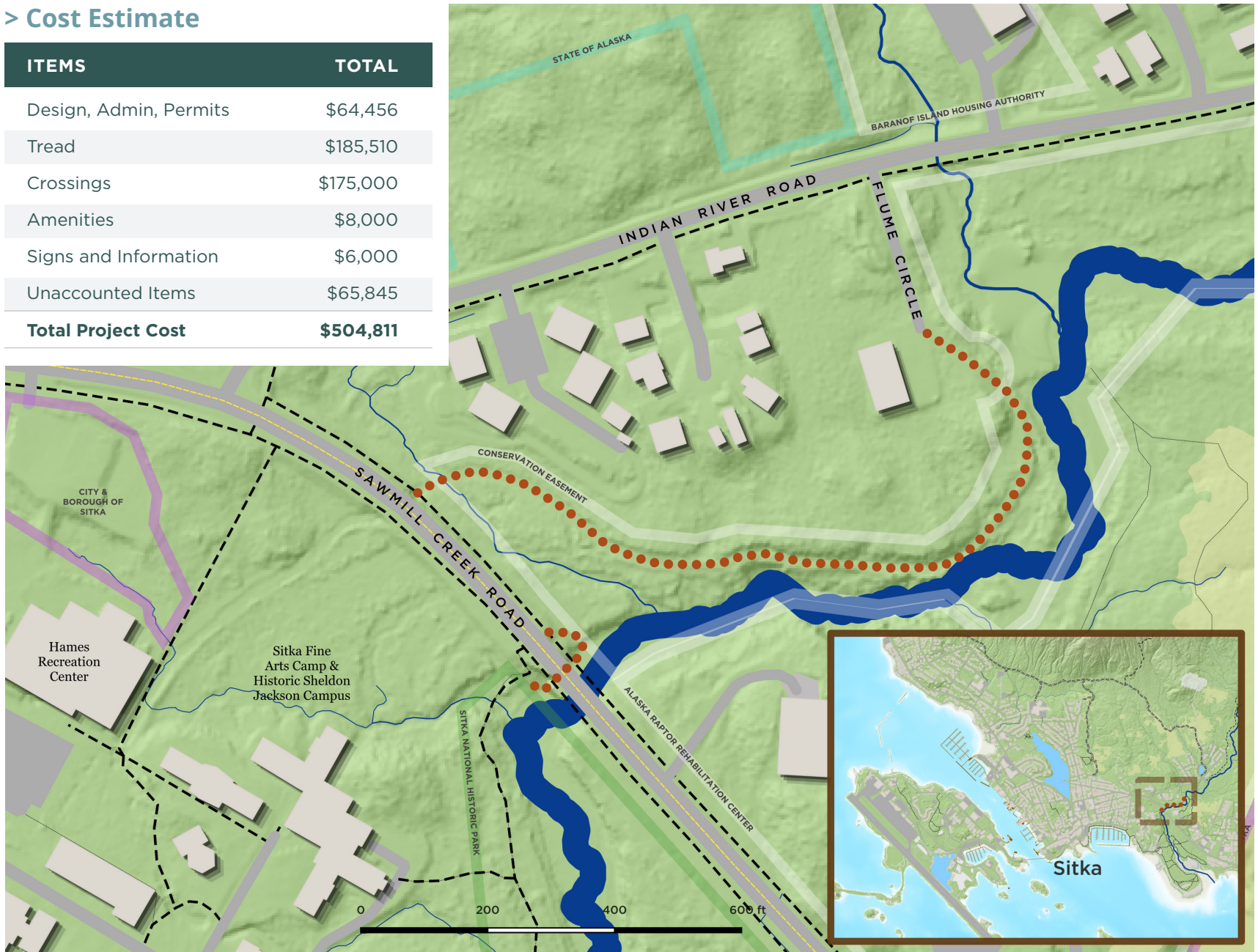
> Responsible Agency & Participants

| | |
|---------------------|---|
| Land Managers | Alaska Department of Transportation, National Park Service, Southeast Alaska Land Trust |
| Adjacent Landowners | Alaska Raptor Center, Sitka Fine Arts Camp, Sitka Sound Science Center, Sitka Counseling, Baranof Island Housing Authority |
| Other Participants | Sitka Tribe of Alaska, Indian River Watershed Working Group |

²¹ In 2018, the National Park Service and the US DOT Federal Highway Administration published “Sawmill Creek Road Transportation Corridor Assessment.”

> Cost Estimate

| ITEMS | TOTAL |
|---------------------------|------------------|
| Design, Admin, Permits | \$64,456 |
| Tread | \$185,510 |
| Crossings | \$175,000 |
| Amenities | \$8,000 |
| Signs and Information | \$6,000 |
| Unaccounted Items | \$65,845 |
| Total Project Cost | \$504,811 |



Price-Hillside Neighborhood Connector

| | |
|-------------------------|-----------------|
| New Construction Length | 0.1 mile |
| Difficulty Level | Easy |
| Trail Surface | Gravel |

> Project Description

This proposed connector trail is an opportunity to provide access to the Cross Trail network from a high-density, underserved neighborhood. The current neighborhood, with many apartments, trailers, and low-cost housing, lacks trail access afforded to many other neighborhoods in Sitka. With construction of a bridge and a short neighborhood connector, over 250 households and 80 businesses will have access to the extensive Cross Trail network.

> Public Needs Met

The Price-Hillside Connector was ranked seventh out of all trail concepts surveyed, with many respondents extolling the many benefits of greater north-south trail connectivity. Establishing a new neighborhood trail link would reduce trips through a busy industrial corridor, provide a back-up evacuation route for emergencies, and boost community health.

> Planning & Design

The greatest challenge to this project is the crossing of Kaasda Héen. A direct line between Jarvis Street and the Cross Trail Trailhead would only

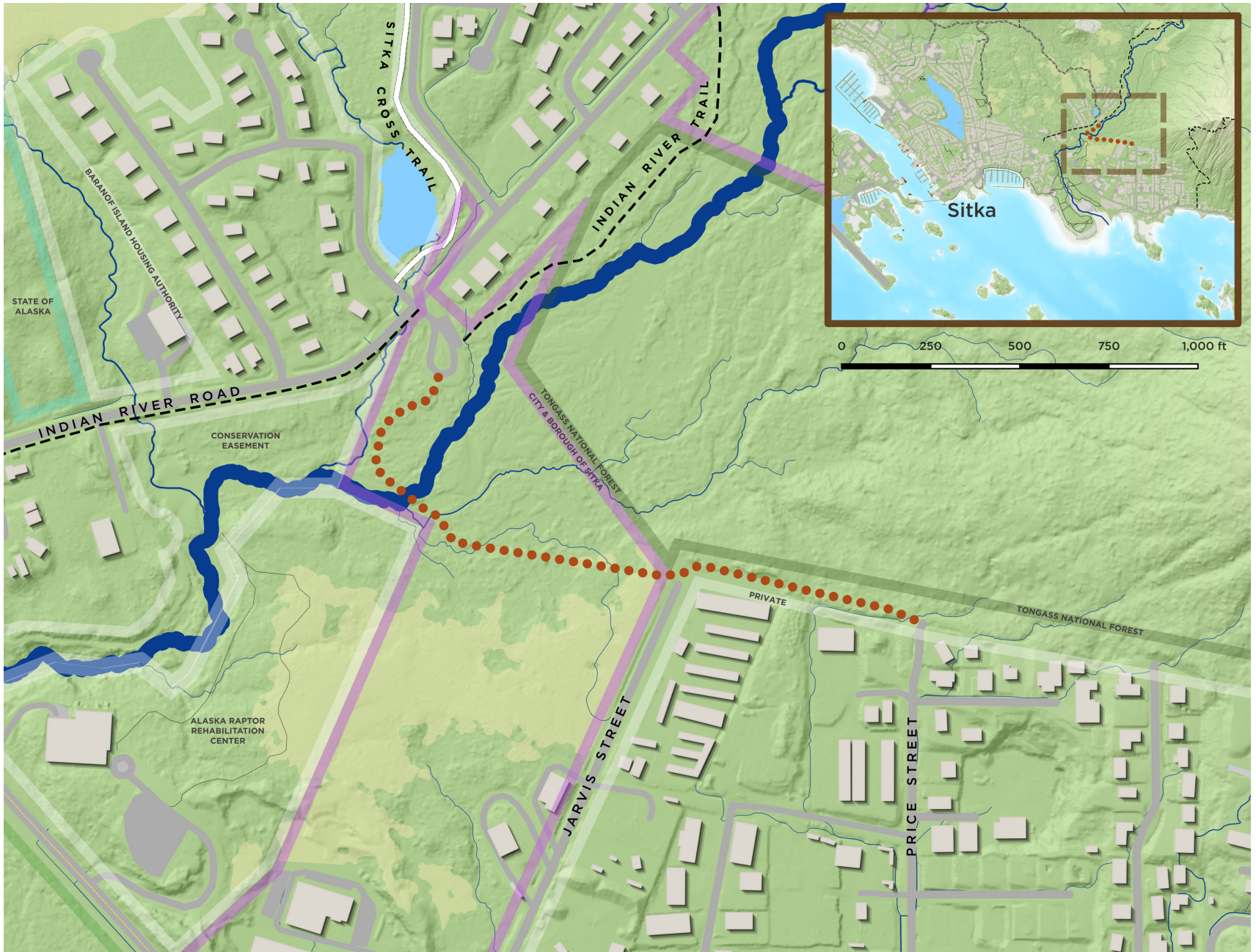
be 900 feet long, but most of that distance crosses a dynamic floodplain. The river maintains a wide riparian corridor for over a mile upstream of the trailhead. Downstream, land on either side of the river is in private ownership between the Southeast Alaska Land Trust and the Alaska Raptor Center.

> Responsible Agency & Participants

City & Borough of Sitka

> Cost Estimate

| ITEMS | TOTAL |
|---------------------------|--------------------|
| Design, Admin, Permits | \$140,563 |
| Tread | \$236,080 |
| Crossings | \$569,664 |
| Amenities | \$8,000 |
| Signs and Information | \$2,500 |
| Trailhead | \$135,000 |
| Unaccounted Items | \$163,771 |
| Total Project Cost | \$1,255,578 |



Mills Street Land Trust Connector

| | |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| New Construction Length | 0.05 mile |
| Difficulty Level | Easy |
| Trail Surface | Gravel or asphalt |

> Project Description

Establishing a formalized walking connection between Halibut Point Road and Mills Street/Edgecumbe Drive will be a simple, but impactful addition to the Sitka’s non-motorized transportation network, improving access to a Cross Trail trailhead and an elementary school. The trail could be constructed entirely within the existing City roadway easement. The trail would be hard pack gravel or asphalt and wide enough to accommodate people walking and biking. The route will need to switchback up the hillside to maintain sufficiently low grades for wheeled users.

> Public Needs Met

Shortcuts between destinations like schools and trailheads make it easier for commuters to make the choice of walking or biking instead of driving. For residents of Halibut Point Road and the Community Land Trust neighborhood, this access point could facilitate increased levels of physical activity, supporting public health goals. The route would also serve as an alternative evacuation route for those living on Halibut Point Road as well as provide students of Keet Gooshi Heen Elementary School a safer way to walk to school.

> Planning & Design

The Sitka Community Land Trust (SCLT) is developing S’us’ Héeni Sháak Community Neighborhood and has incorporated the vision for this multi-modal pathway into their site plans. A more refined trail alignment will be required before construction to ensure the route maintains a low grade for wheeled users. With a rock substrate hillside that has already been cleared, excavation work should be relatively straightforward. The trailhead would need to be signed and adequately visible so all members of the public feel comfortable using the route through the neighborhood.

> Responsible Agency & Participants

City & Borough of Sitka, Sitka Community Land Trust

> Cost Estimate

| ITEMS | TOTAL |
|---------------------------|-----------------|
| Planning, Design, Admin | \$11,426 |
| Tread | \$25,344 |
| Signs and Information | \$1,000 |
| Unaccounted Items | \$5,666 |
| Total Project Cost | \$43,436 |



Halibut Point Road Active Transportation Improvements

| | |
|-------------------------|------------------|
| New Construction Length | 4.9 miles |
| Difficulty Level | Easy |
| Trail Surface | Asphalt |

> Project Description

People walking or riding along Halibut Point Road (HPR) have no margin of safety from increasing traffic levels. The road lacks bike lanes and sidewalks from Cascade Creek Road north to the Ferry Terminal. South of Cascade Creek into town, the on-street bike lane only provides a thin line of paint as protection. This project proposes a paved multi-modal pathway along HPR. Ideally, the facility could be a 10-foot-wide separated pathway like exists along Sawmill Creek Road (SMC). However, a narrower right-of-way (ROW) and numerous driveways will necessitate adapting the design to fit constraints. Focusing first on segments of highest feasibility, like the stretches of public land along Sandy Beach, Pioneer Park and Harbor Point, would improve access to safe walking and enhance under-used public open space. With thousands of cruise passengers disembarking only a third of a mile from a Cross Trail Connector, a crosswalk on HPR will be a necessary safety addition.

> Public Needs Met

Sitkans ranked this proposal as number one in the Trail Concepts Survey by a substantial margin, illustrating the widespread public demand to improve this important transportation corridor. A bicyclist fatality in 2021 and a serious injury in 2023 could have been avoided if vehicular and

human-powered traffic were separated. Increased traffic on HPR from tour buses and commercial activity at the Cruise Dock makes the threat of a traffic fatality along the road more severe. This project supports the vision in the Alaska Department of Transportation's Strategic Highway Safety Plan of moving toward zero deaths and serious injuries so all surface transportation users arrive safely at their destination.

A separated pathway would improve everyday walkability for nearby residents, while creating another coastal walking route, one of the most desired types of new trails. Hundreds of Sitkans walking dogs, running, using wheelchairs, and riding bikes would benefit from a place to safely move. A crosswalk and roadway connection from the Cruise Terminal to the Cross Trail would help disperse visitors on foot, reducing downtown congestion and providing a tour guiding business opportunity.

> Planning & Design

This proposal echoes recommendations for safer pedestrian and cycling facilities formalized in the City's 2002 Non-Motorized Transportation Plan. Progress since then has been impeded by the complexity and expense of the infrastructure upgrade. In comparison to SMC, the HPR ROW is narrower, with some pinch points like the Cascade Creek Bridge, and intersected consistently by private driveways. However, the ROW still provides ample space for safety improvements, especially when compared to dense urban streets. With heavy traffic and no alternative routes, shutdowns for construction would be required. Facility design should loan from established Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) best practices.²²

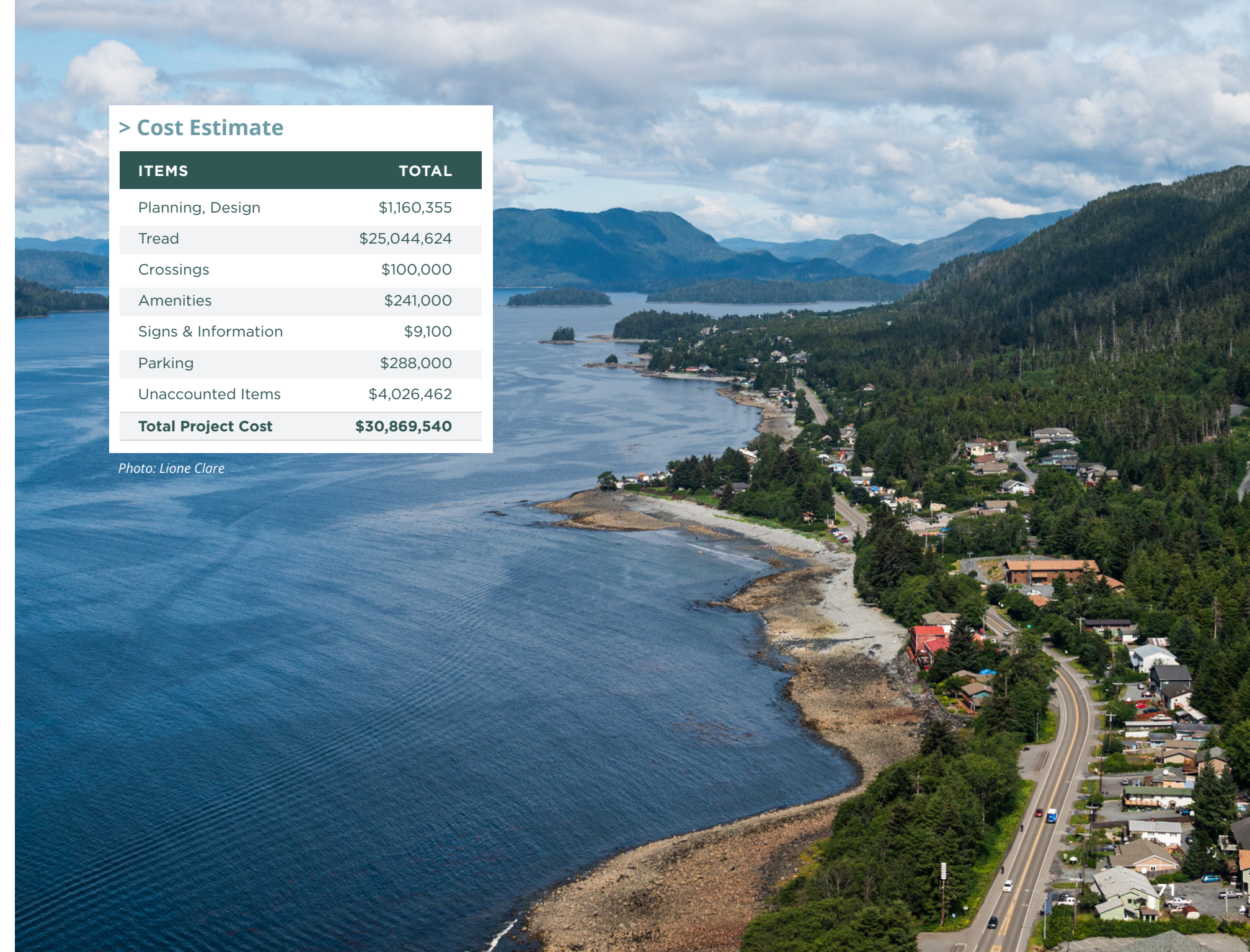
> Responsible Agency & Participants

Alaska Department of Transportation, City & Borough of Sitka

> Cost Estimate

| ITEMS | TOTAL |
|---------------------------|---------------------|
| Planning, Design | \$1,160,355 |
| Tread | \$25,044,624 |
| Crossings | \$100,000 |
| Amenities | \$241,000 |
| Signs & Information | \$9,100 |
| Parking | \$288,000 |
| Unaccounted Items | \$4,026,462 |
| Total Project Cost | \$30,869,540 |

Photo: Lione Clare



Starrigavan Recreation Enhancements

> Project Description

After a large landslide in 2014 destroyed fish habitat, riparian forests, and sections of trails in Starrigavan Valley, the Forest Service launched an initiative to restore and enhance aquatic and recreational resources in this watershed. The District sought public input in 2020 and began implementation in subsequent years.

The recreation component of the plan includes repairs and new development of Off-Highway Vehicle (OHV), mountain bike, and hiking trails throughout the Valley. Already, some OHV trails have been restored; work is underway to repair crossings and build a new trailhead and OHV practice area. The plan calls for three loop additions onto the existing OHV network, with approximate alignments identified. Two zones bounded by the OHV loops are identified for potential mountain biking trail development.

> Public Needs Met

The Forest Service plans call for safe, affordable, and sustainable recreational opportunities, emphasizing locally popular destinations. The proposed projects increase the variety of motorized and non-motorized hunting and recreation opportunities that are accessible from the road system. OHV riding areas and single-track mountain bike trails are both limited on the Sitka road system, so the proposed expansions will provide more opportunities to underserved user groups.

> Planning & Design

With a Finding of No Significant Impact signed by District Ranger Perry Edwards in March 2021, the NEPA requirements have been satisfied for all projects identified in the Starrigavan Watershed & Recreation Enhancement Environmental Assessment (EA). Project funds have been secured for Starrigavan watershed improvements and OHV road repairs but are not for hiking trail construction. The following pages detail the three hiking trail proposals. The mountain bike zones require more analysis to refine concepts for trail construction.

> Responsible Agency & Participants

Forest Service, City & Borough of Sitka, State of Alaska

> Cost Estimate *(not applicable)*





Photo: Lione Clare

Starrigavan Ridge Trail

| | |
|---------------|------------------------|
| Trail Length | 3.8 miles |
| Trail Surface | Gravel, natural |

> Project Description

Starrigavan Ridge is the most popular backcountry route without a formalized trail in the Sitka area. Various routes up this ridge have long been used by Sitkans to hunt and recreate in the alpine, but over the last decade, use has accelerated beyond a sustainable level. With the availability of GPS on mobile phones and the publishing of user routes on various mapping applications, more users are aware of and feel comfortable attempting backcountry hikes. One common route up the mountain, starting from the end of the paved road, was eliminated when construction of the Katlian road began, concentrating use onto a steep ascent from the end of Nelson Road. The steep grade of the social trail has led to high rates of erosion, stripping vegetation and soil from wide swaths of the hillside.

The proposal to construct a formal trail to the Ridge would mitigate resource damage, improve safety and wayfinding, and open access to a wide range of users impeded by the rough nature of the current route.

> Public Needs Met

Building a trail up Starrigavan Ridge was the single-most requested new trail suggested in open-ended comments of 2022 General Survey and only second to the HPR improvements in the 2023 Trail Concepts Survey. Respondents to the 2022 General Survey also requested

challenging new day hikes as a top category of new trail types to construct. With a route that provides access through the forest to the alpine, this trail would also provide backpacking opportunities, another stated desire of survey respondents.

> Planning & Design

NEPA requirements have been satisfied for several trail projects in the area per inclusion in the Starrigavan Watershed & Recreation Enhancement Environmental Assessment (EA), signed on March 17th, 2021. However, more planning and design work will be required to identify the most sustainable trail alignment, which may stray from the corridor analyzed for the EA. Alternatives to the user-built route were identified in this planning process, including one route that ascends an old growth forested ridge from the campground. Ascending from the west-facing lookout off the new Katlian Road could also provide sustainable grades to alpine, but a trailhead in that location may not be accessible during the winter if the road is not plowed.

While constructing this trail received widespread support, concerns about the impact to hunting were also voiced. A new trail will bring more users to the alpine, so care should be taken in trail design and management to minimize impact to this road accessible subsistence opportunity. Building a trail with an out-and-back destination, perhaps with a dock at the lake, could direct use in a way that affords hunters with more safe shooting zones than if a trail looped around the alpine.

> Responsible Agency & Participants

Forest Service, City & Borough of Sitka

> Cost Estimate

| ITEMS | TOTAL |
|----------------------------------|--------------------|
| Planning, Design, Admin, Permits | \$201,907 |
| Tread | \$1,151,340 |
| Crossings | \$75,800 |
| Amenities | \$71,610 |
| Signs & Information | \$18,000 |
| Trailhead | \$21,270 |
| Unaccounted Items | \$230,989 |
| Total Project Cost | \$1,770,916 |



Eagle Dip Lake Trail

| | |
|----------------|------------------------|
| Reroute Length | 1.4 miles |
| Trail Surface | Gravel, natural |

> Project Description

Eagle Dip is the second-most popular alpine route from the Starrigavan Valley, and reconstruction of the road system after the landslide has made the trailhead more accessible. The social trail to Eagle Dip Lake is less used than the route to Starrigavan Ridge but offers a unique experience with passage through old growth forest, crossing of a beautiful mountain stream, and glimpses of a cascading waterfall. The trail arrives at a south-facing shallow lake, which bald eagles use to bathe.

Building an official trail to the lake could direct use in a way to minimize environmental damage while enhancing public access to a spectacular destination.

> Public Needs Met

This route would supply new day hike and backpacking opportunities requested in the 2022 General Survey. The multiple recreation enhancements proposed in the Starrigavan Valley were bundled as one project concept in the 2023 Trail Concepts Survey and received the second-highest survey scoring. Some commenters cited the increasing erosion on the Eagle Dip social trail as a need to develop, while others requested that the upper reach of the Starrigavan Valley retain its back-country character without formal trails.

> Planning & Design

This route was included in the 2021 Starrigavan Watershed & Recreation Enhancement Environmental Assessment (EA), though more planning and design work will be required to identify the most sustainable trail alignment. The current user route ascends alongside a waterfall and will not be suitable for a formal trail, so an alternative route at a more sustainable grade was identified during this planning process.

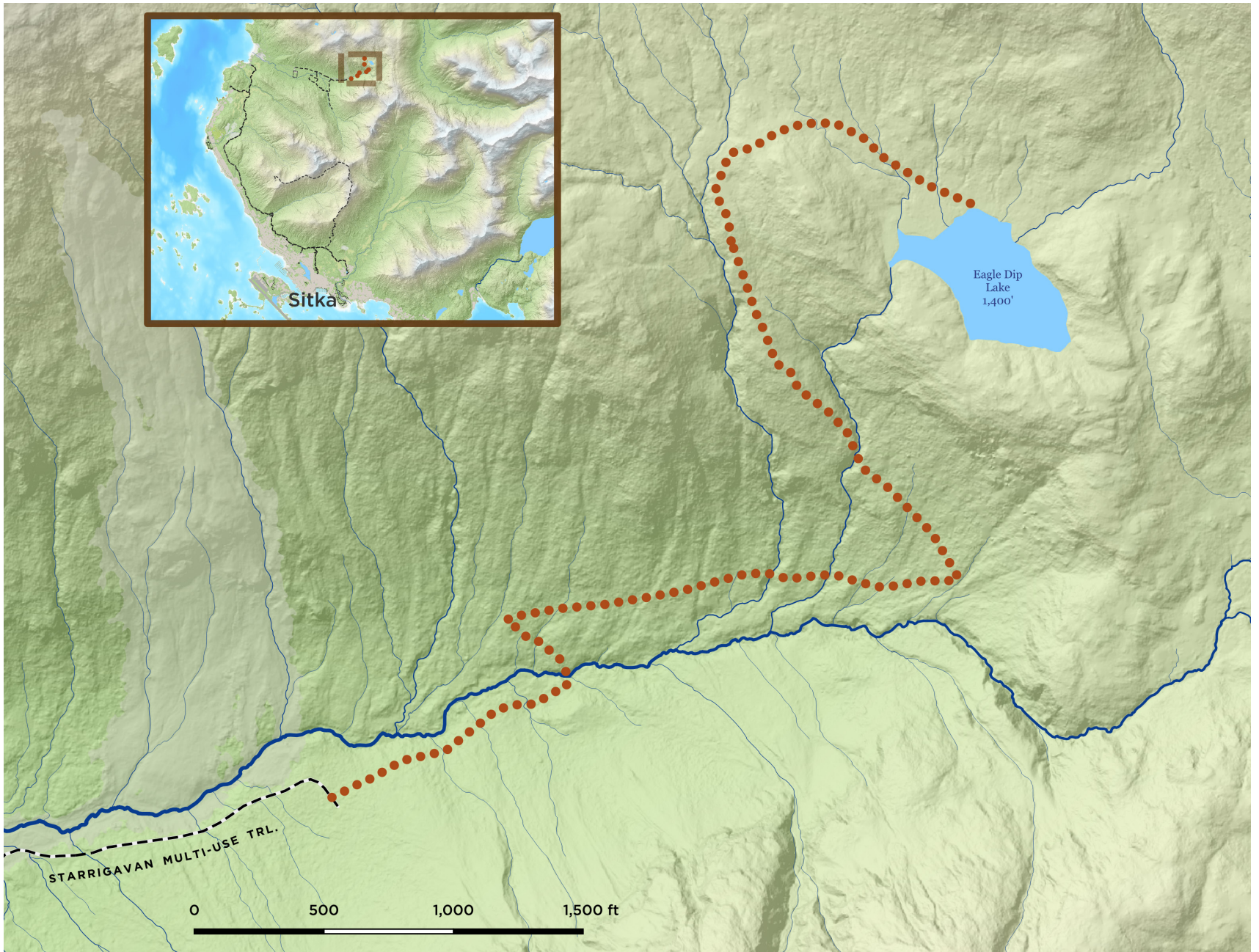
Concerns about the impact of this route to hunting were voiced and should be considered during trail design and management. Trail design should also consider the sensitivity of the lake wetland and the bird use of the area. Building a dock that concentrates visitor use could minimize impacts to vegetation and habitat.

> Responsible Agency & Participants

Forest Service

> Cost Estimate

| ITEMS | TOTAL |
|----------------------------------|--------------------|
| Planning, Design, Admin, Permits | \$142,319 |
| Tread | \$665,444 |
| Crossings | \$104,500 |
| Amenities | \$139,010 |
| Signs & Information | \$6,400 |
| Unaccounted Items | \$158,651 |
| Total Project Cost | \$1,216,324 |



South Fork Starrigavan to Harbor Trail

| | |
|----------------|------------------------|
| Reroute Length | 2.7 miles |
| Trail Surface | Gravel, natural |

> Project Description

The third alpine trail identified by Forest Service staff as part of the Starrigavan Watershed & Recreation Enhancement project establishes a hiking trail connection to the backcountry hut on the Gavan-Harbor Trail. With the newly constructed Cross Trail to Starrigavan, this connection would create a loop of more than 16 miles of recreational trails from downtown and back with an incredible diversity of views and ecosystems.

> Public Needs Met

This route provides new day hike and backpacking opportunities requested in the 2022 General Survey. The multiple recreation enhancements proposed in the Starrigavan Valley were bundled as one project concept in the 2023 Trail Concepts Survey and received the second-highest survey scoring. This short connection creates a long-distance trail with minimal expense, diversifying recreational opportunity with lower cost than developing a fully new trail.

> Planning & Design

This route was included in the 2021 Starrigavan Watershed & Recreation Enhancement Environmental Assessment (EA), though more planning and design work will be required to identify the most sustainable trail

alignment. This route is the only proposed trail in the Starrigavan watershed that is not an existing social trail or a commonly used hunting area.

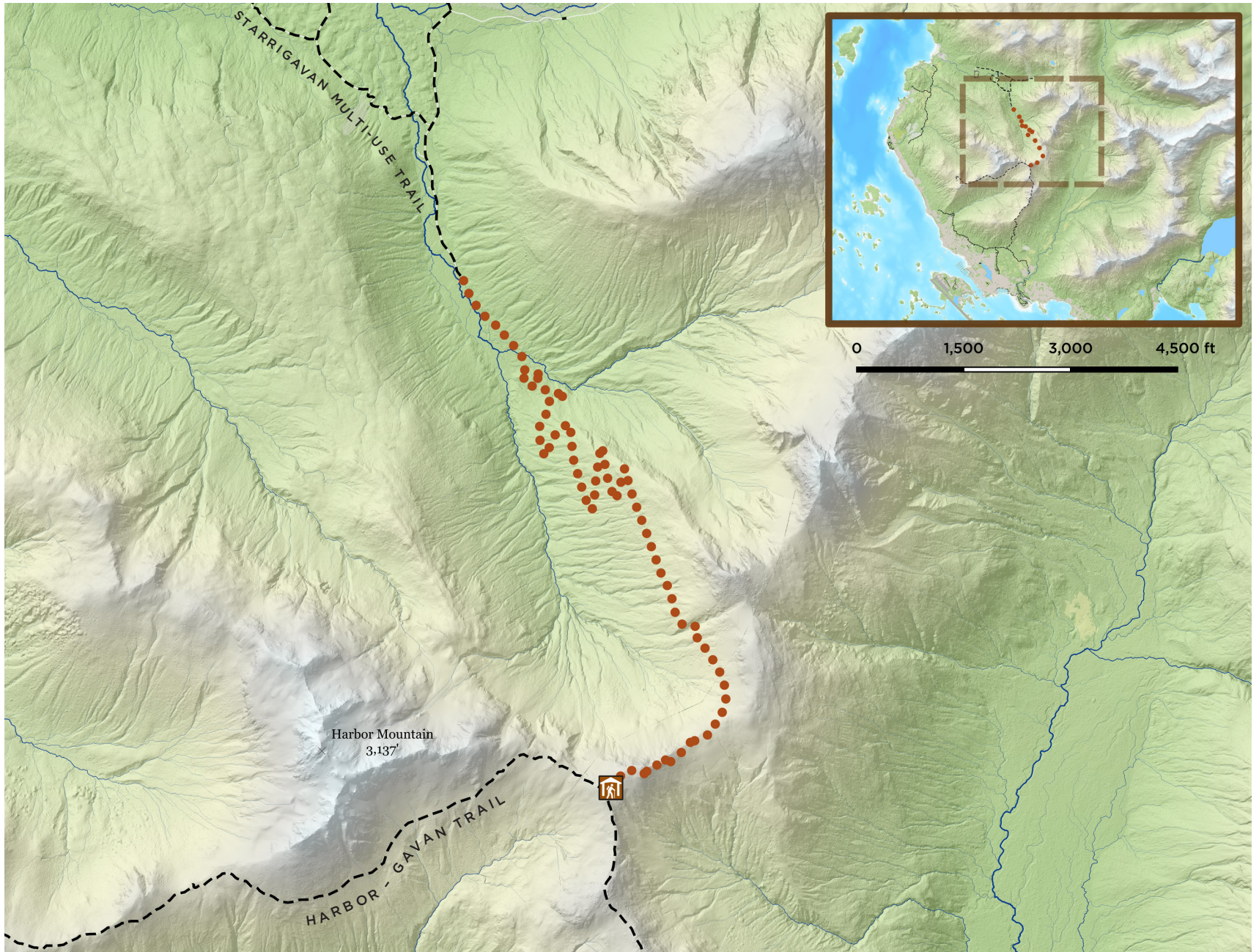
Starting from the southern terminus of the multi-use trail system, the route follows the South Fork of the Starrigavan River through a clearcut before beginning an ascent of a steep ridge. This planning process identified the mapped route following a sustainable grade according to digital elevation data, but the final alignment will need to be chosen after extensive on-the-ground design work. Identifying a sustainable route through the dynamic river valley, the steep-sided ridge, and the long traverse through avalanche terrain may pose feasibility challenges.

> Responsible Agency & Participants

Forest Service

> Cost Estimate

| ITEMS | TOTAL |
|----------------------------------|--------------------|
| Planning, Design, Admin, Permits | \$175,593 |
| Tread | \$1,245,068 |
| Crossings | \$26,875 |
| Amenities | \$8,000 |
| Signs & Information | \$7,200 |
| Unaccounted Items | \$219,410 |
| Total Project Cost | \$1,682,146 |



Harbor Mountain Lookout Tower Trail

| | |
|-------------------------|-----------------|
| New Construction Length | 0.1 mile |
| Difficulty Level | Easy |
| Trail Surface | Gravel |

> Project Description

Formalizing a trail to the first knob adjacent to the Harbor Mountain Trail will reduce damage to alpine vegetation from user established routes and improve the visitor experience, offering an opportunity to interpret World War II history. The Harbor Mountain Lookout Tower Trail would spur off of the existing Harbor Mountain Trail, a little over a third of a mile from the trailhead. Most people accessing the knob now ascend straight up an open hillside with alpine vegetation. The heavy use dispersed across the hillside has caused erosion across a large section of the slope. Other informal trails lead down the east ridge, connecting to the formal trail on the flat ridgetop.

> Public Needs Met

The current informal route is popular given the access to spectacular views of Sitka Sound only a half mile from a trailhead. The historical World War II installations on the knob offer an additional attraction.

> Planning & Design

This project proposal was advanced in the 2003 Trail Plan and was included in the 2006 Harbor Mountain Road and Recreation NEPA



Photo: Hannah Nelson

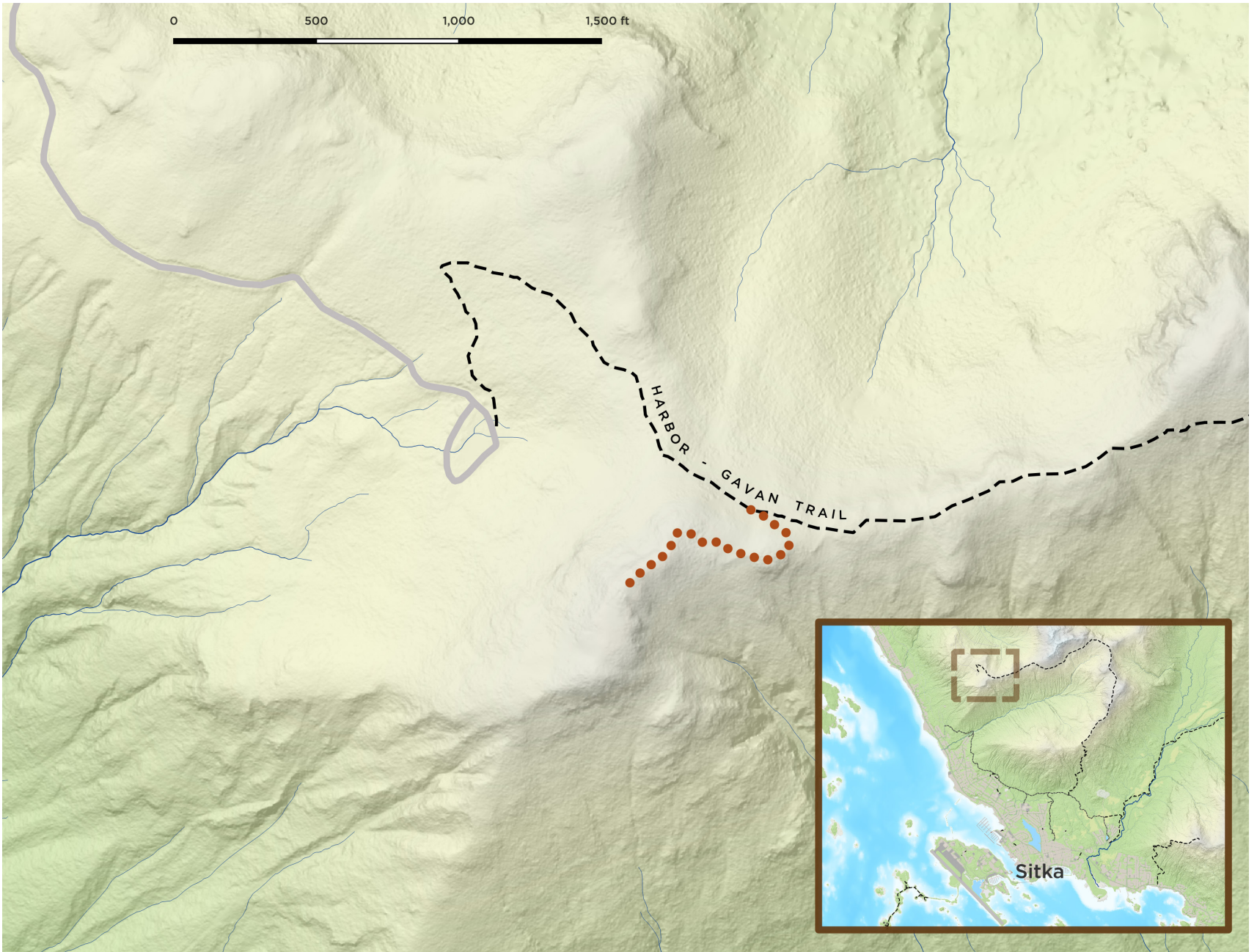
Decision Memo. To achieve a sustainable grade, the route will need to incorporate a switchback while navigating the ascent from the formal trail to the knob. The final design may also need to incorporate spurs allowing users to continue down the ridge or return to the trailhead, as desire paths already show the demand for this option.

> Responsible Agency & Participants

Forest Service

> Cost Estimate

| ITEMS | TOTAL |
|---------------------------|------------------|
| Design, Admin, Permits | \$28,000 |
| Tread | \$146,750 |
| Amenities | \$16,000 |
| Signs & Information | \$1,800 |
| Unaccounted Items | \$28,883 |
| Total Project Cost | \$221,433 |



Lucky Chance Historic Trail

| | |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------|
| New Construction Length | 9.0 miles |
| Difficulty Level | Moderate to Challenging |
| Trail Surface | Gravel, Corduroy |

> Project Description

This proposal has been established as a priority since the 2003 Trail Plan and would create a loop trail of two historic trails: Lucky Chance Mine and Salmon Lake. The proposed loop would allow hikers to see the remnants of the first major hard rock mines in Alaska while taking users through old-growth forests, alpine lakes, muskegs, and narrow gorges carved by waterfalls. The proposed trail is close enough to Sitka’s road system to potentially connect, which would greatly expand public land accessible without a boat.

The entire loop would result in a 14-mile trail. Huts could be established along the route for multi-day treks, augmenting the existing opportunity at the Salmon Lake Forest Service cabin.

> Public Needs Met

This project would satisfy two of the top five future trail development demands according to the 2022 General Survey. The first is an interest in multi-day backpacking trails, and the second is trails to public use cabins. In the Trail Concepts Survey, this route received an average score of 70/100. This route would also improve access for backcountry skiing. If an additional overnight hut is selected, it would then serve as a hut-to-hut trail, a topic routinely identified by the public as being desirable.

> Planning & Design

The existing historic alignment provides a route at an acceptable grade for the majority of ascent. However, extensive archeological analysis will be required to determine the most appropriate mitigation of construction impacting the historic route. Given the high cost of mobilization, construction, and maintenance in this remote location, this project ranks below other priorities closer to downtown Sitka.

The ambitious goal of connecting the trail to Sitka’s road system will require further analysis to determine feasibility. Crossing the Vodopad gorge below the Green Lake Dam will require a substantial bridge, a cable car crossing, or a system of public skiffs to a shoreline trail. If a bridge is not feasible and use will remain limited, occasional vegetation management could improve access to this existing historic route, while maintaining the semi-primitive character.

> Responsible Agency & Participants

Forest Service, City & Borough of Sitka, Federal Energy Regulatory Commission

> Cost Estimate

| ITEMS | TOTAL |
|----------------------------------|--------------------|
| Planning, Design, Admin, Permits | \$380,080 |
| Tread | \$2,229,496 |
| Crossings | \$12,500 |
| Amenities | \$306,000 |
| Signs & Information | \$51,800 |
| Unaccounted Items | \$446,981 |
| Total Project Cost | \$3,426,857 |



South Sitka Sound Coastal Trail

| | |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| New Construction Length | 21 miles |
| Difficulty Level | Challenging |
| Trail Surface | Gravel, Boardwalk |

> Project Description

The South Sound Coastal Trail is an ambitious project which aims to construct a 20-mile coastal loop trail just 14 miles south of Sitka. The trail would integrate a historic Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) trail near Goddard Hot Springs and connect to the existing Kanga Bay Forest Service Cabin. Seven sites along the trail have been identified for creating additional shelter locations; three are hardened tent camping sites and four are three-sided shelters. Such infrastructure would increase alternative itinerary opportunities and allow for shorter hiking days.

The coastal backpacking loop was also identified in the 2003 Sitka Trail Works Plan. In 2020, Sitka Conservation Society conducted a field and GIS evaluation of the proposed route to determine feasibility and developed a Design Narrative for implementation. The South Sound Coastal Trail can be developed in three segmented loops which would provide options for varying skill levels. Focusing on one segment at a time would also help to phase trail construction.

> Public Needs Met

The project would give local users a new backpacking trail within proximity to town. Multi-day backpacking trails were identified as being the

third most demanded in Sitka Trail Work's survey of future development priorities. This trail would also cater to a diverse mix of user groups. Hiking, hunting, kayaking, and packrafting are all examples of the variety of user groups that could benefit from the South Sound Coastal Trail.

It would be one of the only hut-to-hut systems in Alaska, and its attractiveness to visitors should be studied to determine economic benefit.

> Planning & Design




The proposed route crosses City, State, and Forest Service lands, necessitating a wide array of permits and approvals. Existing use at Goddard Hot Springs could be affected if the trail attracts many users, so future designs should seek to minimize user conflicts, possibly through improving and expanding the hot springs' facilities, following public input on the desired character.

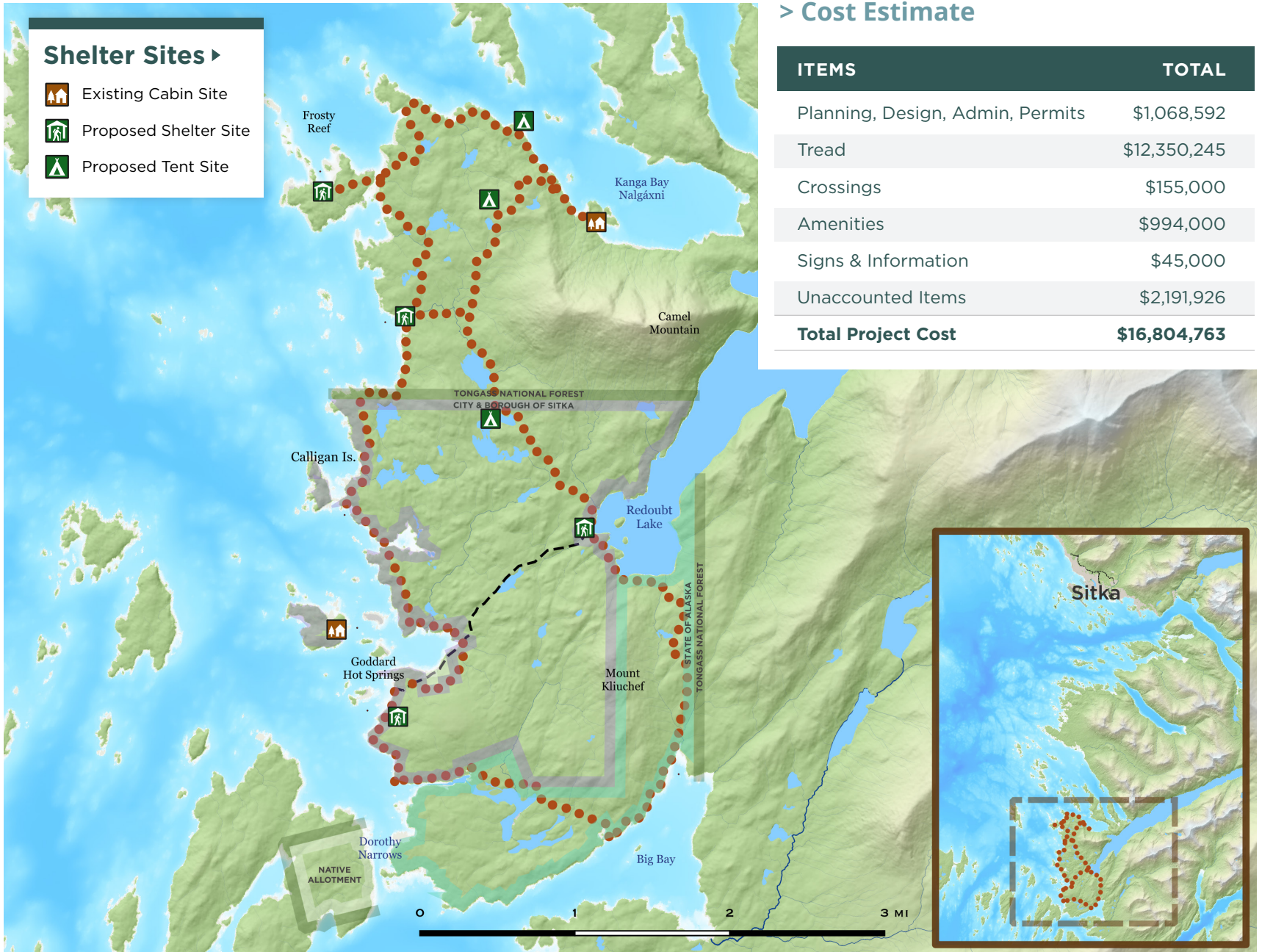
Segmenting the route into discreet phases will increase the feasibility of funding and construction. To start, the CCC trail to Redoubt Lake and the lakeside shelter could be restored, launching the development of the South Loop to Big Bay. After, the Middle Loop through central muskegs and outer coast would establish a figure eight system with multiple itinerary options. The final phase could connect to Kanga Bay and the north coast to complete the full 21 mile network. The high cost of this project factors in the use of barges and helicopters to mobilize to a remote location.

> Responsible Agency & Participants

Forest Service, City & Borough of Sitka, State of Alaska

Shelter Sites ▶

-  Existing Cabin Site
-  Proposed Shelter Site
-  Proposed Tent Site



> Cost Estimate

| ITEMS | TOTAL |
|----------------------------------|---------------------|
| Planning, Design, Admin, Permits | \$1,068,592 |
| Tread | \$12,350,245 |
| Crossings | \$155,000 |
| Amenities | \$994,000 |
| Signs & Information | \$45,000 |
| Unaccounted Items | \$2,191,926 |
| Total Project Cost | \$16,804,763 |

Marine Trails

> Project Description

For thousands of years, Lingít people traveled the waterways of Southeast Alaska, using canoes as their primary mode of transportation. Sitka has the opportunity to celebrate this heritage and reinvigorate the use of human-powered watercraft by establishing marine trails. A marine or water trail is a “stretch of shoreline or ocean that has been mapped out with the intent to create an educational, scenic, and challenging experience for recreational canoers and kayakers.”²³ While land-based trails are difficult and expensive to build in this mountainous rainforest, dozens of miles of new marine trails could be designated with minimal on-the-ground improvements.

> Public Needs Met

A marine trail network would be to increase access to low impact recreation for locals and visitors with much lower upfront and ongoing public costs. Paddling provides many of the same health and wellness benefits as hiking but is accessible to people with mobility impairments. People with knee pain and families with young children can more easily adventure on the water than on land. When asked what environments they would most like to see new trails in, more respondents to the 2022 General Survey requested trails on the coast than in the alpine, in old growth, or in any other environment. Sitka’s shoreline is spectacular and unique among Southeast Alaska given the position on the outer coast and historic volcanic activity. Knowing what route to take was one of the top

four barriers that survey respondents listed that keep them from paddling more. Most respondents indicated they personally would be likely or very likely to paddle more if there were water trails; more broadly, they indicated Sitka as a whole would benefit from a water trail. Given that most of Sitka’s road-system coastline is developed, marine trails offer an accessible and achievable way to explore the shore.

> Planning & Design

Developing a marine trail system will require a new planning process to develop a vision, determine desired route distances, identify potential landings, design overnight facilities, solicit public feedback, engage land management agencies, and eventually develop promotional materials and maintenance plans. Funding from the Southeast Alaska Sustainability Strategy has been designated to launch this planning process. Given the popularity of boating in Sitka, planners will need to identify underused landing sites that minimize conflict with existing uses.

> Responsible Agency & Participants

**Forest Service, City & Borough of Sitka,
State of Alaska**

> Cost Estimate *(not applicable)*

²³ National Park Service Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program. Water Trail Planning 101

Cabin Network

> Project Description

Several cabin proposals have been incorporated into the proposals in this Plan because overnight shelter is an important part of a functional and diverse trail network in this remote rainforest environment. For this reason, the Trail Plan Committee decided to incorporate feedback on cabins into both public surveys. Cabins are an affordable vacation opportunity, a way for families and friends to spend time outdoors together. Trails and cabins go hand-in-hand, creating a bundled recreational attraction more compelling than either alone. The draw of Salmon Lake and Shelikof is the opportunity to hike into a remote destination and have comfortable accommodations in all weather. Visiting these boat-accessible trails would also be less viable without overnight lodging.

> Public Needs Met

In the 2022 Survey, cabins were the second-highest ranked amenity that Sitkans wanted on trails. The demand for cabins outpaces supply as evidenced by the fact that 88% of respondents said that most or some of the time that they try to reserve a cabin, that cabin or a similar one is not available. When asked what types of cabins or shelters to develop, three quarters of respondents selected walk or bike-in or multi-day overnight huts.

> Planning & Design

In response to the strong benefits that public-use cabins provide communities, Senator Murkowski incorporated set-aside funding for cabins on the Tongass and Chugach National Forests in the Bipartisan Infrastructure

Law of 2021. In the fall of 2022, the Forest Service Alaska Region solicited public comment on opportunities to expand the cabin network. Sitka Trail Works partnered in public engagement by sharing survey findings and by hosting staff from the Sitka Ranger District at the 2022 Annual Meeting.

Many opportunities to expand the cabin network exist off of National Forest lands, which is why Sitka Trail Works surveyed the public on 26 potential locations compiled from prior City investigations, conversations with State Parks staff, and input from the Trail Plan Committee. Respondents were asked to rank the list of cabins proposals in order of preference. The results are shown on the following page.

> Responsible Agency & Participants

Forest Service, City & Borough of Sitka, State of Alaska

> Cost Estimate *(not applicable)*



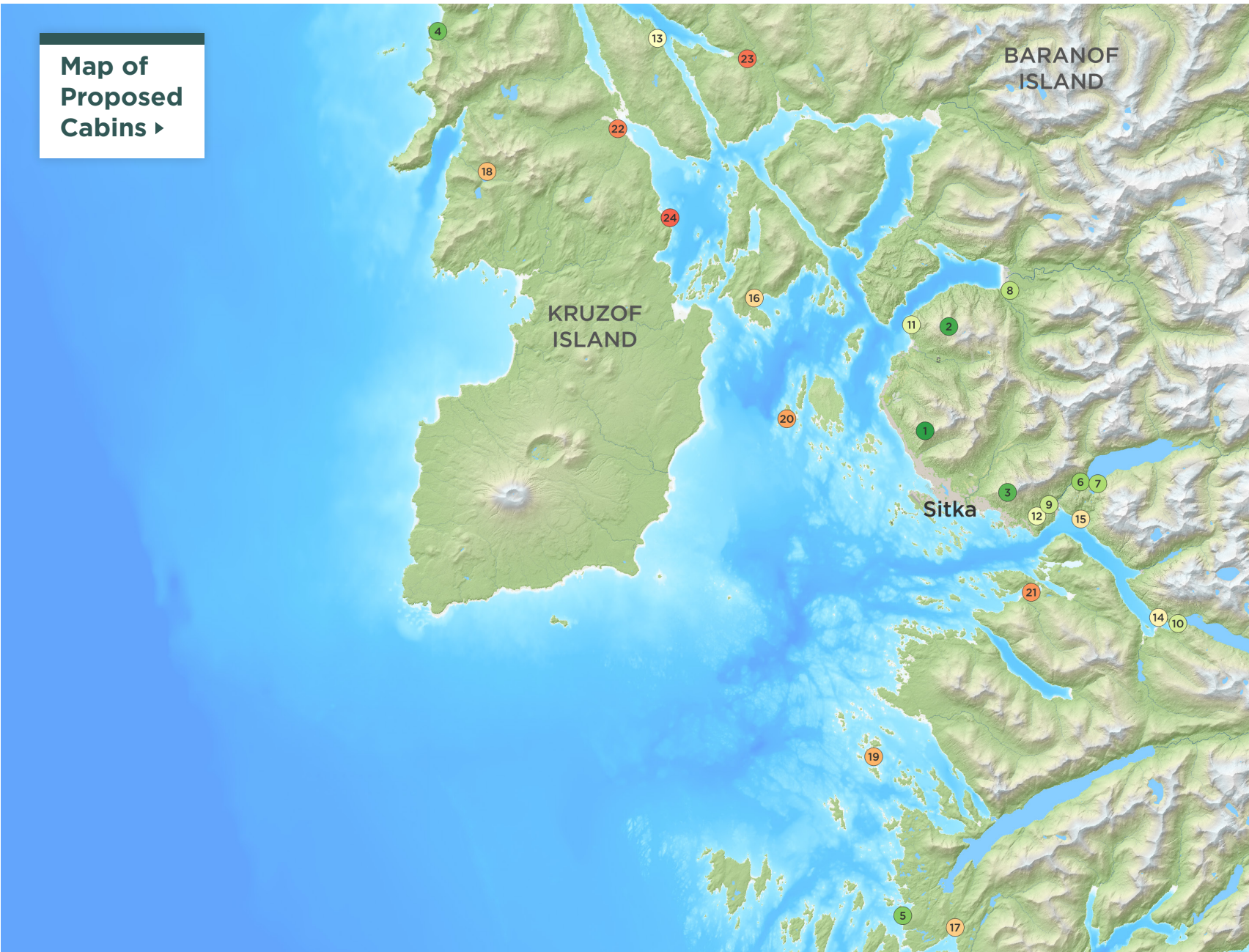
Photo: Alex Kelsey

Cabin Network (continued)

| SURVEY RANK | NAME | 2023 SURVEY MEDIAN SCORE* | LOCATION | AGENCY | ACCESS |
|-------------|------------------------------|---------------------------|---|---------|--------------|
| 1 | Harbor Mountain | 8 | | USDA FS | Drive up |
| 2 | Starrigavan Ridge | 9 | | USDA FS | Hike in |
| 3 | Verstovia | 10 | In vicinity of Picnic Rock / the saddle for winter recreation | USDA FS | Hike in |
| 4 | Sealion Cove | 10 | | DNR | Boat & hike |
| 5 | Goddard mainland | 10 | Just south of tubs; tap into second springs | CBS | Boat |
| 6 | SMC / Blue Lake Campground | 11 | Near campground | USDA FS | Drive up |
| 7 | Beaver Lake | 11 | | USDA FS | Hike in |
| 8 | Katlilan Valley | 11 | | SAI | Drive up |
| 9 | Heart Lake | 12 | | UAS | Hike/bike in |
| 10 | Green Lake | 12 | On the large landing at the end of the lake | CBS | Hike/bike in |
| 11 | Mosquito Cove | 13 | | DNR | Hike in |
| 12 | Thimbleberry Lake | 13 | End/back side of the lake | UAS | Hike/bike in |
| 13 | Neva Point | 13 | Update existing shelter | USDA FS | Boat |
| 14 | Silver Bay Landing | 13 | Landing on Silver Bay off Green Lake Road | CBS | Hike/bike in |
| 15 | SMC-Herring Cove Point | 14 | Current popular rope swing and net | CBS | Hike in |
| 16 | Promisula Bay | 14 | Nearby beach | USDA FS | Boat |
| 17 | Big Bay | 14 | Just south of Goddard for future trail system | USDA FS | Boat |
| 18 | Twin Lakes | 14 | On Kruzof Road System | USDA FS | ATV/Hike |
| 19 | Strawberry / Taiguid Islands | 14 | Not main island | USDA FS | Boat |
| 20 | Gagarin Island | 15 | Cabin on West side; mooring buoy on the East | CBS | Boat |
| 21 | Leesoffskaia Bay | 15 | | USDA FS | Boat |
| 22 | Eagle River | 15 | | USDA FS | Boat |
| 23 | Saint John Baptist Bay | 15 | | USDA FS | Boat |
| 24 | Nadezhda Island | 16 | Just north of Mud Bay; kayak destination | USDA FS | Boat |
| 25 | Ushk Bay | 16 | Near Hoonah Sound | USDA FS | Boat |
| 26 | Nelson Falls | 17 | (N. arm Hoonah Sound) | USDA FS | Boat |

* Top ranked cabins received a score of 1, so lower median scores indicated a higher desirability.

**Map of
Proposed
Cabins ▶**



Chapter 6 / Recommendations

During the public engagement process for this Plan, participants advanced a wide variety of ideas that did not fit as concrete trail construction projects but instead met the plan goals through programming, policy changes, or information. Additionally, several infrastructure needs were identified that lacked enough definition to be included as a priority but held enough value to capture for future consideration.

Policy & Information Recommendations

Trail Maintenance Issue Reporting System

ISSUE

When a member of the public notices a maintenance issue on a trail, it isn't always clear who the issue should be reported to, given that the trail system cross federal, state, and city lands.

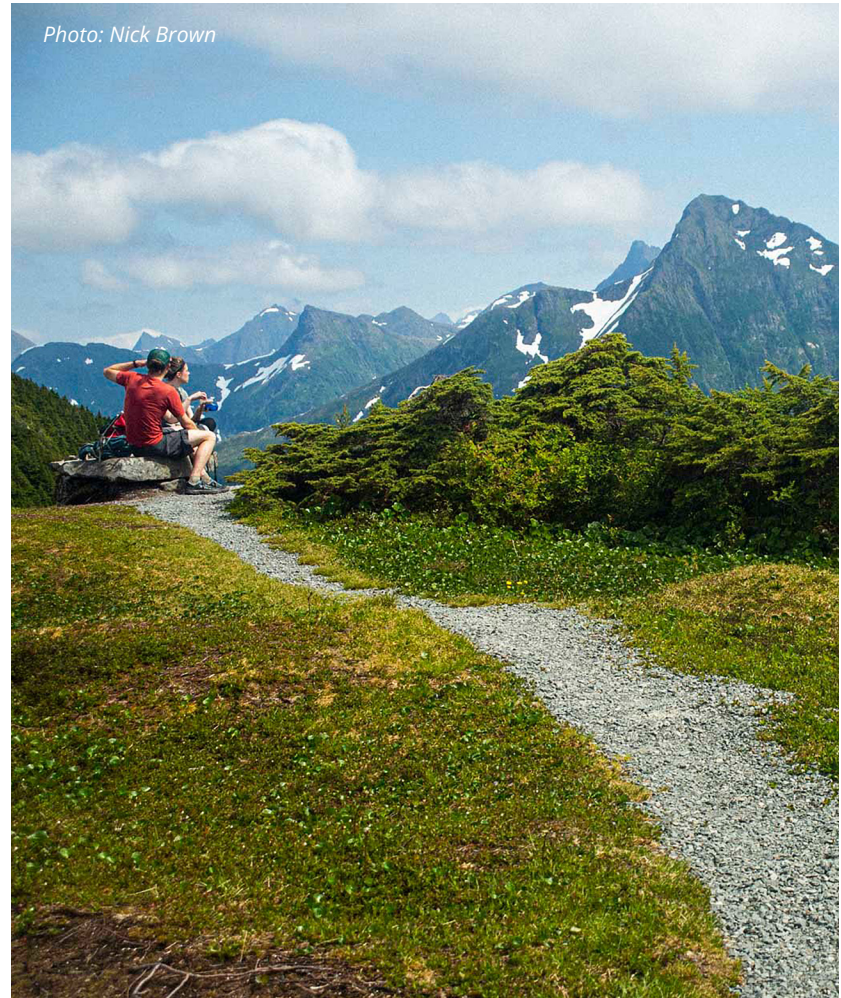
OPPORTUNITY

Local hikers and outdoor guides could better support maintenance efforts by reporting blowdown and erosion issues earlier than they would be identified by agency staff.

RECOMMENDATION

Develop a centralized platform where hikers could submit a photo, location, and description of trail maintenance issues, with information shared by all agencies.

Photo: Nick Brown



Improve Signage and Wayfinding

ISSUE

When asked what amenities they would like to see more of on trails, more respondents chose trailhead signage than any other response, and directional signage and interpretive signs were the top fifth and sixth chosen amenities.

OPPORTUNITY

A clear demand exists for improved signage across the trail system. Thinking holistically about wayfinding, education, and orienting users of the trail system would highlight opportunities for improvement.

RECOMMENDATION

Review Forest Service standards and adopt a standard for all area trail signage detailing style and frequency. Inventory existing signage on trails, identify gaps, and install new signs along the trail system as funds are available.



Photos left & right: Lee House

Coordinate Commercial Use

ISSUE

Land management agencies (the Forest Service, State Parks, and the City and Borough of Sitka) do not coordinate the permitting of commercial uses on public land, despite the fact that Sitka's trail system consistently crosses jurisdictional boundaries. Each agency has a separate permit application, timeline, and fee structure. Lack of coordination causes several issues:

- There is no comprehensive assessment of commercial use across the trail system and no avenue for public input on the cumulative impacts of commercial use.
- The system is difficult for new guiding businesses to navigate.
- Funds collected from commercial use are not consistently designated toward trail maintenance. Alaska State Parks and the Forest Service retain user fees for recreation investments, but the City of Sitka does not earmark user fees toward maintenance.

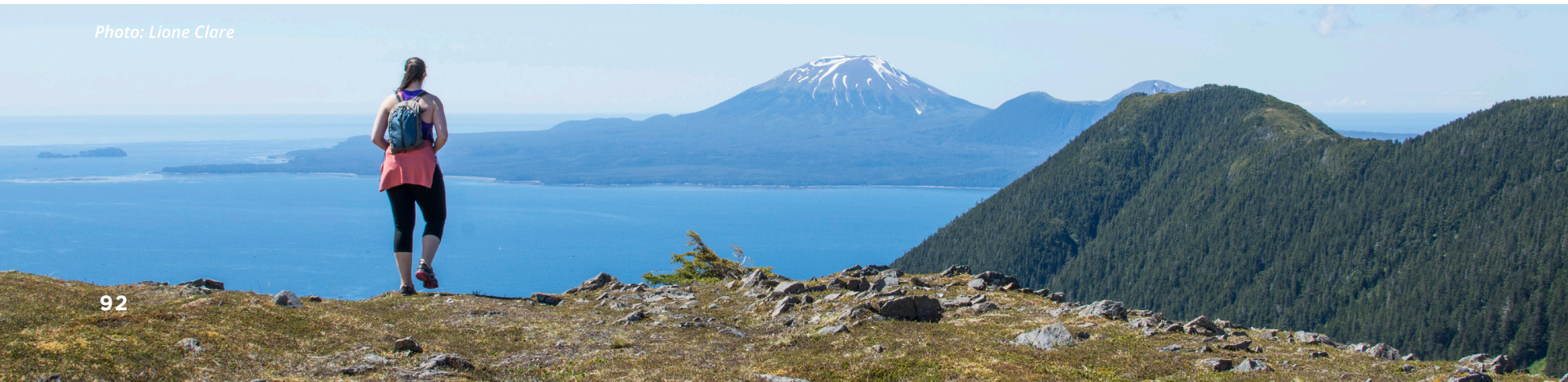
OPPORTUNITY

A multi-jurisdictional discussion could improve public input and oversight of commercial use to protect against the overcrowding of local favorite trails. Land managers could learn from each other in creating permitting processes to find efficiencies. Hiking guides could face fewer hurdles and added clarity with a more coordinated approach across jurisdictions.

RECOMMENDATION

Organize a stakeholder roundtable with land managers to discuss improvements to commercial use permit administration. Advocate for designation of user fees on trails toward trail maintenance to ensure that increased commercial use leads to more investment in upkeep. Support the City of Sitka in streamlining a process that is less reliant on the volunteer Parks & Recreation Committee and incorporates cumulative impacts. Develop a one-page checklist document for guides outlining the needs of each agency, including fees, timeline, and links to permit applications. Avoid commercial use that impacts subsistence harvesting.

Photo: Lione Clare



Plan for Visitor Dispersal

ISSUE

Paralleling the issue of commercial use permitting, the dispersal of unguided hikers may also require attention as the number of visitors increases. Visitors gain information about the trail system from a variety of sources that influence where they choose to hike. The way trails are described or promoted can lead to greater or fewer numbers of visitors on local trails. Currently no consensus exists on whether visitors should be discouraged from using any local trails to prevent overcrowding or to contain visitor use to specified zones. Bicycle use by visitors, including electric and non-electric, is also increasing and leading to conflicts on multi-use trails.

OPPORTUNITY

Determining a plan for how to ideally disperse visitors across the trail system will require coordination between land managers and the visitor industry. A coordinated communications and messaging plan could effectively direct visiting hikers onto certain trails and leave others less impacted. Enlisting the support of tourism industry groups like Visit Sitka would help identify communication needs. Areas of opportunity could include increased signage, altering maps for visiting tourists, social media, and online mapping platforms.

RECOMMENDATION

Monitor trail use on existing system to determine where overcrowding might be an issue. Develop a plan with public input on which trails might be best promoted to visitors. Identify best avenues for communicating information to visitors and recommend preferred destinations. Messaging should include recommended destinations and etiquette for bicyclists.



Ensure Multiple Benefit of Energy Transmission

ISSUE

The City and Borough of Sitka and other agencies have been exploring opportunities to expand dispersed renewable energy generation and transmission on and across public lands. For example, wind turbines on Lucky Chance Ridge or transmission lines to Biorka would potentially require transportation corridors for construction and maintenance that would impact existing backcountry recreation zones.

OPPORTUNITY

Any industrial development of public lands should be approached with utmost caution and extensive public engagement. However, if corridors for power lines or turbines are cleared, then the resulting access routes could accommodate recreational use.

RECOMMENDATION

The City and Borough of Sitka and federal agencies should conduct public engagement beyond the regulatory minimums to ensure community members using the land for recreation and subsistence have robust input and that projects on public land produce holistic public benefit. Any access routes developed for energy projects on public land should be designed for recreation use.

Develop E-Bike Policy

ISSUE

Increasing use of electric bicycles by residents and visitors has created a need for a multi-jurisdictional approach to e-bike management. The increased availability of rental e-bikes and the growing popularity for commuters is impacting the experience of other trail users. The State Legislature has defined e-bikes and passed policy on their use, but the proposed policy leaves room for municipalities to elaborate and define some areas as off-limits. While e-bikes improve access to active transportation options and allow people with mobility restrictions to explore the trail system, the ease of acceleration creates a higher risk of collision or conflict.

OPPORTUNITY

Clearly defining where and how e-bikes should be used in Sitka could reduce user conflict and help coordinate a messaging approach to educate visitors. The Sitka Cycling Club hosted an initial meeting in summer of 2023 with all local e-bike rental businesses and identified a shared interest in clarifying e-bike policy and best practice. Further community and stakeholder engagement can further inform the approach to reducing conflict. Reaching consensus on an approach will allow businesses and land managers to communicate with a coordinated front to increase the likelihood that riders adhere to the rules.

RECOMMENDATION

Establish a voluntary agreement, or a municipal ordinance if necessary, to address riding speed, shared use etiquette, potential off-limit areas, and bike use on trails after a community engagement process to hear all voices. Clearly communicate the rules to the public with tools like Frequently Asked Questions and social media.



Photo: Lee House

Programming Recommendations

Provide Education in Backcountry Hiking

ISSUE

Hikers want to explore new places, but the costs of trail construction and maintenance will always be limiting factors in expansion. With the advent of mobile phone GPS mapping applications that allow users to publish non-system trails, more inexperienced hikers are venturing into the backcountry. Providing hikers with the tools and education to navigate safely off trail would reduce risk and address some of the demand for new routes.

OPPORTUNITY

Instead of spending resources on new trails, efforts could be made to educate willing and interested people on backcountry skills and safety protocols, including winter preparedness.

RECOMMENDATION

Provide workshops and classes that would support the public in matters such as orienteering, avalanche preparedness, outdoor safety, first-aid training, and leave no trace principles. Many local partners, like Alaska Marine Safety Education Association, the Sitka Fire Department and Search & Rescue, and the Alaska Department of Public Safety (DPS) have resources and expertise that could be shared with the public. Additionally, a gear library providing access to backcountry camping gear would provide access to new experiences for those without appropriate equipment. The Outdoors Empowered Network supports over a dozen member organizations around the country that host gear libraries as a way to reduce barriers to getting outside.

Investigate opportunities to improve access to remote trails

ISSUE

Residents are interested in more hiking opportunities but many lack access to existing trails beyond the road system, given the relatively high cost of private water taxis. Current models of government funding favor one-time capital investments, so creative strategies will be required to provide ongoing access in an affordable way. Increasing visitation is concentrating use on already popular trails in town, while nearby facilities like the Fort Rousseau Causeway State Park are underutilized.

OPPORTUNITY

Residents and visitors could take better advantage of Sitka's existing trail system if underused trails off the road system were easier and more affordable to access.

RECOMMENDATION

Convene a roundtable of stakeholders including agencies and operators to highlight solutions. Investigate access constraints to nearby marine access trails and determine if capital improvements are needed to facilitate use. Compile a list of all water taxi operators and publish it online. Explore opportunities to reduce the cost of transportation through subsidies, discounts, group coordination, or otherwise.

Future infrastructure recommendations

Enhance trails with amenities

ISSUE

Avid hikers quickly run out of new trails to explore, and people less interested in hiking might not be interested in the current offerings. Youth may feel uninspired by a walk in the woods. The trail system might not be offering its fullest potential to the widest range of Sitkans.

OPPORTUNITY

Increasing the diversity of activities available on or near the trail system could encourage more Sitkans to engage in healthy physical activity. Challenges that can be repeated, or are social activities, might draw a new crowd. Recently constructed mountain bike spur trails interest a certain user group. A disc golf course near a trail would provide a social activity that remains fun with repetition. Exercise equipment on more urban trails or parks might bring new use. A small outdoor amphitheater at a scenic spot would provide a chance for groups to appreciate nature through special events.

RECOMMENDATION

Investigate opportunities to add additional features co-located with trails, like disc golf, that would engage a wider range of Sitkans in healthy outdoor activity.



Expand the Cruise Dock Connector Trailhead

ISSUE

When the Phase 6 Cross Trail expansion was initially planned in 2015, the Cruise Terminal did not exist, so the trailhead to the Halibut Point Road Connector was not designed to accommodate the volume it may receive.

OPPORTUNITY

The Cross Trail is extremely popular due to its high accessibility and variety of entrances. Improved access and facilities would help to support the increased traffic on the trail, especially during the summer when there is a higher influx of tourists, easing traffic congestion by increasing the use of alternative transportation and improving visitor flow by spreading out use of buses.

RECOMMENDATION

The parking lot could likely be doubled within the flat ground north of the existing footprint. To allow for safer, two-way traffic flow, the entrance to the parking lot should be doubled and side guards should be installed. Visitors hiking from the Cruise Terminal will likely not be able to cover the eight miles to downtown, so they need a recognizable destination for a turnaround. Creating a viewing structure with interpretive signage at a lookout over the sound or across the large muskeg may provide the desired experience. A side path along Halibut Point Road and a crosswalk to the Cruise Terminal would greatly improve safety and accessibility for visitors and residents.

Plan for Katlian Valley

ISSUE

While the Katlian Valley needs a recreation plan, the Trail Plan Committee determined the area to be outside the scope of this planning process given the need for additional study. In addition to the uncertainty of the timeline for completion of the road, it remains unclear how the public will want to recreate on public lands once the road is open. A more focused round of public engagement and project concept development is needed to determine the best approach to development. Despite the anticipated increase in public use, there are currently no planned visitor facilities on National Forest System Lands or Shee Atiká Inc. land beyond the road itself. Volatility of the post-clearcut river channel will pose a challenge to trail and infrastructure sustainability.

OPPORTUNITY

It is necessary to address what facilities will be needed and how they can be developed before completion of the Katlian Road. Basic restroom and orientation amenities are necessary as a bare minimum. The Kiks.adí Survival March of 1804 passed through the Katlian Valley, offering opportunities to interpret a significant historical event.

RECOMMENDATION

Given the construction of a road that changes access to the Valley, additional planning is needed to manage public use and recreation in Katlian Valley. Convene stakeholders including State DOT&PF, Forest Service, and Shee Atiká Inc to develop a plan for facilities that protect the environment and provide desired visitor experience.

Identify Design Approach for Mountain Biking

ISSUE

Mountain bikers have repeatedly demonstrated their interest in increasing trail access in Sitka. Since a 2020 MOU with the City, the Sitka Cycling Club has constructed almost two fifths of a mile of single-track, largely with volunteers. Demand exists for longer rides, though constructing trails with the desired user experience of flow has proved largely infeasible due to the lack of mineral soil.

OPPORTUNITY

While the public supports initiatives for mountain biking, there are ecological challenges that must be overcome. In 2023, the Juneau Mountain Bike Alliance constructed a trail with heavy machinery mining mineral soil from borrow pits along the route to construct berms and features. If Juneau's construction proves sustainable, Sitka could pursue a similar approach if and where subsurface soil deposits are available. Of particular interest is a downhill mountain bike route from Harbor Mountain, but initial scouting of the route suggests the organics layer may prove too deep.

RECOMMENDATION

Monitor potential design approaches that support mountain bike trails and search for suitable soils in the Sitka area.



Improve Kayak Facilities

ISSUE

Though some kayak racks have been installed in harbors, demand for kayak storage still outpaces availability. There is a lack of information about Sitka's kayaking potential and lack of information about kayaking safety in harbors.

OPPORTUNITY

Improving kayak facilities would enhance access to paddling and future water trails for residents and visitors.

RECOMMENDATION

Expand user-friendly facilities for kayak storage and launching in Sitka in proximity to phones, showers, and stores. Ideally, kayak storage would be covered with room for gear. Inform visiting kayakers about safe and unsafe routes through the harbors, places to launch and additional services. Pea gravel or cobble or cement lasts, but pea gravel is softer on boats. The Maritime Heritage Site is a great location.

Increase Local Campsites

ISSUE

The only public campsites in Sitka are far from the downtown core, which is a barrier for recreation-minded visitors.

OPPORTUNITY

Increasing affordable overnight opportunities could attract more independent travelers, including hikers and kayakers, and establish Sitka as more of a destination for outdoor recreation. The municipality of Seward operates public use campsites near their downtown.

RECOMMENDATION

Establish one or more campsites in proximity to downtown Sitka. Potential locations on Japonski Island could serve visiting kayakers. Ideally, the sites would include restrooms, picnic tables, cooking shelters, and bear boxes.

Photo: Charlie Jordan



Investigate Potential Improvements to Bear Lake User Route

ISSUE

Bear Lake is a user-established route to spectacular views and is increasing in popularity. Several challenges kept this proposal from elevating to a priority in the Trail Plan including the following:

- Saturated soils along the route and unavoidably steep terrain
- Constrained access given that the road approach is closed to public vehicles
- Other alpine trail projects with higher priority (e.g., Gavan, Verstovia, Starrigavan)
- Opposition from the hunting community

Despite some strongly stated opposition from a minority of survey respondents, constructing a trail to Bear Lake was the sixth-highest-ranked trail proposal.

OPPORTUNITY

Establish a new trail to particularly spectacular views and an alpine lake. Improve safety and mitigate erosion and other impacts by constructing a sustainable trail.

RECOMMENDATION

Monitor the use and conditions of the user route at Bear Lake. If demand increases, pursue construction after other priorities. Investigate opportunities to make small improvements to trail sustainability and safety, especially just on the City and Borough of Sitka lands.

Identify a Peril Strait Trail

ISSUE

There are not enough onshore destinations for small cruise vessels between Juneau and Sitka. Demand for Lake Eva far outpaces the capacity of the trail system, so tour companies are unable to obtain desired permits.

OPPORTUNITY

Improving access to public lands in the Northeast Baranof or Southeast Chichagof zone would support the growing small tourism industry. Ideally, any infrastructure developed would also benefit residents.

RECOMMENDATION

Identify the best destination to build a trail for Tongass visitors along Peril Strait. The trail should be constructed to accommodate large volumes, arrive at a point of interest, and ideally loop back for better dispersal. The destination needs a protected anchorage for large boats and should accommodate nearby water sport activities.



Photo: Lione Clare

Appendix A / Sitka Trails Condition Assessment

| CONDITION CLASS | CHARACTERISTICS | ACTIONS |
|---|---|--|
| <p>Condition Class A New Condition No Maintenance</p> | <p>Newly built trail, little to no or erosion. Edge is clear of brush to clearing limits. Steps, stairs and rockwork intact and not slippery. Roots are at ground level or covered. Very little mud. Passable to all hikers. No trash/graffiti/vandalism.</p> | <p>No action needed.</p> |
| <p>Condition Class B Good Condition Little Maintenance</p> | <p>Tread surfacing with minor top-cap nearly all intact. Little brush encroachment. Some steps or tread slippery or loose. A few roots, logs to step over. Some muddy, soft portions but limited. No caution areas. Passable to nearly all hikers. Light trash cleanup, little graffiti. No vandalism.</p> | <p>Trail requires light brushing, but little if any tread repair. Minor loose woody debris removal. Light trash pickup. Some minor debris in culverts/drainage structures.</p> |
| <p>Condition Class C Functional Condition Regular Maintenance</p> | <p>Tread shows erosion gullies or displacement of top gravel. Trail may be widening due to detours. Muddy conditions prevail in longer areas. Some aerial/suspended roots showing. Steps/stairs are slippery when wet in places. Uneven terrain due to some erosion/displacement of top-cap. Passable with caution/moderate agility. Many smaller fallen logs. Some trash/graffiti, little vandalism.</p> | <p>Trail requires regular maintenance. Some tread reinforcement would help a few spots. Ditch clearing to reduce erosion. Minor small log removal (i.e. hand tools). Slip hazards mostly mitigable. Light trash cleanup/little graffiti. No vandalism. Moderate level of debris with some small blockages in culverts/drainage structures.</p> |
| <p>Condition Class D Unmaintained Condition Constant Maintenance</p> | <p>Highly damaged tread shows deeper erosion gullies with exposed loose substrate. Trail is significantly widened/braided or deepened due to detours and/or water erosion. Route-finding may be needed in multiple places. Muddy conditions and loose tread over the majority. Numerous aerial/suspended roots that require caution. Steps/stairs are nearly all slippery and uneven. Passable with difficulty. Large fallen logs requiring climbing to get around. Trash/graffiti/vandalism extensive.</p> | <p>Requires substantial ongoing maintenance investment. Possible seasonal closure/discouraging of use. Reroute trail to lesser grade and/or better soil conditions. Log removal with skilled operators and chainsaws. Major ditching or structural construction needed. Reinforce tread surface. Slip hazards removed. Post warning signs. Trash/graffiti, and vandalism removed with bigger effort. Large blockages causing errant flow of water leading to pooling and some erosion in culverts/drainage structures.</p> |
| <p>Condition Class F Completely Failed Replace or Close</p> | <p>Severely damaged tread surface missing/washed out in whole sections. Significant route-finding required due to erosion and uneven terrain/ brush. Steps and stairs are almost entirely unusable. Many large or multiple downed logs. Highly difficult to impossible for most hikers. Dangerous or risky to travel on. Some structures destroyed by vandalism.</p> | <p>Close or replace with new design and/or materials. Reroute trail to lesser grade and/or better soil conditions. Log removal with highly skilled operators and special equipment. Post warning signs. Whole structure removal. Major blockages resulting in complete failure of culverts/drainage systems.</p> |

Appendix B / Selection of Dropped Concepts Explained

Over one hundred trail ideas were proposed, but many were quickly eliminated due to feasibility barriers. The following proposals had more deliberation and public review, as explained in the synopsis of the public comment and decision.

| PROJECT | SYNOPSIS |
|--|--|
| Japonski Island Pathway | Strong support for year-round, low bear risk, oceanside, accessible walking loop that could highlight historical waterfront, but airport expansion and Mt. Edgecumbe High School (MEHS) security concerns impeded two critical segments. |
| North Fork Indian River Backpacking Trail | Interest in road accessible long-distance route that connects to existing system and improves other alpine access (to Sisters), but scouting found insufficient overnight destination to merit negative impacts to subsistence deer hunting. |
| Kruzof Backpacking Loop | A proposed outer coast backpacking loop from Mud Bay, to Brent's Beach, Fred's Creek, up the trail, over the saddle between Crater Ridge, to Shelikof and back scored highly in public surveys, but maintaining a primitive route through the muskeg and erodible volcanic soils is unsustainable. Developing a fully gravel route would be cost prohibitive and impact the aesthetic character of the Island. |
| S'ooow Tu.aan (No Name) Viewpoint Trail | Suggested as close destination for cruise passengers from the Cross Trail Connector, but terrain poses construction challenge and the top of the hill lacks a clear viewpoint. |
| Old Harbor Mountain Road | Originally identified as another neighborhood connector, but deemed unnecessary and low priority. Scored low in survey. |
| Katlian Valley | Committee decided that more planning is needed to determine opportunities and constraints given uncertainty of use patterns in the Katlian Valley with future road access. Moved to Recommendations chapter. |
| Lindenberg Head, Peril Straits | Identified to fill the need for onshore destinations for small cruise vessels, but Committee deemed that benefits for locals were too low of benefit to justify prioritizing. |
| Bear Lake | Popular user route but less used than Starrigavan Ridge given lack of vehicular access. If use continues to grow and other trail projects are completed, this could be elevated to a priority. Recorded in Recommendations chapter. |
| Harbor Mountain Biking Trail | Route identified in 2003 Trail Plan, but construction method for sustainable, bermed single-track remains uncertain given Sitka's soil conditions. Recommendations Chapter cites need to refine design approach. |
| Swan Lake Loop | Public engagement revealed support for full loop path around Swan Lake, but private property boundaries extend into the Lake, so the route could not be advanced as a priority without much more extensive landowner input. |
| Cross Mountain | Existing user route exhibiting erosion but the bike-in access and near-vertical sections of the ascent limit use, potentially enough to retain backcountry nature for foreseeable future. Like Bear Lake, use should be monitored and the route elevated in priority if needed. |
| Cross Trail to Thimbleberry | Originally planned in 2003, the idea of a Cross Trail connection from Indian River to Thimbleberry Lake is appealing, but the terrain above the residential zones on the flank of Verstovia is too steep to sustainably accommodate a bench cut route. |

Acknowledgments

Sitka Trail Works would like to thank the businesses, organizations, and individuals who donated to support the 2023 Trail Plan.

Above the Clouds \$5000 and above

Fisherman's Quay
Sitka Dock Company

Trailblazer \$1000 and above

| | |
|----------------------|---------------------|
| Kings E-Bike Rentals | ALPS Credit Union |
| Sitka Rotary Club | Elks Lodge |
| Alaska Sea Planes | Chad & Kelly Goeden |

Mountaineer \$500 and above

| | |
|-----------------------|----------------------------|
| Arrowhead Transfer | Horan & Company Appraisals |
| Aspen Hotels | Jeff & Erin Clay |
| Bob & Kim Hunter | Alaska Airlines |
| Charles & Chris Horan | |

Base Camp \$499 and under

| | |
|---------------------|------------------------|
| Sitka Vision Clinic | Sitka Realty |
| Mike Vieira | The Beach Family Trust |
| Elizabeth Short | |

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Sitka Tribe of Alaska: Bob Sam and Chuck Miller for Cultural Resources review, Jeff Feldpausch, Jess Perkins, Fred Hope, Harvey Kitka, Martha Moses, Pat Alexander and Tom Gamble for Natural Resources Committee review

National Park Service: Mary Miller, Jess Perkins, Jessy Bales for project review

Alaska Department of Transportation & Public Facilities: Julius Adolfsson, Sarah Cripe, Marie Heidemann, Kelly Boddy, Nathan Purves, Greg Weinert for project review

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For advice and support along the way: Andrew Thoms, Charles Horan, Lisa Busch, Annemarie LaPalme, Eric Dow, Dave Fedorski, Jeremy Strong, Michael Graney

Final Document Design and Layout: Sitka Conservation Society (Tayler Bowser, Lee House)

Map Data Credits: 2023 Points North Maps, QGIS, Whitebox GAT, Alaska DGGs, Alaska, OpenStreetMap, USGS, NOAA.

And a huge thanks to the hundreds of Sitkans who took time to attend meetings, respond to the survey, review ideas, or otherwise provide feedback and support!



Photo: Lee House



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