

Talkeetna



The gateway to Denali has a number of claims to fame

By SARA WHITNEY

Talkeetna, nestled at the confluence of three major rivers 115 miles north of Anchorage, embodies many outsiders' idea of small-town Alaska, and with good reason. The 1990s hit sitcom Northern Exposure's fictional "Cicely, Alaska" was said to be modeled after Talkeetna.

In recent years, the picturesque community of 861 has regained its place on the national radar. A local roadhouse's giant breakfasts and another local café were featured on the reality show *Man Versus Food*, and then in its quirkiest claim to fame, its honorary mayor made national news for being a cat and, most recently, for narrowly surviving an assassination attempt by a local dog.

Mayor Stubbs has presided over the town for the past 16 years, with some locals noting he hasn't voted for any policies they wouldn't support. Stubbs is just a figurehead, of course, as Talkeetna is unincorporated and has no official mayor or municipal government. The community is a census-designated place, governed by the larger Matanuska-Susitna Borough, but it maintains a strong and cohesive local identity.

Like many towns, it began with gold

The town's modern existence is based mainly on its proximity to Denali National Park and Preserve, but like many places in Alaska, it has roots in the gold rush.

Den'aina Athabascans originally inhabited the area



Stubbs, Talkeetna's honorary feline mayor, pulls rank on a guest during a pool game. The mayor did not specify whether the appearance was official business. Photo by Flickr user t-dawg

around the spot where the Chulitna, Susitna, and Talkeetna rivers converge. This group of Alaska Natives initially resisted outsiders, barring Russian traders from traveling up the Susitna River, but the discovery of gold in the lower Susitna later brought an influx of prospectors who established nearby mines, some of which are still active.

In 1915, President Woodrow Wilson cemented the location for the town site of Talkeetna by making it the first headquarters for the Alaska Railroad Engineering Commission, which oversaw construction of the railroad going north toward Fairbanks. Talkeetna, whose name means "river of plenty," was officially established in 1919.

Today, many of the town's original structures remain. Talkeetna's downtown core is a designated National Historic Site, and it features several businesses that have operated since the early 1900s including a gener-

al store, an inn, and the roadhouse featured on reality TV. The railroad still has a depot there, with daily service in the summer. The trip from Anchorage by train takes about three hours and takes visitors straight into downtown Talkeetna. From there, it's another four-and-a-half hours to Denali National Park.

A key Mat-Su tourist destination

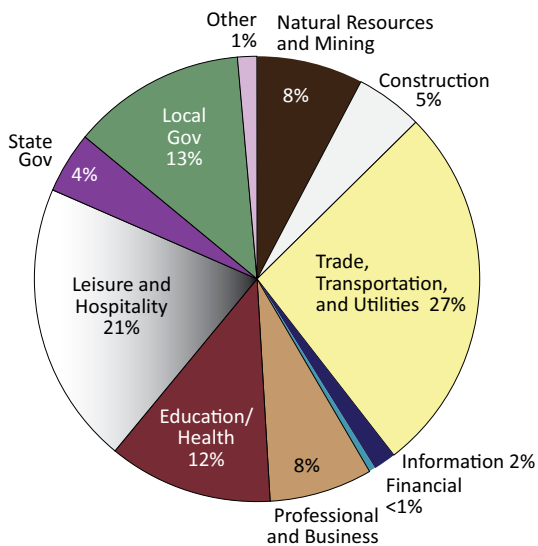
Talkeetna has maintained much of its laid-back, historical flavor, but it's a bustling tourist destination. Its economy is mainly driven by the park and Mount McKinley, which is known as Denali to Alaskans and is the tallest peak in North America at 20,322 feet. The town, which is about 150 miles by road from the park, is one of the Mat-Su Borough's biggest draws.

In the summer, visitors can double Talkeetna's population, and these numbers are on the rise. Cruise ships have ramped up their operations over the past 20 years, and Princess Cruises alone brings an average of 1,000 visitors a day to the town during the summer peak.

Talkeetna serves as a base for Denali expeditions as

1 Jobs Largely Support Tourism

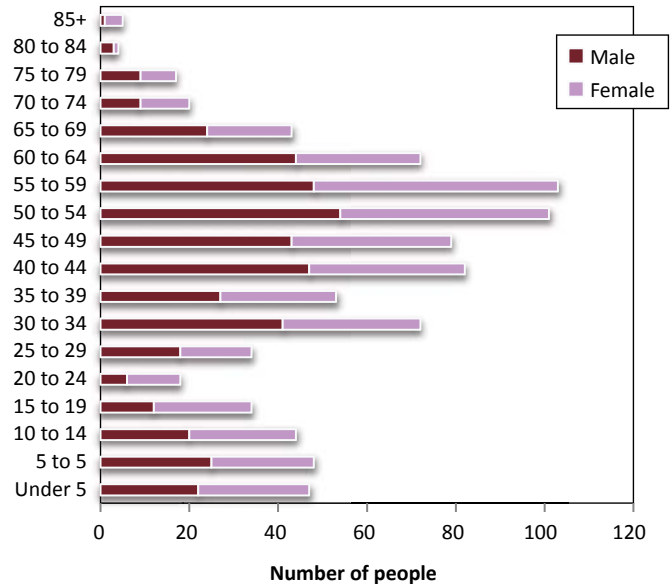
TALKEETNA INDUSTRY BREAKDOWN, 2013



Note: Federal employment isn't included in this chart, but the National Park Service has an office in Talkeetna.
 Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section

2 Year-Round Population is Older

TALKEETNA, 2010 CENSUS



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census

well as providing fishing, rafting, and flightseeing trips for thousands of visitors each year. Locally, its businesses support these adventures and provide a plethora of local entertainment. For example, the town has as a moose droppings festival and an annual wilderness woman and bachelor ball plus a variety of artisanal products, such as locally brewed beer. As of October, Talkeetna had 298 current business licenses, more than one for every three residents.

Jobs that support tourism are spread throughout industries but heavily concentrated in the leisure and hospitality and trade, transportation, and utilities sectors (shown in Exhibit 1). These two sectors encompass nearly half the payroll jobs in Talkeetna. As Exhibit 3 shows, Talkeetna's most common occupations are mostly service jobs — waiters are No. 1 — serving locals as well as the town's numerous visitors.

Though most businesses support tourism in one way or another, the town has a stable, year-round job base. Among working residents, 64 percent worked all four quarters in 2013.

Nearly half the residents aren't employed, though, in the sense that they don't show up on any local payroll, but this number doesn't tell the whole story. Many residents are past traditional working ages and some small business owners are self-employed. Others live in Talkeetna and work elsewhere.

The U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey



The Talkeetna Moose Dropping Festival. Photo by Flickr user ddanforth

3 Most Common Jobs TALKEETNA, 2013

- Waiters and Waitresses
- Cashiers
- Operating Engineers and Other
Construction Equip Operators
- Commercial Pilots
- Cooks in Restaurants
- Bartenders
- Secondary School Teachers
- Office Clerks
- Retail Salespeople
- General and Operations Managers
- Registered Nurses
- Firefighters
- Maids and Housekeepers

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

estimated that between 2008 and 2012, 54.3 percent of Talkeetna residents were employed and 58.3 percent were “in the labor force,” which means they were either working or available and looking for work. That means retirees, for example, are not considered part of the labor force. For comparison, the larger Mat-Su Borough had a labor force participation rate of 65 percent for those age 16 or older, with 57.9 percent employed. It’s important to note that the Talkeetna ACS numbers have large margins of error, however, because of the small sample size.

An affordable place to live

Some residents can earn their entire year’s living during the tourist season and take the winter off, as Talkeetna can be a relatively inexpensive place to live. Although Talkeetna’s utility costs are nearly double those of Anchorage, its average home would cost only about half what it would in Anchorage and would likely sit on considerably more land.

In 2008, McDowell Group conducted the Alaska Geographic Differential Study, which remains the most comprehensive cost-of-living analysis in Alaska to date. The study covered even the smallest places, comparing their costs to Anchorage as a base. For this study, Talkeetna was grouped with similar towns along the Parks Highway, including Healy, Cantwell, Central, Nenana, and Manley Hot Springs.

While housing in Talkeetna is much cheaper than Anchorage, most of its other living costs are a bit higher. However, Talkeetna residents can travel about 70 miles south to Wasilla, where food, medical care, and

other essentials cost less.

Local government presence

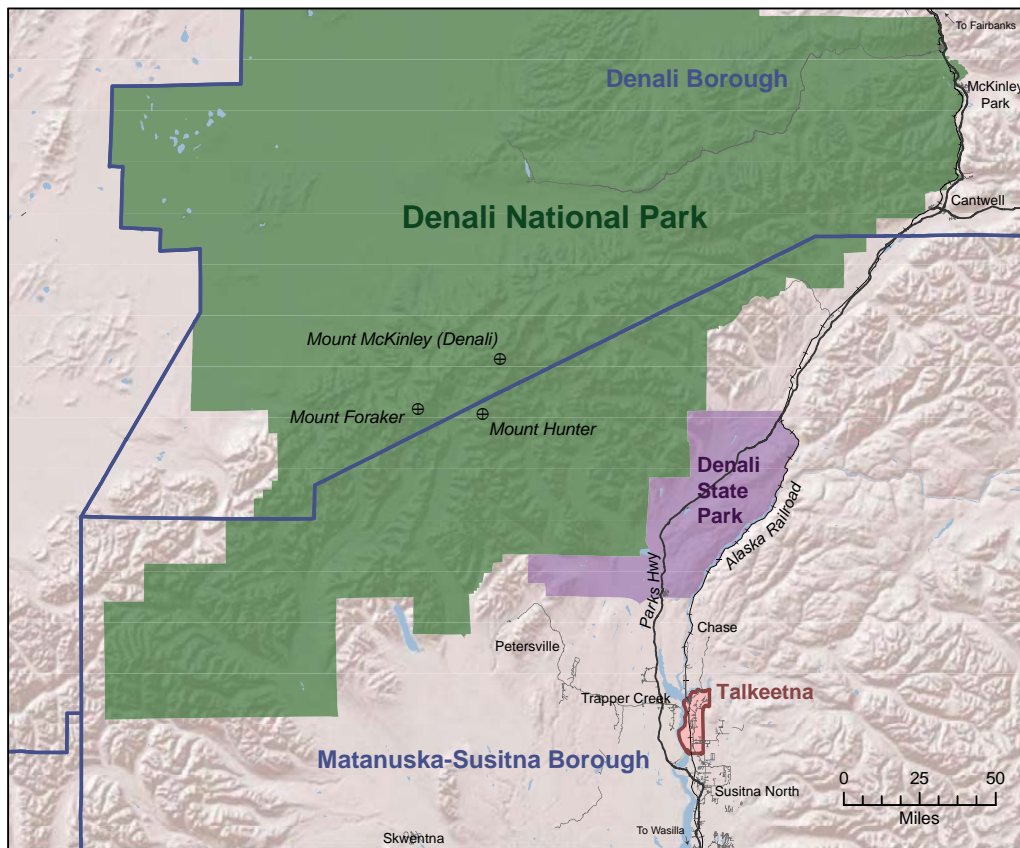
Though tourism is the town’s lifeblood and 83 percent of working residents are in the private sector, local government has a relatively large share of jobs at 13 percent. This is typical for small towns in Alaska, as local government provides a range of basic services for residents, including public school.

Talkeetna Elementary School serves more than 100 kids from the town and surrounding area through grade six, and employs six teachers as of 2014. For middle and high school, students are bused about 14 miles south to Susitna North, another CDP that used to be called Y, at milepost 98 in the Susitna Valley.

The population is older

The town has gained about 100 residents between the 2000 and 2010 censuses. Though Talkeetna and the surrounding area are home to enough kids for an elementary school, the town’s population is considerably older than the state as a whole. Talkeetna residents had a median age of 45.4 in 2013; for comparison, Alaska’s median age was about 34 and for the U.S. as a whole, it was 37.

Because Talkeetna’s population is older and especially concentrated in the 40-to-65 age range (see Exhibit 2), relatively few of its households have children, putting the average household size at just 1.95 people during the most recent census.



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

Talkeetna’s racial makeup also stands out from the state as a whole. As of the 2010 Census, the vast majority were white, at 91.4 percent, in contrast to about 67 percent for the state. Residents were 3.7 percent Alaska Native and 3.4 percent multiracial.

Sara Whitney is the editor of Alaska Economic Trends. To reach her at the Department of Labor in Juneau, call her at (907) 465-6561 or e-mail sara.whitney@alaska.gov.

About these numbers

Data for a place this small are scarce, not updated as frequently as for larger areas, and tend to have large margins of error. Numbers at this level are intended more to give an overall picture of the town and shouldn’t be considered an exact count.

ANCHORAGE

Continued from page 13

ings grew in the 2000s. During the most recent decade, inflation-adjusted earnings rose from \$51,760 in 2000 to \$53,436 to 2013. Anchorage’s per capita income increased from 16 percent above the national average in 2000 to 25 percent higher in 2012. One explanation is the type of employment that grew over the past decade, when both top-earning industries, mining and oil, gained major ground. In contrast, during the 1990s, higher-wage industries fell or remained flat while some of the lower-wage industries grew significantly.

The national recession

The biggest national economic story of the past decade is the Great Recession, the worst trough since the Great Depression of the 1930s. If Alaska operated in a vacuum, this event could be largely ignored or considered a minor blip in the city’s economic history. It wasn’t unscathed, but unlike the trauma the recession caused in most of the U.S., it was what one Alaskan economist called a “glancing blow” for the state. The hardest-hit industries in Anchorage were international air cargo, which still hasn’t recovered, and the real estate market.

Home prices in Anchorage softened in 2007 and 2008,
Continued on page 18