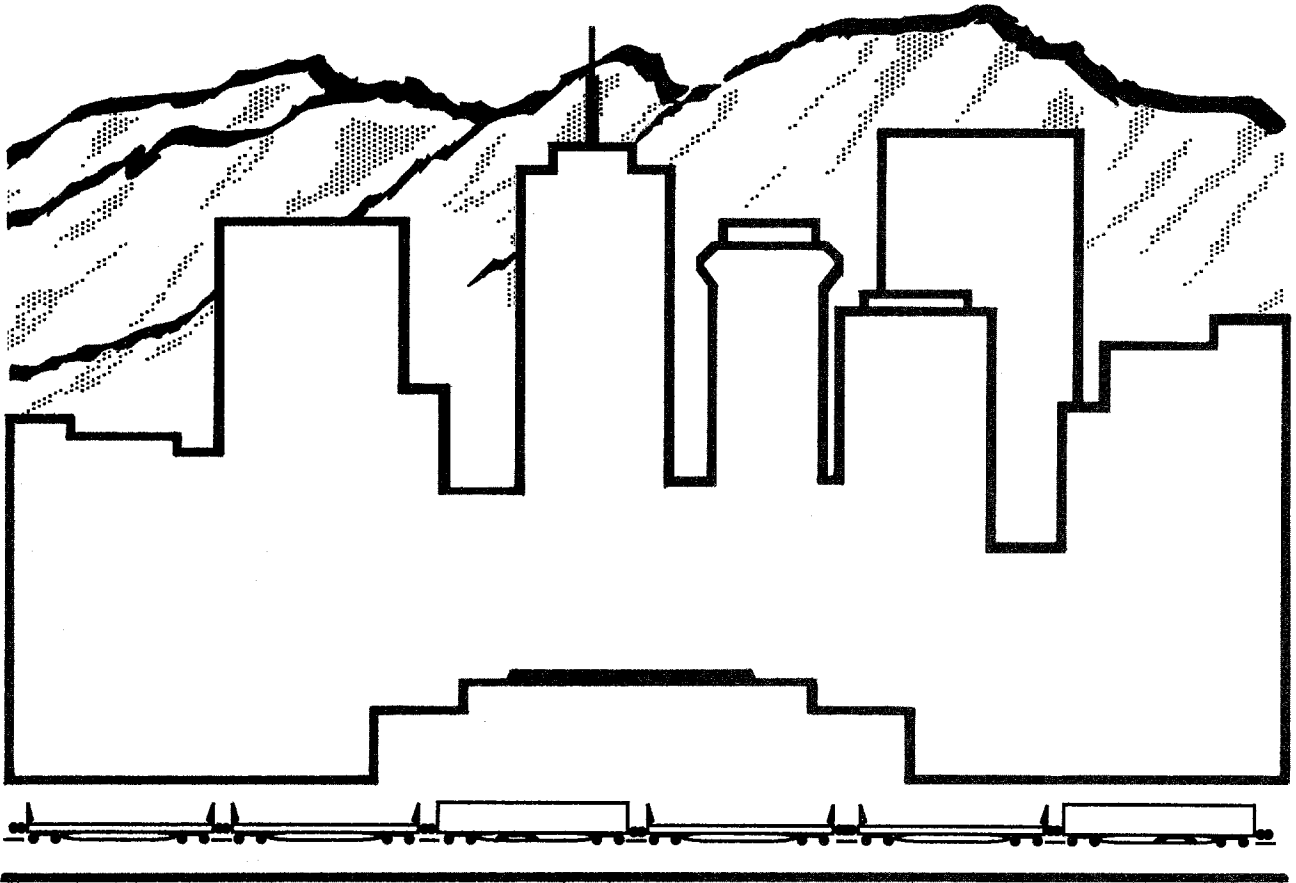

Redesigning the Front Door to Anchorage



A Report by Commonwealth North

A report by
The Commonwealth North
Railroad Committee

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*Redesigning the Front Door to Anchorage
through the Relocation
of the Anchorage Railroad Yard*

In January of 1988, the Board of Directors of Commonwealth North charged an seventeen-member committee of community volunteers to study the Alaska Railroad, present and future. The Committee's assignment was to take a statewide view in examining:

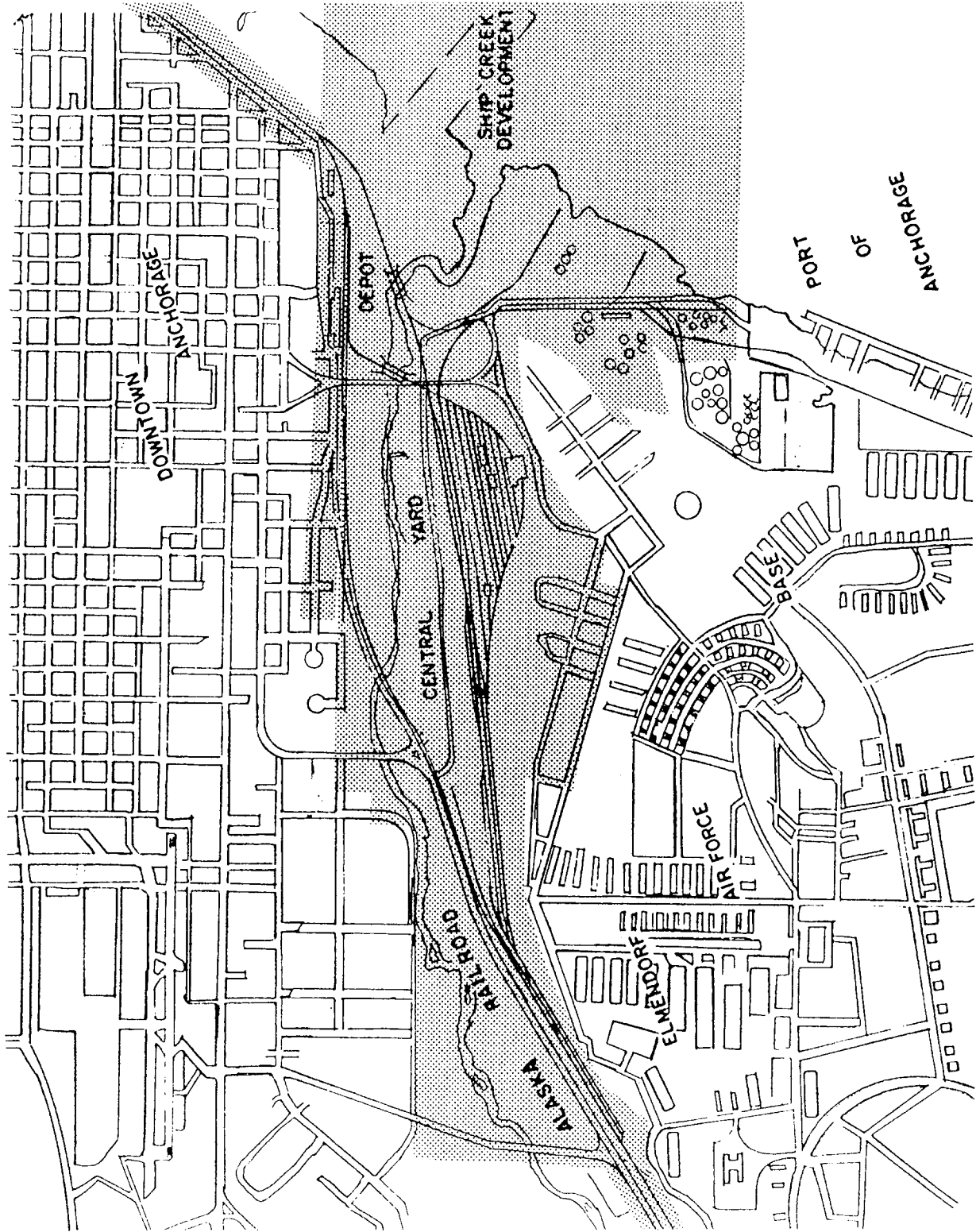
- *How successful are the operations of the Alaska Railroad since the transfer from the federal government in 1984;*
- *Whether or not the railroad should be sold to a private entity; and*
- *How the railroad could be better utilized to assist with economic development throughout the state.*

As the Committee plunged into the extensive research required, the members became aware of the possibility of moving the central railway yard in Anchorage to a new site in Eagle River. This issue is important to the entire state because the Anchorage yard is the home and headquarters of the entire Alaska Railroad system.

A special subcommittee was established to examine this idea due to its timeliness. Then the committee decided to publish a separate proposal on this one issue.

These findings and recommendations, endorsed by the full committee and the Commonwealth North Board of Directors, are published herein for discussion purposes. They will be presented to the leaders and citizens of the Anchorage and Eagle River Communities, the Board of Directors and managers of the Alaska Railroad Corporation, as well as the Governor, the Legislature and the leaders of the state agencies involved, particularly the Departments of Transportation and Public Facilities and Commerce and Economic Development.

Map of Existing Railyard



Findings

1. *The Alaska Railroad's central yard, depot, administrative offices and other facilities located where Ship Creek joins Cook Inlet are outdated, poorly designed and inefficient for best utilization by the Alaska Railroad.*
2. *The industrial sector, of which the railyard is a major portion, is in an inappropriate location for the future development of the central city area.*
3. *The highest and best use of this land, both economically and environmentally, is not as a central railyard.*
4. *Freeing this area for planned, compatible development with downtown Anchorage, Ship Creek Landing and the remainder of the port, will revitalize this area of Anchorage and set the stage for future development for years to come.*
5. *The Alaska Railroad owns land in Eagle River which is more suitable for the railyard and is a more appropriate setting for this use.*

Recommendations

1. *The Alaska Railroad Corporation is urged to initiate immediate efforts to plan for the relocation of the Alaska Railroad's central yard from downtown Anchorage to Eagle River.*
2. *The Mayor and the Municipal Government are urged to participate with the Railroad in the feasibility study for this move.*
3. *The Municipality and the State should examine options for financing this timely project.*

Conclusion

Moving the central railyard at this time is a "win-win-win" concept. It will allow for a more efficient operations and staging area for the Alaska Railroad. It will encourage a redesign and cleaning up of the Cook Inlet entrance to the Anchorage community. It will unleash the creative imaginations of those individuals and groups within Anchorage interested in the environmental look and amenities of the downtown area. It will also enlist those committed to historic preservation and provide a better and more welcoming environment to visitors who arrive by cruise ship at the new Ship Creek Landing facility. Proceeding with this project now will help the Anchorage economy and elevate the pride of Anchorage's citizens regarding the community as a whole. The residents of Eagle River will benefit from the location of a modern, first-class facility in their community which will add to the economic vitality of that area.

Questions and Answers

The Alaska Railroad was responsible for the birth of Anchorage in 1914. Now, in a time of severe economic distress, the Alaska Railroad through escalating the time frame for relocation of the central railyard may help come to the rescue of the community it founded.

Q. *What does the Alaska Railroad Board and management think of this proposal?*

A. The leadership of the railroad recognizes the need to improve their headquarters facilities and the railyard. In fact, they have acquired an excellent location in Eagle River from the Eklutna Corporation and have successfully negotiated with the U.S. Army for access to the property. *(Please see map page 6)*

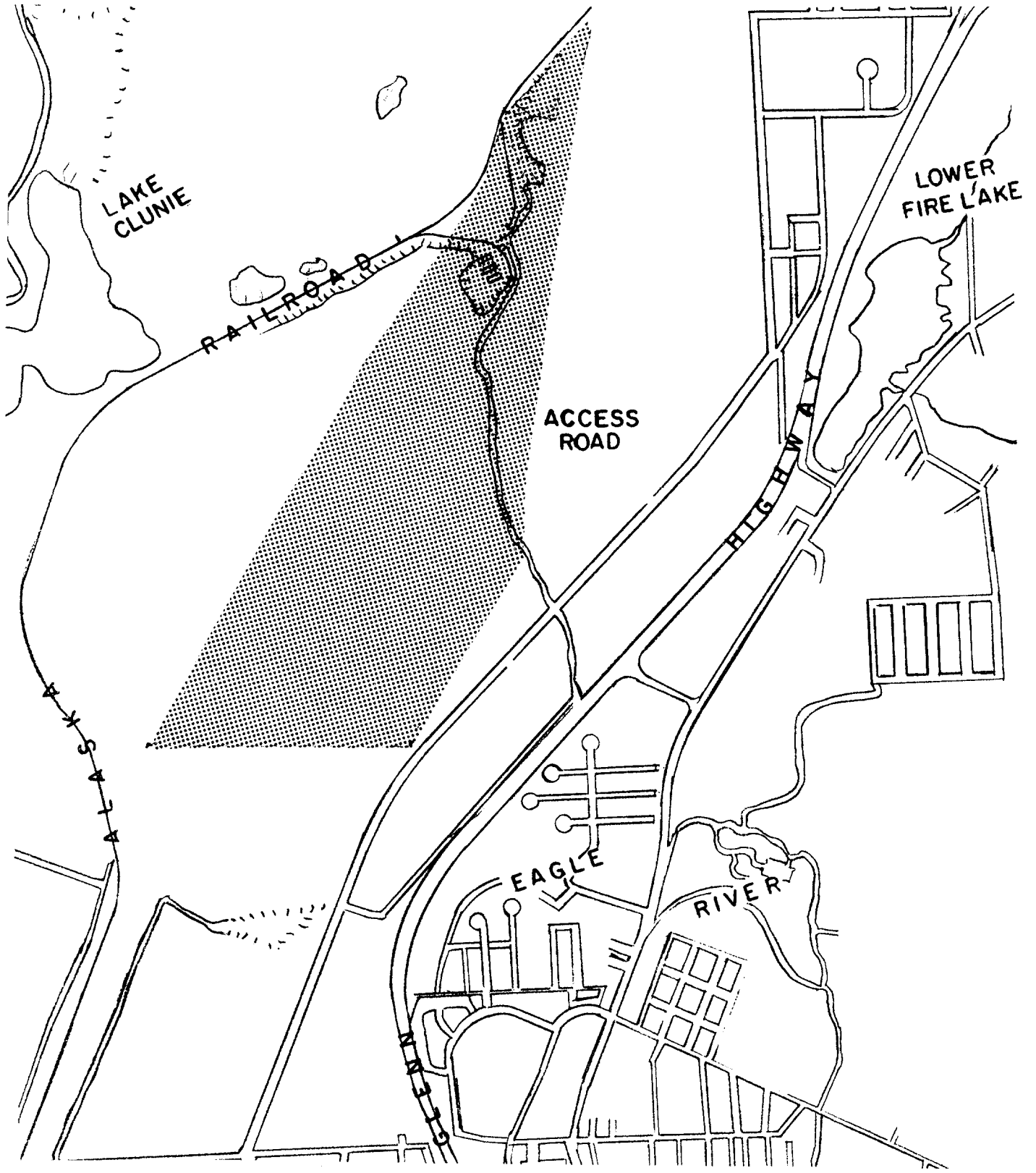
The railroad, however, has viewed the relocation of the central yard as a ten-to-fifteen year proposition involving a thorough study of the 640 acres of real estate owned in the Ship Creek area. Not having a detailed estimate of the move, railroad management guesses that the expense may be over \$100 million.

Some critics believe that relocating the yard makes no sense from a "bottom-line" or operations point of view. Others support the move but prefer a more deliberate, stage-by-stage strategy.

Q. *What do the residents of Eagle River think?*

A. The initial response of the Eagle River community at a Chamber of Commerce briefing in February 1988 was very positive. The benefits as far as job opportunities and the stabilization and improvement of values of both commercial and residential real estate are obvious.

Map of Eagle River Site



Initial concerns focused on noise questions which railroad officials indicated would be much less of a problem than in Anchorage because of the distance between the new site and residential areas.

Some of the residents have asked if this new facility would expedite the straightening and improvement of the track which could allow for a commuter train from the Matanuska Valley and Eagle River into Anchorage.

Q. *What impact would this development have on the present project known as Ship Creek Landing?*

A. Most planners and real estate professionals believe that if the entire railway yard area were to become part of a "total planned development," Ship Creek Landing, land values and the aesthetics of the entire setting would be greatly improved.

Q. *What elements of the rail system will remain in the present site?*

A. The passenger operation will continue. A Trailer on Flat Car (TOFC) yard will be needed near the dock, and a two-track freight main line will pass through the area.

Q. *What would be the fate of the present depot?*

A. The historic value of the Anchorage Railroad depot is well recognized as a major asset of the Anchorage community. It is envisioned that the depot would continue to serve as the major passenger center for the railroad in Southcentral Alaska. With imaginative planning the depot might become the center of an Anchorage Historical Village which could contain restaurants, shops, public markets and tourism-related businesses. Other parts of the 640 acre area should include light industrial activities, parks and perhaps amenities such as a Native cultural center and an aquarium.

Q. *How does this concept become a reality?*

A. The critical steps which must be taken are:

1. A thorough community discussion to explore and develop the concept.
2. The development of strategies for financing the cost of building the new railyard as well as the planning of the redesigned "front door" to Anchorage.
3. The decision to proceed by Alaska Railroad, state and local leaders.

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As well as providing a forum for national and international speakers, working committees study critical issues facing the state and nation and prepare well-researched action papers, such as this one.

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