

# Girdwood Carves Its Own Identity

## Recreation defines the community's economy

**A**lthough Girdwood is technically part of Anchorage, the area has a unique economy and history. The small community 29 miles south of the Anchorage bowl was at one time an incorporated city, but in 1975 it was absorbed by Anchorage when the borough and municipality unified. However, the relatively isolated town has maintained its own identity.

Girdwood is best known for its large ski resort and the associated hotels and restaurants — three-quarters of its jobs are in leisure and hospitality, in stark contrast to 10 percent for Alaska as a whole.



Girdwood as seen from Mt. Alyeska. Photo by Nathan Searles

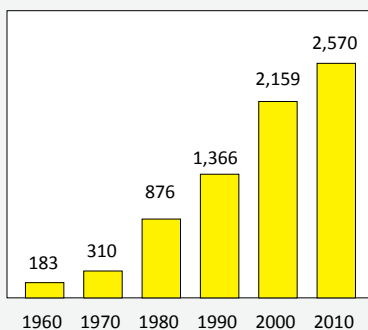
### Sprang to life in the '50s

Originally known as Glacier City, Girdwood came into being in 1896 as a supply camp for gold miners along Turnagain Arm. Construction of the Alaska Railroad in 1915 further fueled its growth. But with the completion of the railroad and the end of mining in the 1930s, Gird-

wood nearly became a ghost town.

During the late 1940s, construction of the Seward Highway breathed new life into the area. The Girdwood village population was just 79 at the 1950 Census, but by the late 1950s the first ski lift and lodge paved the way to what Girdwood is today: a

### 1 Girdwood Grows Population, 1960–2010



Note: Areas included in Girdwood counts changed over time.

Sources: Municipality of Anchorage Community Planning and Development Department; and U.S. Census Bureau

### Defining and measuring the Girdwood area

Because Girdwood is part of the Municipality of Anchorage, it's treated no differently than any other neighborhood in the city when it comes to the availability of economic and demographic data. As a result, data specific to Girdwood is produced less frequently and with less detail than for Anchorage as a whole.

The two main sources for these data are the U.S. Census Bureau's decennial census and the 2006–2010 American Community Survey, or ACS. The 2010 Census is limited to broad demographic

and housing data, and the ACS provides additional demographic and housing information as well as social and economic data. Because the ACS is sample-based and because Girdwood is small, the margins of error for some of the data can be large.

In this article, Girdwood refers to the community plus the population along Turnagain Arm south of the Anchorage bowl, along the Seward Highway to Portage, including such places as Indian and Bird Creek.

world-class ski resort and recreational area. It's also home to an ever-growing number of permanent residents and part-time "weekenders."

Since 1990, Girdwood's population has nearly doubled, to 2,242 in 2010 plus 328 in the outlying areas. (See the sidebar on page 14 and Exhibit 1.) It grew 19 percent between 2000 and 2010, topping Anchorage's 12.1 percent.

The reason is not completely clear, but there are several likely contributors. The 310-room Hotel Alyeska opened in 1994, and over time, significant improvements to the highway between Anchorage and Girdwood cut commuting times and improved safety. However, Girdwood may simply be a home more people want because it provides the lifestyle of a small town combined with a wealth of recreational opportunities in an incredible natural setting.

## Leisure the year-round driver

Leisure defines the area's economy, but unlike other tourist hot spots such as Denali or Skagway, tourism in Girdwood is year-round. (See Exhibit 2.) Wage and salary employment in 2011 peaked at 1,077 in March but wasn't far off in July, at 976. Girdwood is an attractive summer destination as well as a winter ski haven. And unlike the other visitor-dependent communities, its proximity to the state's largest city provides Girdwood with a steady flow of year-round customers.

A large slice of the area's workforce is missing from these numbers: commuters. An unknown but significant number of residents drive to Anchorage each day for work, evidenced by the average time Girdwood residents spend commuting, which is longer than the statewide and Anchorage averages. (See Exhibit 3.)

## 'Part-time' housing common

The Census Bureau identified nearly a third of Girdwood's housing units as "for seasonal, recreational, or occasional use," compared to 1 percent in Anchorage. Many people live elsewhere but own recreational property in Girdwood, one of the town's distinctive characteristics.

## A different age distribution

The differences between Girdwood and the rest of the state don't end at homes and jobs. Residents are

also a bit older, with a median age of 36.9 — that's not a dramatic departure from Anchorage's 32.9 years, but there are key differences.

Girdwood has proportionally fewer kids, which may be partially due to the lack of a high school, though Girdwood does have an elementary and junior high school. The area has the same proportion of 20-to-29-year-olds as the rest of the state, but it has a higher rate of those between 30 and 64. Girdwood also has fewer seniors.

## More men, less diverse

Another standout feature of Girdwood is how male it is — for every 124 men, there are 100 women. That's considerably higher than the 109-to-100 ratio for the state, which is the highest in the U.S. The ratio is more balanced in Anchorage, with 103 men for every 100 women.

Girdwood's high percentage of men isn't unusual in alpine skiing communities. Sixty-two percent of all skiers and 67 percent of snowboarders in the nation are male.

Girdwood is also considerably less diverse than the rest of Anchorage and most other places in Alaska. Its population was 91 percent white in 2010 versus 66 percent in Anchorage.

## 2 Jobs by Industry Girdwood area, 2011

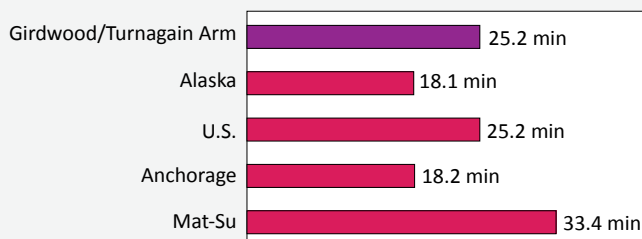
Industry	Jobs
Total	976
Construction	48
Retail Trade	38
Financial Activities	19
Professional and Business Services	49
Education and Health Services	37
Leisure and Hospitality	727
Other Private Sector	40
Government	20

Notes: Because of the small size of Girdwood's workforce, much of its industry data are confidential and rolled into "Other Private Sector." Numbers do not sum to the total due to averaging. Girdwood numbers are a subset of Anchorage data, and therefore should be used only for general comparisons.

Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section

*Continued on page 18*

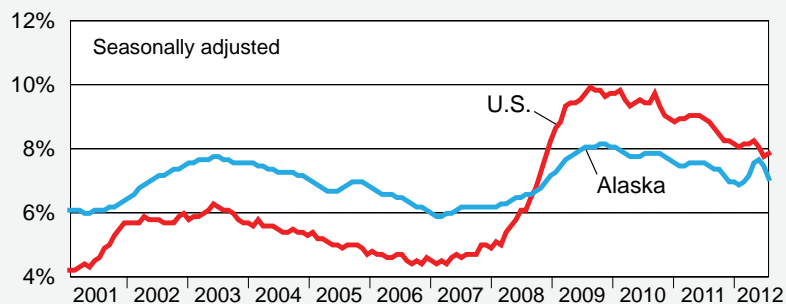
## 3 Residents Have Long Commutes Girdwood comparison, 2011



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2006-2010

## 2 Unemployment Rates

January 2001 to October 2012



Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis; and U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

## 4 Unemployment Rates

Boroughs and census areas

SEASONALLY ADJUSTED	Prelim.	Revised	
	10/12	9/12	10/11
<b>United States</b>	<b>7.9</b>	<b>7.8</b>	<b>8.9</b>
<b>Alaska Statewide</b>	<b>7.1</b>	<b>7.5</b>	<b>7.5</b>
<b>NOT SEASONALLY ADJUSTED</b>			
<b>United States</b>	<b>7.5</b>	<b>7.6</b>	<b>8.5</b>
<b>Alaska Statewide</b>	<b>6.0</b>	<b>6.3</b>	<b>6.9</b>
<b>Anchorage/Mat-Su Region</b>	<b>5.1</b>	<b>5.6</b>	<b>6.1</b>
Municipality of Anchorage	4.7	5.2	5.6
Matanuska-Susitna Borough	6.5	7.1	8.0
<b>Gulf Coast Region</b>	<b>7.0</b>	<b>7.0</b>	<b>8.1</b>
Kenai Peninsula Borough	7.1	7.5	8.4
Kodiak Island Borough	5.1	4.9	5.8
Valdez-Cordova Census Area	9.1	6.9	9.7
<b>Interior Region</b>	<b>5.8</b>	<b>6.1</b>	<b>6.9</b>
Denali Borough	15.3	5.2	15.7
Fairbanks North Star Borough	5.0	5.4	6.0
Southeast Fairbanks Census Area	9.3	9.6	9.7
Yukon-Koyukuk Census Area	12.2	13.2	13.8
<b>Northern Region</b>	<b>8.3</b>	<b>9.7</b>	<b>9.5</b>
Nome Census Area	9.9	11.2	11.1
North Slope Borough	4.8	5.6	5.8
Northwest Arctic Borough	12.6	14.8	13.8
<b>Southeast Region</b>	<b>5.8</b>	<b>5.5</b>	<b>6.9</b>
Haines Borough	6.6	4.8	7.9
Hoonah-Angoon Census Area	11.5	11.9	14.0
Juneau, City and Borough of	4.3	4.3	5.1
Ketchikan Gateway Borough	5.8	5.3	6.7
Petersburg Census Area <sup>1</sup>	8.4	7.0	8.5
Prince of Wales-Hyder Census Area	10.4	12.5	13.4
Sitka, City and Borough of	4.6	4.8	6.0
Skagway, Municipality of	17.3	2.4	21.9
Wrangell, City and Borough of	7.7	6.8	9.4
Yakutat, City and Borough of	7.0	5.8	8.4
<b>Southwest Region</b>	<b>12.5</b>	<b>12.5</b>	<b>11.7</b>
Aleutians East Borough	11.2	11.1	10.5
Aleutians West Census Area	10.3	7.7	7.2
Bethel Census Area	13.5	15.5	12.8
Bristol Bay Borough	6.0	3.0	7.1
Dillingham Census Area	9.8	9.0	10.2
Lake and Peninsula Borough	5.3	5.5	6.4
Wade Hampton Census Area	19.2	20.6	17.4

### GIRDWOOD

Continued from page 15

### Lower income, more education

The estimated margin of error for median household income for the area is too large to draw firm conclusions, but income is somewhat lower than in Anchorage.

Girdwood residents are apparently more educated, though. The rate of those over age 25 with bachelor's degrees or higher, 49.9 percent, is measurably higher than both Anchorage (33.0 percent) and the state (27.0 percent).

## 3 Statewide Employment

Nonfarm wage and salary

Alaska	Preliminary		Revised		Year-Over-Year Change	
	10/12	9/12	10/11	10/11	90% Confidence Interval	
<b>Total Nonfarm Wage and Salary<sup>1</sup></b>	325,800	342,000	325,700	100	-5,977	6,177
Goods-Producing <sup>2</sup>	41,200	46,200	42,000	-800	-3,766	2,166
Service-Providing <sup>3</sup>	284,600	295,800	283,700	900	-	-
<b>Mining and Logging</b>	16,800	17,100	16,200	600	-635	1,835
Mining	16,700	17,000	16,000	700	-	-
Oil and Gas	13,400	13,600	13,200	200	-	-
<b>Construction</b>	15,300	15,400	16,500	-1,200	-2,713	313
<b>Manufacturing</b>	9,100	13,700	9,300	-200	-2,559	2,159
<b>Wholesale Trade</b>	6,600	6,900	6,000	600	261	939
<b>Retail Trade</b>	35,100	35,900	35,400	-300	-1,084	484
Food and Beverage Stores	6,300	6,300	6,300	0	-	-
General Merchandise Stores	9,900	9,900	10,100	-200	-	-
<b>Transportation, Warehousing, Utilities</b>	21,100	23,600	20,800	300	-534	1,134
Air Transportation	5,800	6,200	5,700	100	-	-
<b>Information</b>	6,300	6,300	6,400	-100	-375	175
Telecommunications	4,000	4,000	4,200	-200	-	-
<b>Financial Activities</b>	14,700	15,100	15,200	-500	-1,367	367
<b>Professional and Business Services</b>	27,500	28,700	27,400	100	-1,256	1,456
<b>Educational<sup>4</sup> and Health Services</b>	46,600	46,000	45,400	1,200	65	2,335
Health Care	32,600	32,400	31,800	800	-	-
<b>Leisure and Hospitality</b>	29,100	36,100	29,700	-600	-3,269	2,069
<b>Other Services</b>	11,400	11,000	10,700	700	-121	1,521
<b>Government</b>	86,200	86,200	86,700	-500	-	-
Federal Government <sup>5</sup>	15,800	16,400	16,700	-900	-	-
State Government <sup>6</sup>	26,700	26,700	26,600	100	-	-
State Government Education <sup>7</sup>	8,600	8,400	8,600	0	-	-
Local Government	43,700	43,100	43,400	300	-	-
Local Government Education <sup>8</sup>	26,000	25,200	25,600	400	-	-
Tribal Government	4,100	4,300	3,900	200	-	-

A dash means confidence intervals aren't available at this level.

<sup>1</sup>Excludes the self-employed, fishermen and other agricultural workers, and private household workers. For estimates of fish harvesting employment and other fisheries data, go to [labor.alaska.gov/research/seafood/seafood.htm](http://labor.alaska.gov/research/seafood/seafood.htm).

<sup>2</sup>Goods-producing sectors include natural resources and mining, construction, and manufacturing.

<sup>3</sup>Service-providing sectors include all others not listed as goods-producing sectors.

<sup>4</sup>Private education only

<sup>5</sup>Excludes uniformed military

<sup>6</sup>This number is not a count of state government positions, but the number of people who worked during any part of the pay period that included the 12<sup>th</sup> of the month (the same measure used for all employment numbers in this table). The numbers can vary significantly from month to month; when attempting to identify trends, annual averages are more useful.

<sup>7</sup>Includes the University of Alaska. Variations in academic calendars from year to year occasionally create temporarily large over-the-year changes.

<sup>8</sup>Includes public school systems. Variations in academic calendars from year to year occasionally create temporarily large over-the-year changes.

Sources for Exhibits 2, 3, and 4: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section; and U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics