

## Boom times bring big changes to Mat-Su

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Mike Nederbrock/KTUU

**Wasilla, Alaska** - If communities were graded on how well they attract economic development, Wasilla would have a report card any kid would be proud to take home to mom.

While the city's population continues to climb, many other things are happening.

And although some are causing short-term headaches, Wasilla's future is looking bright.

The changes begin before you even get to Wasilla, where the Glenn Highway meets the Parks. The northbound overpass opened Sunday.

"This last weekend we were able to move traffic going towards Wasilla up on the final alignment, and they're going over the top of the railroad tracks and over the top of the Glenn Highway," says Department of Transportation project manager Tom Dougherty.

By this weekend, the southbound interchange will open and there will be no more traffic light at the intersection.

The \$46 million project is coming to an end in October. "It's a lot of work that's been done in the last two years," says Dougherty.



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But it doesn't end there. Butting up to this project is another one worth \$26 million that will create a four-lane freeway from the Glenn Highway interchange all the way to Wasilla. It's scheduled for completion in fall 2005.



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Along the route, there are more and more signs of economic development in the area. A 166,000-square-foot Lowe's Home Improvement store is going up. Not to be outdone, Home Depot is busy building a 123,000 square foot store on the Palmer-Wasilla Highway.

“Between January and March, there was over 225,000 feet of permits for commercial development in Wasilla,” says Mayor Dianne Keller.

It’s long been said the Mat-Su Valley is the fastest growing region in the state. Wasilla is no exception. Its population grew 6 percent in the past year.

But Keller says that's not the only reason businesses are coming here. “We're giving them sewer and water and roads,” she says. “We are, I can't think right off the top of my head of another community that's building new roads.”

It's not just about industrial development. Over the last few years, volunteers have turned an old gravel airstrip into a new park. It comes with a veterans memorial and what is probably the state's best skateboard and bike park.

While activity is soaring, Wasilla has been able to keep a handle on local taxes. The property tax is just .4 mill - - courtesy of a 2.5 percent sales tax. And with more businesses coming to town, revenue from the sales tax continues to climb.



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The city has only now begun to shop for an economic development director. “You ain't seen nothing yet,” Keller says. “We're on our way.”

Wasilla also is extending the length of its runway at the airport north of town. When completed, the runway will be 5,000 feet long.

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