

## 4.0 Willoughby District Assets and Challenges

### 4.1 Capitalize on Area Assets

Good planning takes advantage of and builds upon an area's natural and cultural assets, and the Willoughby District presents several such opportunities.

**The District is already home to many of Juneau's arts, cultural and civic uses**, including the Alaska State Museum, major State offices, the City's Centennial Hall Convention and Visitors Center, the Central Council of Tlingit Haida Indian of Alaska's Andrew Hope Building with its meeting space and ANB/ANS Juneau camp home, the Juneau Arts and Culture Center, Zach Gordon Youth Center, and Juneau's home for public broadcasting. In addition, the Alaska State Capitol and Dimond Court House are just 'up the hill', and the Federal Building is across Gold Creek.

Planned expansions of several of these facilities was reviewed in the last chapter, with construction of the new State Library, Archives, and Museum anticipated to start in the next one to two years. The Willoughby District is the area where the CBJ encourages location of civic, arts, and cultural facilities and activity.



Juneau Arts and Culture Center ('the JACC') in Willoughby District

**The Willoughby District is home to about 25 popular shops, service providers, restaurants, and indoor recreation facilities.** Downtown's only major grocery and hardware store are here. Popular and well visited recreation destinations include the Zach Gordon Youth Center, Juneau Bowling Center, and JRC Alaska Club. There are several restaurants and three of downtown's five hotel/motels are located in the District too. Retail and commercial stores that offer services and goods bring activity and bustle to the District. The Willoughby District Plan calls for the 1<sup>st</sup> floor of most

new buildings, especially those on street corners and on Willoughby Street, to have retail and other activity-creating uses. These stores will be home to new, and in some cases relocated, commercial activity.

**About 1,600 people work in the District and over 21,000 drive along Egan on a daily basis.** There are approximately 1,600 full time employees in the District (including the State Office Building), of which about 20 percent are private sector. Several major office buildings are either within the area or less than a ¼ mile (5 minute) walk. These employees are a lot of the customers for local shops and restaurants. According to Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities, the Average Daily Traffic on Egan Drive at the intersection with Willoughby Avenue is 21,477 (August 2009).

**Close to 1,000,000 tourists are nearby every summer off the cruise ships.** Many visit the Alaska State Museum and Visitor's Center in Centennial Hall by foot or by bus. As infrastructure and Museum improvements occur these tourist destinations will be more visible, and easier to reach by foot, tour bus, and transit.

**The area has a rich past** that is already celebrated in totem poles, a few interpretative signs, and in display cases inside the Alaska State Museum, Andrew Hope Building, Centennial Hall and nearby at the City Museum and State Historic Library. Much more could be done to explain the area's history and its cultural significance to visitors and residents. Everyone's experience will be enriched with a better understanding of this early summer home for the Auk Nu Tlingits, the mining boom in the early 1900's, Juneau's military support during WWII, and today's Alaska State Capital.

**The waterfront is near and as improvements occur a connection will be re-established.** Less than a century ago the Willoughby District was ocean lapping against the bluff behind Village Street. Today, the area is across Egan Drive from the waterfront. The Willoughby District will be reconnected with Juneau's waterfront as better pedestrian crossings of Egan Drive are established and linked to a finished Seawalk, the mouth of Gold Creek is restored to natural conditions, concrete and fences are removed, and as the speed that cars travel on this section of Egan are slowed.

**Beautiful views.** The area offers captivating views south down Gastineau Channel, of Mount Juneau to the east, and west across the channel to Mt Troy and other the mountains on Douglas Island. Development should maintain these views from Calhoun Avenue, the Governor's Mansion, the 8<sup>th</sup> floor State Office Building plaza, and from the future Capitol campus on Telephone Hill.

**Cruise ship docks, downtown, the Capitol, and residential areas are nearby as is the new Transportation Center.** The area is small enough that it can be crossed on foot in five minutes, which is good for transit oriented development and related incentives. Transit viability will be increased primarily through added density, improved access, traffic calming, community-serving facilities, compactness, mixed use and pedestrian amenities. These are the features that define the Willoughby District. Locating transit stops in front of the new State Library, Archives and Museum on Whittier will provide a central location with ample space to shelter patrons from the wind and rain. Bus pull-outs should be provided at all stops so traffic circulation is not disrupted.

**The Willoughby District is an excellent location for a District Heat and/or Energy Project.**

The Willoughby District is an excellent location for a district heating and energy distribution project as there are many large, publicly owned facilities in a compact and discrete area; more facilities are anticipated, requiring significant site preparation and earthwork; and heat sources are available. Larger private sector property owners may also wish to participate. Providing the opportunity to access lower cost heat/energy could be another way that CBJ encourages housing and other mixed-use developments in the district. The key steps would be to:

1. Conduct a feasibility analysis in the near term to review source options and life cycle costs (capital costs for this type of project tends to be high but the fuel costs are low and fixed);
2. Establish an agreement between facility owners (CBJ, State, Federal, CCTHITA, AEL&P) with regard to cost sharing; and
3. Sequence the construction of several major public projects simultaneously so that the installation of underground distribution pipes (depending on heat/energy source) occurs district wide in a cost efficient and coordinated manner, or in logical construction phases.

Knowledgeable sources on energy and heat production have variously suggested that a bio-mass based steam plant, a ground water, or ocean water, heat exchange system may be optimal. A co-generation facility (electricity and heat) could be owned and operated by AEL&P, a private energy producer (selling wholesale electricity to AEL&P), or even the CBJ, who would use the generated electricity to offset electrical consumption by CBJ facilities.

A district heating system could extend beyond the core Willoughby District to serve other CBJ, State and Federal facilities such as the Federal Building, JDHS, Bill Ray Center, the Capitol, the Courthouse

Building, Coast Guard Station Juneau and NOAA support buildings, as well as future development on Mental Health Trust property on the waterfront. Depending on placement, it may even be feasible to extend district heat to Bartlett Hospital, Juneau's largest energy consumer. This would also provide a local power generation site that would not be vulnerable to avalanches and other potential transmission line failures. The feasibility study would determine the most effective and efficient source and service area.

This type of distributed heat and/or energy system is common in Europe and in cold weather regions. In downtown Seattle a private utility provides district heat to approximately 200 buildings from five bio-mass boilers. In addition to purchasing thermal energy for heat, Seattle Steam's customers use it for other applications. For example, steam is used for humidity control at the Seattle Art Museum, where art installations have precise humidity and temperature requirements, and, several of Seattle's artisan food and beverage producers, such as Beecher's Cheese and the Pike Brewing Company, use steam in their production processes. The core downtown buildings in the City of Fairbanks are currently heated by excess heat from a co-generation facility.

#### **Willoughby District Assets**

- Home to many of Juneau's arts, cultural and civic uses.
- Popular shops, service providers, restaurants, and indoor recreation facilities here.
- About 1,600 people work in the District every day.
- Close to 1,000,000 tourists nearby every summer.
- Rich history.
- Close to waterfront and better connection to it planned.
- Beautiful views.
- New Transportation Center is 'next door' & District is perfect for transit-oriented and pedestrian-oriented development.
- The Willoughby District is an excellent location for a District Heat and/or Energy Project



Some of the challenges created by large 'super-blocks' – Landowners erect fences to mark property lines, pedestrians zig-zag to short cut through parking lots.

## 4.2 Address Area Challenges

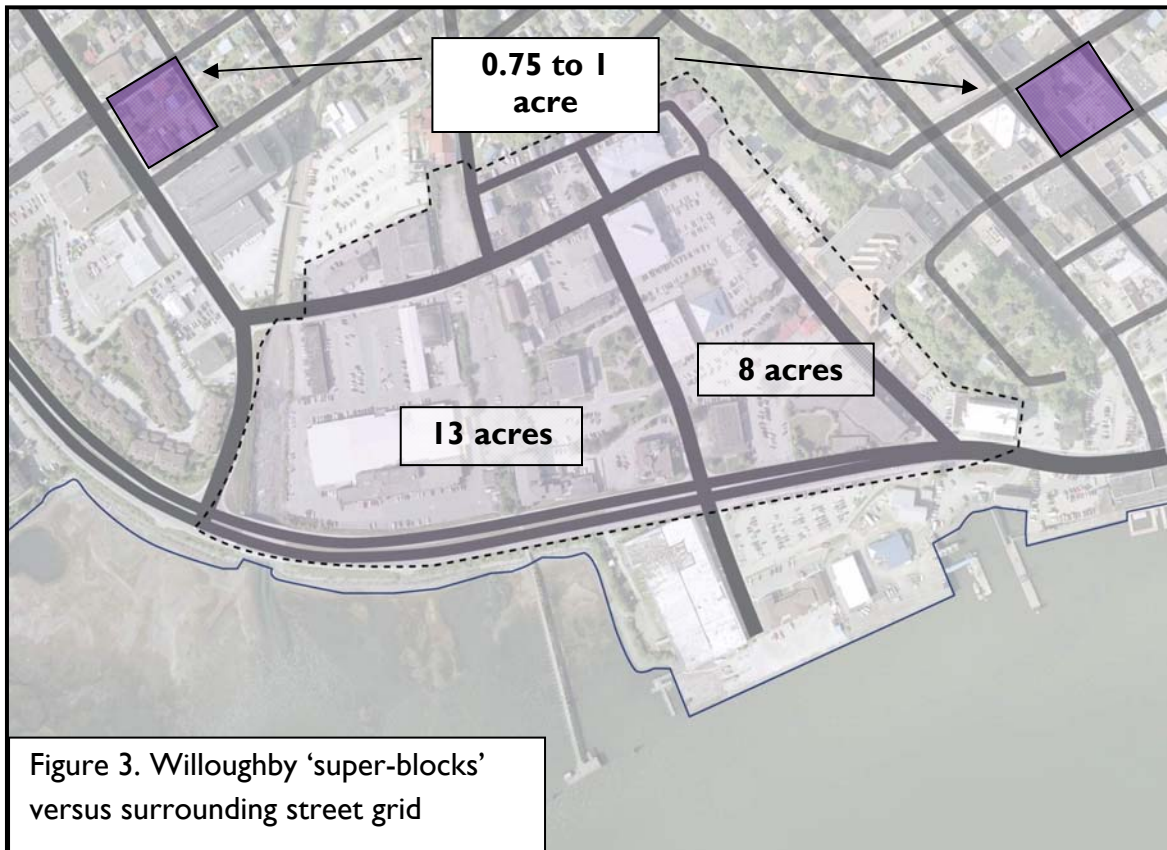
Despite the assets described above the Willoughby District has not developed to its full potential. There are barriers and challenges that, if addressed and removed, will facilitate development and spark new vitality in the District.

**The area's street and sidewalk grid is insufficient, resulting in 'super-blocks' and the challenges they create.** When the grid of streets and sidewalks in the Willoughby District is compared to that of surrounding areas, such as downtown or nearby residential areas, it is immediately apparent that the scale is very different (see Figure 3). Both town and neighboring residential areas have streets and sidewalks in a comfortable, walkable, human-scaled grid.

Rather than a connected grid of streets and sidewalks, the central part of the Willoughby District is divided into two blocks, one about 13 acres and the other about eight acres. Without streets and sidewalks breaking-up these large blocks:

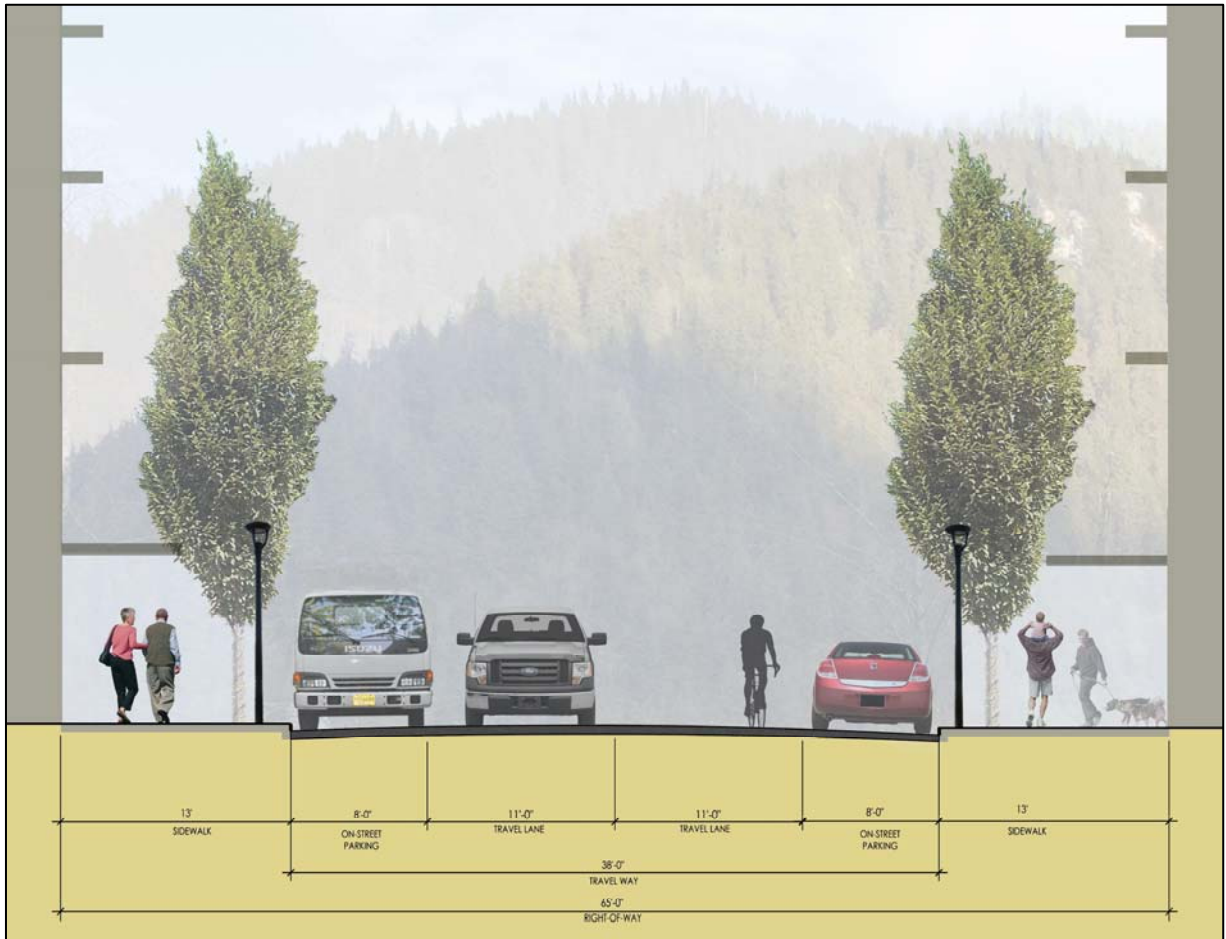
- People tend to take short-cuts, zig-zagging among parked cars to get to their destinations;
- Property owners tend to put up fences to mark their property;
- Areas between buildings are taken up with surface parking (parking is needed but there are better ways to provide it in an urban area);
- Areas in between and around parking and buildings tend to collect litter and junk;
- Large spaces between buildings aren't readily visible and can attract undesirable activity; and
- Parcels are larger than is typical in an urban area making buyers harder to find and development more expensive.





To address these issues, the Willoughby District super-blocks are broken-up with new streets to create a walkable, human-scaled urban grid. The new streets and sidewalks will help form pleasant, shared spaces where much of the District’s public life takes place. The streets will be narrow 11 ft wide slow-speed travel lanes with spaces for on-street parking, which is important for customers of district retailers and helps create a buffer between the roadway and sidewalks. People walking to and from their cars also add to the activity on the sidewalks. Sidewalks will be from 8 to 13 ft wide, with pedestrian-scale lighting and benches. Street trees and benches will enhance both the street and wide sidewalks (see diagram next page).

Buildings in the Willoughby District will front directly onto sidewalks with active 1<sup>st</sup> floor storefronts, office windows and entries, all of which help add activity and liveliness for walkers passing by. Because the new network of streets will create smaller blocks, a finer grain of buildings and uses can be introduced to the



District and multiple ways for pedestrians to walk through are possible. The new streets will also create connections with the surrounding neighborhoods, further helping to knit the city together and reduce loading on single, wide streets such as Egan Drive.

**The primary land use in the Willoughby District is surface parking lots,** which accounts for about one-third of the current land use in the district. Most of the parking lots lack landscaping and some lots are unpaved and disorganized. These large parking lots make it difficult to get from one destination to another, are not attractive to look at, create dark, empty scary-feeling places at night, and take up space that could be used for mixed-use buildings, housing, and other activity (see Figure 4).

**Several buildings in the Willoughby District – both publicly and privately owned – are at or nearing the end of their design life.** These rundown buildings are unattractive and do not contribute to a Civic, Arts and Cultural District. There are seven commercial properties and 10 residential properties where the land is worth more than the building upon it, one indication that an appropriate time for redevelopment is nearing.





- Existing Surface and Structured Parking Lots and Number of Spaces In and Around Willoughby District
- Existing Pedestrian Routes



**Figure 4. Existing Parking and Pedestrian Routes**



**Lack of housing.** The District is zoned to allow 60 residential dwelling units per acre (dua), but there are now only 120 dwelling units in this 35 acre area, yielding an overall density of about 3.4 dua. Only one place within the District approaches the allowable density; Fireweed Place, a 5-story senior housing complex with 67 units and a density of 47 dua. The low number of housing units in the District means that after regular work hours, activity is generated only by the commercial destinations, restaurants, and indoor recreation uses. At night, once the stores and restaurants close, the area is practically deserted. The CBJ wants to see many more residential units in the Willoughby District, both affordable and market-rate.

One reason why the Willoughby District is so well suited for dense residential development is that this area is appealing to people less dependent on cars, compared to other places. The Willoughby District is a place to live where people without access to a car, including children, the elderly, and the disabled have more safety and independence in their world. Residential areas are now and will be even better connected by sidewalks and pedestrian paths to parks, nearby retail shopping areas, and public transit. Cultural destinations and performing arts are close. Walking is enjoyable here and the need for car travel is reduced. Already in downtown Juneau over 60% of residents walk to work and in the Willoughby District, nearly 45% walk to work. Additionally, the walking environment will become better as planned improvements occur.

**Many people already walk to and through the Willoughby District, but commonly used routes can be unsafe.** While there are sidewalks on at least one side of most streets, it is common in the Willoughby District to cut randomly through parking lots –it can be dangerous to follow informal but well used dark and muddy paths, like the one between the Prospector Hotel and Museum, and to walk and ride bikes while dodging cars along skinny Capital Avenue, which has no sidewalk or shoulder. Attendees at conferences and celebrations often are confused about how to get from one venue to the other without cutting through parking lots

**Egan Drive is a pedestrian barrier and disconnects the District from the waterfront.** The only pedestrian crossing of Egan Drive in the Willoughby District is at Whittier Street. This, combined with the high traffic speeds, makes Egan Drive a barrier separating Willoughby District pedestrians from the waterfront, employment areas by the Douglas Bridge, and current and future development at the Subport. It is common for those parking in the temporary lots at the Subport to cut across Egan Drive as they head to town rather than use the Whittier light.

Also a frequent sight at the intersection of Egan Drive and Willoughby are bicyclists and pedestrians trying to cross Egan. Non-motorized use data collected by the CBJ at the intersection of Egan and Willoughby during a January 2011 day documented one bicyclist and 91 pedestrians during the morning rush hour in extreme winter weather, and two bicyclists and 250 pedestrians during lunch time in poor winter weather. An early May 2011 count day documented the morning rush hour at this intersection with 13 bicyclists and 154 pedestrians and on that sunny day the afternoon count was 56 bicyclists, 553 pedestrians and 11 skateboarders. In the morning, at least 29 (17%) of the pedestrians crossed Egan Drive outside of a marked crosswalk (jay-walked) and in the afternoon, at least 51 (8%) pedestrians jay-walked.

During an all-day survey (7:30 AM to 5:30 PM) in May 2011 on a sunny day along Willoughby Avenue, between Gold Creek and Capital Avenue, surveyors counted 135 bicyclists and 2,243 pedestrians (an average of 243 pedestrians per hour); of the combined total, 23% of pedestrians and bicyclists were documented jay-walking,



Some places along Egan Drive where pedestrians and bicyclists currently desire to cross and struggle to do so.

The number of people trying to cross Egan Drive, from Gold Creek to Main Street, is going to increase significantly as the Subport area redevelops, residential and commercial in-fill occurs in the Willoughby District, and the Seawalk is finished.

**Current design of Egan Drive does not fit planned multi-use developments and operating speeds are too high.** The present design and functionality of Egan Drive in the Willoughby District needs to be evaluated to address the future multi-modal travel needs of the planned redevelopment surrounding it. Egan Drive is the only viable major vehicle corridor in the District and it will continue to serve as the primary vehicle route. It also provides the only direct vehicle connection to downtown, a through traffic route for residents to the south of town, and to worker, tourist, and freight vehicle traffic to and from the port facilities of Juneau.

With the planned transformation of the District into a vibrant 24/7 mixed use neighborhood that includes significantly more housing, the design of Egan Drive through this area will also need to evolve. The future Egan Drive design will need to balance mobility requirements to accommodate the large volume of daily commuter traffic destined for this employment and cultural center and a significant increase in pedestrian and bicycle activities that are expected.

The current posted speed limit on Egan Drive is 40 mph at 10<sup>th</sup>, 25 mph at Whittier Street, and 20 mph at Willoughby Street. However, because the character of roadway does not change drivers do not have any visual cues to slow down and traffic often travels above the speed limit. The lack of crosswalks and the high speed of traffic make the walking conditions along Egan unpleasant and unsafe

As full build out of new streets in the Willoughby District occurs, there will be more direct routes to destinations. New signals with crosswalks should be added at these intersections as well as Glacier Avenue and Willoughby Avenue (see Figure 8). There will also eventually be a new street between the Foodland property and the Museum to facilitate the increase in vehicle traffic and circulation needs. The employees working in the Willoughby District will be able to choose one of the new streets and signalized intersections rather than cueing up at the one or two entrances/exits to Egan that now exist. Currently these streets and intersections exceed capacity and fail to handle peak hour traffic. With thoughtful, coordinated planning, the same number of cars, or more, will be traveling but there will be more options for getting into and out of the area. The new signals are to be operated in a coordinated fashion to provide efficient traffic flows during the weekday commuter periods. Eventually new



development will be thwarted by the failure of the existing street/ intersection system to move traffic to Egan at peak hours. The new streets/Egan intersections become mandatory for successful redevelopment and investment to continue build out. The ‘pinch point’ however, at the 10<sup>th</sup> and Egan intersection, won’t be improved as a result of these actions.

Change in the character and functionality of state highways like this happens frequently throughout the country as urbanization occurs; this is one of the reasons the Federal Highway Administration and many state DOTs have adopted context sensitive approaches to roadway design and redesign.

A transportation system master plan should be developed for the District to identify the specific capital and operational needs to serve the area at full build-out. The study will build upon the concepts shown in this plan and should be a cooperative context-sensitive design effort between the ADOT&PF and CBJ.

**Although this District is intended to be the community’s civic, arts and cultural district, there is very limited public space.** And, the limited green space here is little more than remnant landscaping that is not connected. Many potential routes and assets, such as Gold Creek, are surrounded by fences and barbed wire.

Usable, year round public open space provides a place for people to connect, space for public events, and fosters a sense of community. Public plazas or malls are also typical of civic districts where they showcase important buildings and monuments. Well designed public space includes areas for both active and passive use, public art, and capitalizes on natural features and views. Making clear connections between public spaces, parks, pedestrian routes and important destinations will benefit residents and visitors.

A public plaza will be developed between the State Office Building, Centennial Hall, JACC and the new State Library, Archives, and Museum. This plaza will be connected by an east-west pedestrian path south of the Museum to Gold Creek, and from there an improved intersection across Egan will allow access to the Seawalk. The new plaza will provide a good visual and pedestrian connection between important civic buildings. It should be usable year round, accessible, well-lit, and include public art and space for outdoor performances, civic gatherings, markets or fairs. Native vegetation should be used for landscaping wherever practical.



**Area creeks are in concrete and culverts.** Gold Creek runs from Cope Park south through the District, however, it is currently in a concrete channel (except for mouth) and surrounded by barbed wire fence. Gold Creek, from its mouth to at least Willoughby Avenue and potentially through the federal building parking area, should be restored and rehabilitated to a natural condition with a walking area and picnic spot located along the upper bank.



A diverted flow from Gold Creek runs through the AEL&P back-up diesel substation in the area. This water flows to Gastineau Channel under culverts and below fenced boardwalks. It can't be seen and can barely be heard rushing below fenced in areas. Opening up and landscaping this spillway is another opportunity to create an attractive feature that will become a pleasant amenity in the area.

The Juneau Watershed Partnership has indicated its interest in partnering with the CBJ on both these restoration efforts. AEL&P would also be a necessary partner on the spillway project. The US Fish and Wildlife Service have provided information on several grant sources that support work on stream restoration (see Chapter 6).

## Willoughby District Challenges

- The existing grid of streets and sidewalks is insufficient, resulting in 'super-blocks' that create obstacles to growth and access.
- Significant land in the Willoughby District is used for parking lots. This makes it difficult to get from one place to another for drivers and pedestrians, creates dark, empty places at night, and takes up space that could be used for mixed-use buildings, housing, and other activity.
- Several buildings – both publicly and privately owned – are rundown.
- Many more residential units are needed, both affordable and market-rate.
- Walking routes to and through the area are not well defined.
- Egan Drive is a pedestrian barrier and disconnects the area from the waterfront.
- Design and function of Egan Drive through the area needs to become more context-sensitive to the future development uses and densities.
- There is very little public open space.
- Area creeks and streams are in concrete or culverts.