



PARTIAL VIEW OF ALSEA, OREGON

Alsea Community Plan Benton County, Oregon



July 2008

ALSEA RURAL UNINCORPORATED COMMUNITY PLAN

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Chapter 1: Planning Overview

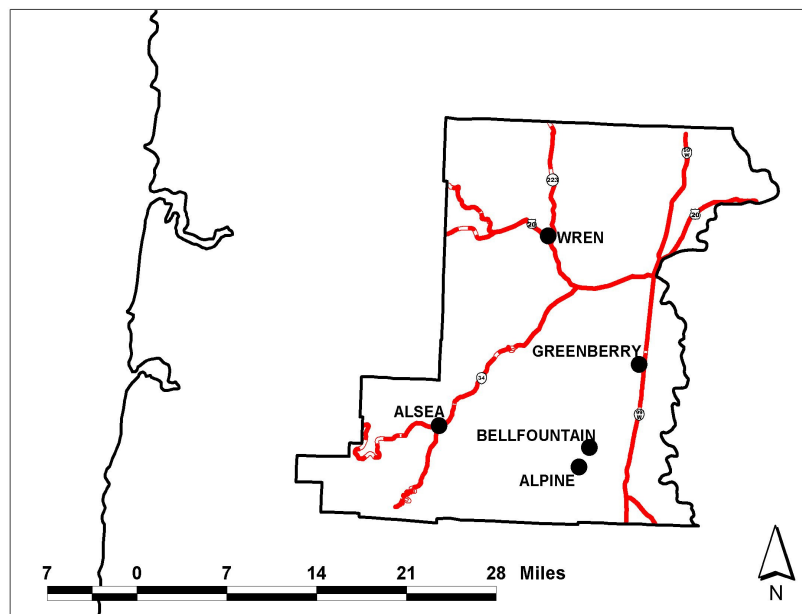
1.1 The Planning Process

In the fall of 1994 the Land Conservation and Development Commission (LCDC) adopted Administrative Rule amendments that established planning and zoning requirements for unincorporated communities outside established Urban Growth Boundaries (OAR 660, Division 22, the “Unincorporated Communities Rule” or “UCR”). The UCR includes criteria for determining the qualifications and boundaries for four types of unincorporated communities: Resort Community, Rural Community, Rural Service Center, and Urban Unincorporated Community.

According to the OAR criteria, Benton County has identified 5 unincorporated communities:

Communities:

- **Alpine**
- **Alsea**
- **Bellfountain**
- **Greenberry**
- **Wren**



The Benton County Department of Community Development has undertaken planning for two of these communities, Wren and Alsea, as part of its periodic review work tasks for 2005. This document details Benton County’s planning process and resulting plan for the community of Alsea.

1.2 Community Type

According to the criteria of the UCR, Alsea is classified as a Rural Community because it consists “... **primarily of residential dwellings but also has at least two other land uses that provide commercial, industrial, or public uses ... to the community, the surrounding rural area, or to persons traveling through the area.**” (OAR 660-022-0010[7]) Alsea consists of 113 parcels, of

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which 23 are zoned Commercial and the remaining 90 Residential. The four operating commercial uses are a general mercantile, gas station, café, and small bed and breakfast. Public uses include the Post Office, Clinic, and Community Center/Library.

1.3 Unincorporated Community Boundary

The community boundary of Alsea was effectively established in the Goal Exception document adopted as part of the Benton County Comprehensive Plan in May 1982. This document acknowledged Goal 3 and 4 exception areas zoned Rural Residential 1-acre minimum and Commercial that were developed and committed to non-resource use. In 1985 the Citizen's Advisory Committee (CAC) initiated a zoning and Comprehensive Plan change to re-zone to residential eleven small parcels contiguous to the RR zone. Subsequently, the Goal Exception map was revised to add the rezoned parcels to the exception area.

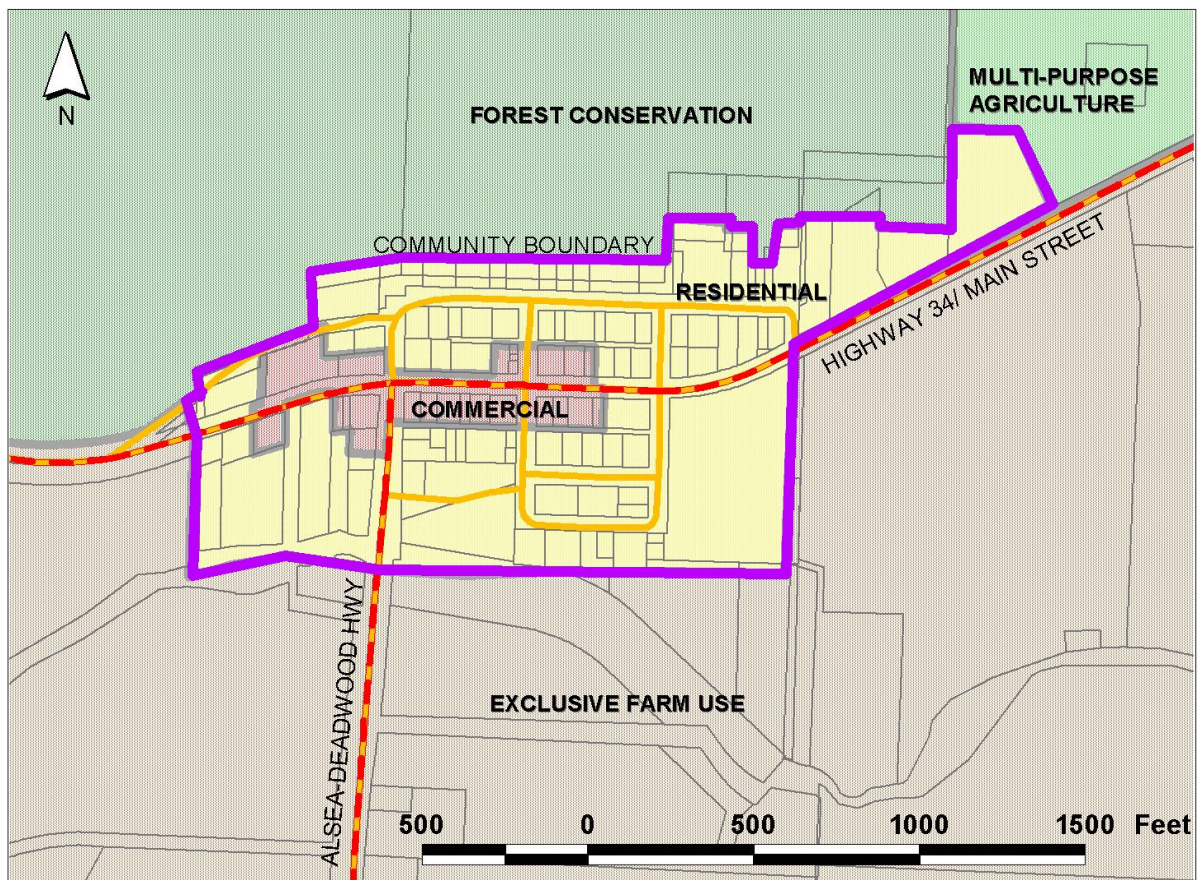


Figure 1 – Community Boundary and Existing Zoning

Consistent with the UCR, Alsea's unincorporated community boundary includes lands acknowledged as Goal 3 and 4 exceptions that are historically considered to be part of the community, which are commercial, industrial or public; or contain dwellings at a density greater than exception lands outside the unincorporated

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community. Lands within Alsea's Community Boundary consist of 19.86 acres: 3.57 acres of Commercial zoning and 16.29 acres of Residential zoning. In 2000 the Alsea Community Center/Library was approved as a conditional use on a 1.05-acre parcel of EFU land adjacent to the community boundary. As an approved use, served by water and an on-site septic system, the library is viewed as an integral part of the community, even though it lies outside the boundary. The boundary of the unincorporated community of Alsea is shown above.

Residents of the entire Alsea Valley region, including Lobster Valley, have been the primary active participants in local community efforts, in the past and currently. Although residents outside the town of Alsea do not fall within the OAR definition of a Rural Unincorporated Community boundary, the community contributions of these individuals will undoubtedly continue to benefit Alsea.

1.4 Public Involvement

Two citizen groups have been influential in the community of Alsea in the past 25 years. The Citizen Advisory Committee (CAC) has a long history of involvement, with a level of activity responding to community needs. Since the early 1990's a citizen organization, Alsea Community Effort (ACE), has formed to spearhead several projects within the community. These two groups have had many members in common, and both have been instrumental in the development of this Community Plan.

Public involvement for the Rural Unincorporated Community Plan began in Alsea in June of 2004 when county staff met with a citizen group composed of ACE board members, local stakeholders, and Oregon Downtown Development Association (ODDA) staff. The purpose of this meeting was to introduce the upcoming planning effort, and explore a partnership among Benton County and citizen groups whose goal was revitalization of downtown Alsea, utilizing a rural development grant from the U.S. Forest Service.

However, a huge community effort was under way at that time: the construction of the Alsea Community Center and Library on lands adjacent to the eastern community boundary. This effort consumed the attention of the active members of ACE, who requested that we resume community involvement after the Library's opening in April of 2005. The USFS grant was put on hold indefinitely, awaiting the availability of volunteers.

On May 5, 2005, planning staff met with the ACE Board of Directors and members to discuss issues related to land use planning in the community. On May 27 another meeting was organized by members of the community to review current activities and future plans at the Alsea Ranger Station, which is now under private ownership. County staff facilitated this meeting by request, and valuable insights were gained into the unique connections between the community and the Ranger Station.

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1.5 Community Survey

A survey to determine community perceptions and preferences was mailed to all businesses and households in Alsea with the June 2005 water and sewer bills. This community survey was designed to be open-ended, allowing a maximum range of response, and preventing respondents from feeling that they were being “led” to pre-arranged answers. Appendix A contains the survey instrument and responses in detail. A return rate of 13% was achieved, and the results of the survey are summarized below. The survey instrument and a detailed list of responses is contained in Appendix A.

What do you feel is the most important issue facing Alsea?

The decrease in school enrollment was seen as an important issue, and many people link this decrease to land use regulation and the economy.

What one thing would you like to see remain the same in Alsea?

Residents like the community involvement and small town rural life, with the addition of the new library. Responses indicate a reluctance to change, balanced by the perceived need for improvement.

If you could change one thing about Alsea, what would it be?

The need to revitalize the local economy is seen as a much-needed change, as well as the need to clean up the town from an aesthetic standpoint.

1.6 Community Open House

A community open house was held in the new Alsea Community Center and Library on June 22, 2005 to discuss the community plan.

Notification of the meeting was sent to all residents within the community boundary via their water and sewer bills, flyers were posted around town, and notice was placed in the Corvallis Gazette Times on June 15 and 20, 2005. The Alsea Valley Voice, a community publication mailed bimonthly to 650 residents of Alsea and Lobster Valleys, contained an article explaining the planning process and alerting residents to the upcoming survey and public open house, and a subsequent article described the meeting and its results. Appendix B contains materials used to publicize the RUC planning effort.

During the open house, attended by 26 community members, staff briefly explained the planning process, and requested input from those in attendance on the topics of how they perceived the main issues facing Alsea, and what they would and would not like to see change. Individual and group input was given (nominal group process for identifying issues and priorities), with sticky dots to provide a weighting technique. A summary of the issues identified, in order of priority, is listed below.

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Needing change

- 1) Change setbacks
- 2) Crosswalk across Highway 34
- 3) Jobs in town are needed
- 4) Maintain streets better
- 5) Roads need repair
- 6) Expand the borders of town
- 7) Enforce speed limits in town
- 8) Deputy sheriff presence
- 9) Develop arts tourism
- 10) Too many land use restrictions
- 11) Clean up town
- 12) Youth center, Boys and Girls Club
- 13) Need more good families
- 14) Senior center
- 15) Streetlights
- 16) Need better stormwater management
- 17) Need more tourism
- 18) Need multi-family dwellings
- 19) Change zoning to allow recreation
- 20) Too much late night activity
- 21) Establish a Farmer's Market
- 22) More social events
- 23) Establish a food bank
- 24) Give no more variances
- 25) Open blocked alleys

Good, do not change

- 1) Library and Clinic
- 2) Good school, fire department, EMT
- 3) Hope Grange
- 4) Good level of tourism
- 5) Alsea River
- 6) Peace and quiet
- 7) Caring neighbors
- 8) Good people
- 9) Small size of town
- 10) Presence of Gleaners
- 11) Commercial space available
- 12) Natural beauty
- 13) Clean air
- 14) Industrial land available nearby
- 15) Good sense of community
- 16) Low crime rate



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Chapter 2: Community Profile

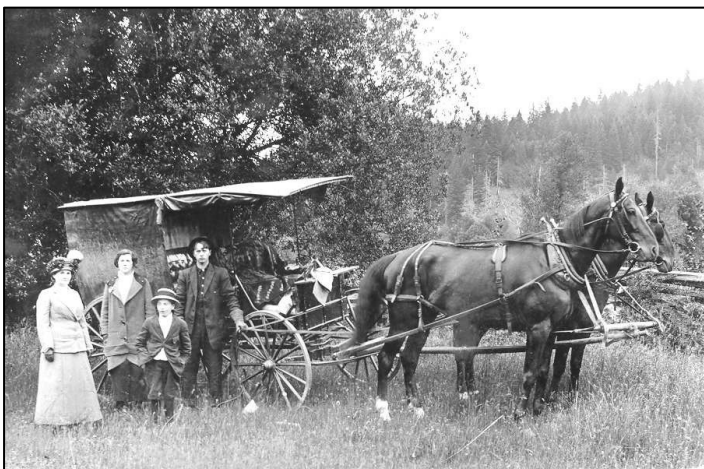
2.1 Physical Setting

The community of Alsea is located in Oregon's Coast Range, about 25 miles west of Corvallis on Oregon Highway 34 at the junction of Highway 201, the Alsea-Deadwood Highway. Nestled in a bend of the Alsea River where the valley widens, Alsea is surrounded by rich farmlands that are bounded by steep forested slopes. From the summit of the Coast Range on the slopes of Marys Peak about nine miles east, the Alsea River flows into Alsea Bay at Waldport on the Pacific Ocean.

2.2 History

The region was named for the Alsea Indians who occupied the area prior to pioneer settlement. Most of the prime farmland in the Alsea River Valley was claimed by 1855, chosen for farm purposes by people with agricultural backgrounds. By the late 1800's a village began to grow at the town site, and agricultural products were shipped downstream to Alsea Bay and upstream to Corvallis via the Marys River by flat-bottomed scows, which were then disassembled and sold for lumber. The Alsea area was known for its hams, butter, and flour. Gristmills and sawmills were built along the rivers that powered them, and in 1853 the first sawmill was established in the Alsea area.

The town of Alsea was platted in 1908, and within a few years it had become the service center for western Benton County, boasting a general store, bank, pool hall, feed store, hardware store, café, telephone exchange, creamery, candy store, skating rink, and gas station.



Because it was relatively isolated from the Willamette Valley, accessed only by horse drawn coach or horseback, Alsea became an important commercial center, providing the only mercantile between Philomath and Waldport.

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Even after the advent of the motorcar, the long trip to Alsea via curving mountain roads was not an endeavor to be undertaken lightly.



In 1909 the valley's three local schools were the first rural schools in Oregon to consolidate, as well as the first to provide bussing of schoolchildren, using horse drawn "kiddiewagons".



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2.3 Economics

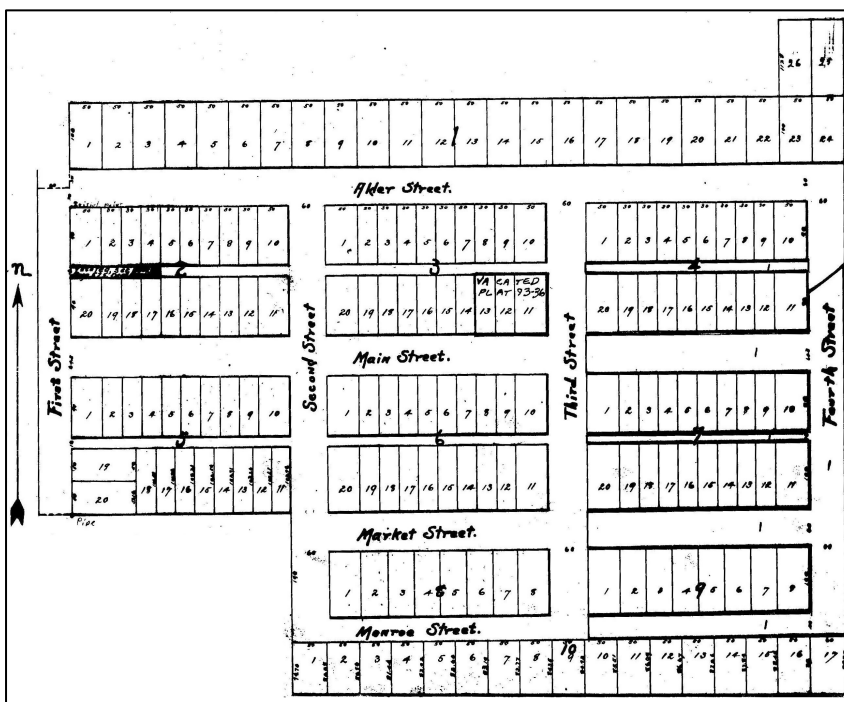
The 1920's saw a steady increase in the importance of timber in the economy, and despite the Depression, the industry continued to grow, becoming the mainstay of Alsea's economy in the post-war era. The paving of Highway 34 from Corvallis to the coast in 1951 ended the isolation that had characterized Alsea, bringing visitors to the area and allowing residents more social and economic options.

Located 0.7 miles west of Alsea on Highway 34, the U.S. Forest Service District Ranger Station provided many opportunities for employment, as well as a visitor's center, and a locus for the operation of various community service organizations. However, decline in the local timber industry and the closure of the last of the area mills in the early 1980's led to the announcement in 1995 that the Alsea Ranger Station was scheduled for closure.

The Alsea Ranger Station was sold in 2004, and is now under private ownership. The future use of this 24-acre station with multiple residential and commercial buildings is uncertain at this time, but its distance from other residential and commercial centers may indicate that its greatest potential lies in maintaining its historic connection to the community of Alsea.

From its heyday at the height of the timber boom commercial activity has dwindled, and today businesses still in operation on Alsea's Main Street are outnumbered by vacant commercial buildings.

2.4 Community Form



The 1908 plat of the town of Alsea created 179 lots in a grid pattern, in sizes ranging from 2700 to 5000 square feet, with streets 60 feet, and alleys 16 feet wide.

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Constrained by steep slopes on the north and the Alsea River on the south, the town expanded east and west along Highway 34 in subsequent years, adding about 17 acres to the town.

Today the Unincorporated Community Boundary includes the 1982 Goal Exception area of 16.29 acres in addition to 7.86 acres added in 1985, to total 19.86 acres.

2.5 Buildable Land

The historic plat of Alsea created lots 50x100 feet and 30x100 feet in size, presenting constraints for residential development, especially when considering current trends in home size. Over the years most of the original lots have been combined or reconfigured to allow siting of a residence, and only a few of the smallest platted lots remain.

An inventory of lands within the Alsea Unincorporated Community Boundary shows that of a total of 113 parcels, 6 vacant parcels zoned Commercial and 7 vacant parcels zoned Rural Residential exist. Several of the vacant parcels are currently being used as accessory to adjacent parcels, for example as driveways or parking. A few vacant parcels are of such small size that their use for development is unlikely unless they are reconfigured or combined. For these reasons it is likely that only a few of the vacant parcels in Alsea are candidates for development.

Although several parcels contain grandfathered uses that do not comply with current zoning, most development in Alsea is consistent with zoning, as the table below illustrates.

Current Land Use	Zoning	Developed Parcels	Vacant Parcels
Residential	RR-2	69	7
Commercial	C	4 businesses in operation 6 closed, not in use	6
Residential	C	1	
Commercial	RR-2	1 (bed & breakfast)	
Public	C	2 (post office, old library building)	
Public	RR-2	4 (health clinic, school, bus barn, fire station)	
Public	EFU	1 (new library, not in RUC boundary)	

Zoning and Land Use

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2.6 Public Facilities

Background

Alsea's community water system was constructed in 1952, drawing water from the Alsea River. The gallery intake systems at the river were later replaced by wells, and wastewater treatment was by individual on-site septic disposal systems. In 1963 Alsea launched an effort to incorporate as a city for the specific purpose of developing a municipal water system of good quality. The problems, which arose from wells and septic systems on Alsea's small lots, were highlighted in this excerpt from an engineering report prepared for the town in 1964:

“A high percentage of dwellings have their wells and septic tanks located within rather close proximity to each other. The housewife can determine if her well supply is of low chemical quality by viewing the results of her laundering operation. Unfortunately, however, she cannot determine, by simple observation, if her family is consuming water that passed through her neighbor's septic tank only a few days before.”

Although Alsea was never incorporated as a city, health hazard problems continued to be identified and became more frequent, until the water and sewer district was organized in 1983 to manage operations. In 1986 grant funding helped complete improvements to the water delivery system and to construct the community sewer system.

In 1997 a Rural Economic and Community Development grant and low-interest loan package funded major improvements to the water and sewer system. The project included construction of a second 30,000-gallon storage reservoir to provide increased fire flow as well as a five-day emergency supply of drinking water. These funds were provided as part of the Pacific Northwest Economic Adjustment Initiative, which targeted timber dependent communities.

Current Condition

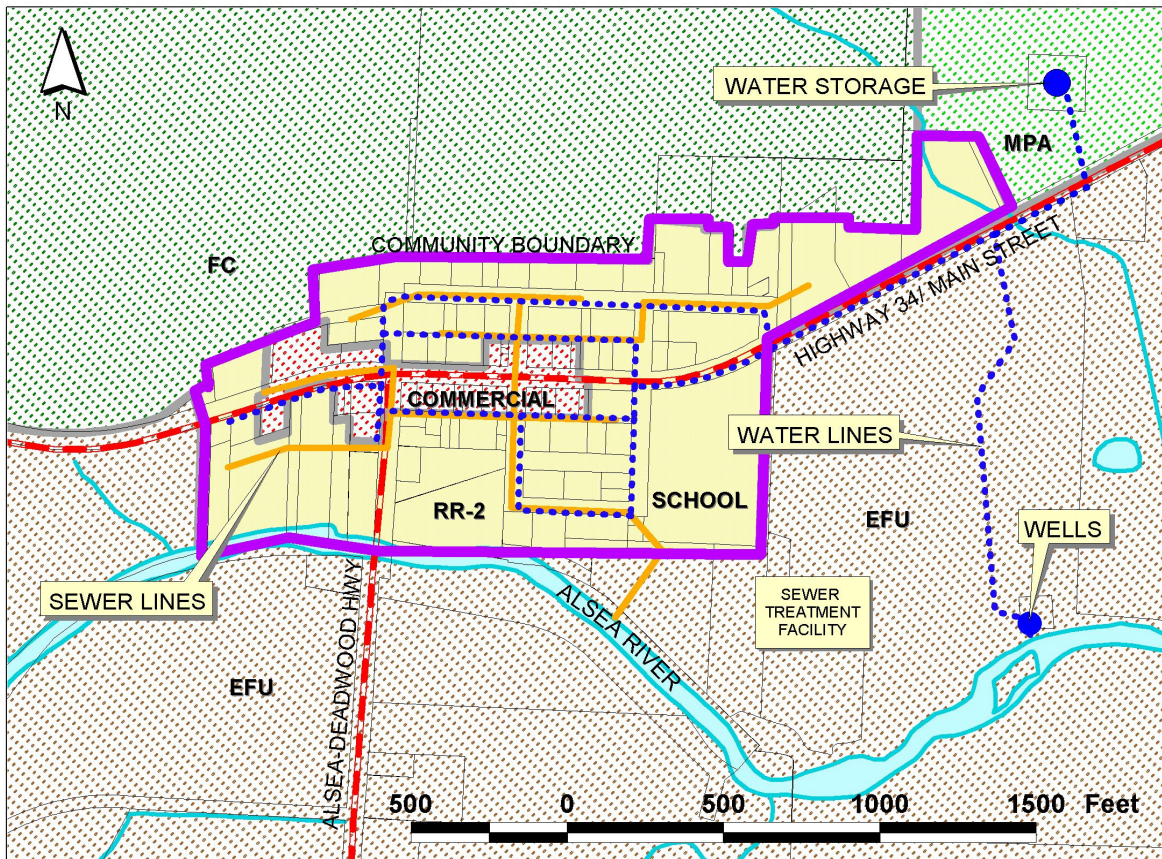
Water and sewer service to properties within the Rural Unincorporated Community boundary are provided by the Alsea Service District, an independent municipal corporation. The Benton County Board of Commissioners sits as its governing body, and the county Public Works Department manages daily operations, customer billing, and provides staff support. A three-member local advisory board meets annually to review District operations and make recommendations to the governing body. The county Finance Office provides treasury and financial management services, and the budget process is coordinated by the county Budget Office. The county is reimbursed for these services by district funds.

Cooperative agreements between the water and sewer service districts and Benton County were signed and recorded in 1984 and 1986. These agreements

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establish rules, responsibilities, and procedures for operation on the service districts. The agreements are included as Appendix C.

Today two wells serving the community are located near the river, just east of town. From these wells water is pumped to the storage reservoirs from which a gravity delivery system feeds the town. The sewer treatment facility is located near the river, southeast of the school. The map below illustrates locations of these facilities.



Needs Assessment

Currently the district provides water and sewer services to 83 customers within the RUC boundary, and water alone to the new library, adjacent to the community boundary. During periods of normal rainfall, the sewer plant operates at about two-thirds capacity, therefore capacity exists for additional sewer connections to serve the vacant parcels. The Alsea Service District manager has confirmed that existing water supplies are more than adequate to serve additional households and businesses, in the event of development of the community's 13 remaining vacant parcels.

Peak capacity at the wastewater treatment facility has occasionally been reached during periods of intense rainfall, due to inflow and infiltration of stormwater to the sewer lines. Benton County Public Works engineers have proposed to alleviate

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this problem by constructing a system that will separately collect and convey only stormwater to a constructed wetland for treatment prior to discharge into the Alsea River. To fund implementation of this stormwater treatment system, in coming years Benton County will submit a grant proposal to the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board (OWEB) and the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ).

This project, when completed, will benefit the town of Alsea by insuring capacity in the treatment plant, and preventing contamination of the river during storm events, as well as providing an educational component to the Alsea School. Proposed for school property immediately south of the school building, the wetland would be the site of a community stormwater “lab” for Alsea students. This project will require approval of the Alsea School District Board.

Chapter 3: Community Goals and Policies

As a result of the community survey and meetings held in Alsea, and based upon knowledge of the processes affecting the region, staff has identified 4 broad community goals for Alsea. Specific policies supporting these goals will become part of the Benton County Comprehensive Plan, and the county will develop Development Code regulations to implement the adopted policies. Proposed Development Code sections are contained in Appendix D.

Goal 1: Alsea will have a thriving business community, providing goods and services to locals and travelers.

Goal 2: Alsea will be an attractive, safe, pedestrian friendly town.

Goal 3: Alsea will be the home of families and individuals who enjoy the friendly small town atmosphere.

Goal 4: Alsea residents will work together to maintain and improve the quality of the community.

Goal 1: Alsea will have a thriving business community, providing goods and services to locals and tourists.

Policy 1.a: Benton County shall work with* local business owners, community organizations, and agencies to create a supportive atmosphere for existing businesses in Alsea.

**Note: “work with”, as used within these goals, includes recognition of community vision, administrative assistance, participation in inter-agency partnerships, and facilitation of community efforts to achieve stated goals.*

Policy 1.b: Benton County shall refine the commercial and residential zoning designations for Alsea to enhance opportunities for existing and new businesses to locate there.

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Policy 1.c: Benton County shall work with property owners, community organizations, and agencies to improve the attractiveness of downtown Alsea.

Goal 2: Alsea will be an attractive, safe, pedestrian friendly town.

Policy 2.a: Benton County shall work with the Oregon Department of Transportation to decrease auto traffic speeds and improve the safety of pedestrians and bicyclists within the boundary of Alsea.

Policy 2.b: Benton County shall work with residents, community organizations and agencies to develop and implement programs to identify opportunities for clean-up and improvement of Alsea properties.

Policy 2.c: Benton County shall work with residents, property owners, and community groups to develop a pedestrian plan for Alsea, providing safe links between important community destinations.

Goal 3: Alsea will be the home of families and individuals who enjoy the friendly small town atmosphere.

Policy 3.a: Benton County recognizes the importance of the local school to Alsea, and will support efforts of the community to attract families to Alsea.

Policy 3.b: Benton County shall refine the residential zoning designations for Alsea to provide opportunities for family housing.

Policy 3.c: Benton County shall work with local property owners, community groups, and housing agencies to explore opportunities for development of reasonably priced and attractive family housing.

Goal 4: Alsea residents will work together to maintain and improve the quality of the community.

Policy 4.a: Benton County recognizes the importance of local community groups in the process of community-building, and will support efforts directed at improvement of Alsea's quality of life.

Policy 4.b: Benton County shall work with local community groups and property owners, the local school board, and the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality to improve the stormwater collection system in Alsea.

Policy 4.c: Benton County will work with local community organizations, property owners, contributing agencies and residents to maintain and enhance Alsea's small town atmosphere.

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Policy 4.d: Benton County will work with local organizations, community groups, residents, and property owners to protect and enhance the historical and environmental assets of the Alsea community.

Chapter 4: Community Zoning

4.1 Zoning Background

Zoning was first applied to the Alsea area in 1974, when lands north of Highway 34 were zoned Agriculture/Forestry (AF), and south of the highway were zoned Exclusive Farm Use (EFU). In 1979 the AF lands were changed to Forest Conservation (FC) and the town of Alsea was zoned Commercial along Main Street (Highway 34), Public on the school property, and Rural Residential 1-acre (RR-1) on the residential lots. In 1982 the FC lands were rezoned Multi-Purpose Agriculture (MPA), a zone specific to parcels engaged in small-scale agriculture in the Alsea and Lobster Valleys.

An exception to Goals 3 and 4 for Alsea was approved in 1982, with the adoption of Benton County's Comprehensive Plan, and in 1985 the Alsea CAC initiated a rezoning of several small parcels of land (7.86 acres in total) adjacent to the perimeter of the Goal Exception Area. The rezoning changed EFU, FC, and MPA lands to Rural Residential and Commercial, and they were added to the Goal Exception Area.

Changes to Goal 14 in 2000, implemented through Oregon Administrative Rules (OAR), required that Rural Residential lands outside of Unincorporated Communities recognize a minimum parcel size of 2 acres. In effect, this imposed a 2-acre minimum parcel size on the RR-1 zoning of Alsea; however, no parcels exist in the RR zone that are large enough to partition, with the exception of the school site.

4.2 Current Zoning

Alsea's community boundary currently contains 16.29 acres of Rural Residential zoning and 3.57 acres of Commercial. Please refer to the zoning map on page 2, and the zoning and land use chart on page 9.

4.3 Proposed Zoning Changes

In keeping with the identified community goals, several zoning changes are proposed for the rural unincorporated community of Alsea. The goals as described in Chapter 3 are:

- ... a thriving business community
- ... an attractive, safe, pedestrian friendly town
- ... the home of families, small town atmosphere

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... community participation

The zoning proposed for Alsea recognizes the independence of this community due to its location, and also its rural small-town character. Few buildable vacant residential lots currently exist, but many existing residences are older manufactured homes with a high likelihood of replacement in the near future.

The existing RR-2 zone requires setbacks more appropriate for larger acreage than they are for the compact residential pattern in Alsea. The existing RR-2 setbacks generally result in the necessity of obtaining a variance in order to site a dwelling. The proposed Village Residential zone will reduce setback distances, allow greater flexibility in home business and cottage industry uses, and conditionally allow multi-family development.

The existing Commercial zone is applied throughout Benton County, and does not address the need of a rural community such as Alsea to function as an independent entity with a high degree of self-sufficiency. The existing Commercial zone also fails to recognize the limitations of a business district that was platted in an earlier time and intended to function as a neighborhood, pedestrian downtown. Although Alsea businesses also serve the needs of travelers who arrive by auto, parking requirements designed for suburban development are impossible to achieve without negatively impacting the village character of downtown Alsea.

The proposed Village Commercial zone will recognize the historic village character of downtown Alsea, and the primary need of businesses in this zone to serve the needs of the neighborhood. Pedestrian and bicycle uses are common in Alsea, and contribute to the friendly, small-town atmosphere. Siting standards in the Village Commercial zone will assure that new commercial development enhances the walkable character of the community, while providing for the needs of those traveling by auto.

Development Code additions of Village Residential and Village Commercial zones are detailed in Appendix D.

Chapter 5: Additional Strategies for Reaching Goals

5.1 Transportation Planning

Transportation planning issues are among the chief concerns identified through public input and staff analysis. The need for a crosswalk was repeatedly noted by residents at public meetings, and is typical of citizen concerns in communities where Main Street is a state highway. As part of the zone changes, downtown revitalization, and economic development strategies for Alsea, a transportation

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plan will be essential. This plan will identify pedestrian destinations, examine opportunities for linkages, and recommend strategies to minimize conflicts between pedestrians/bicyclists and autos. Enhancement of the pedestrian experience will benefit residents, as well as increasing attractiveness of the community to tourism.

The Alsea transportation plan will be developed by planning staff in coordination with residents, staff transportation engineer, and Oregon Department of Transportation planners.

5.2 Downtown Revitalization

Downtown Alsea once contained a thriving business district, due to the relative isolation of the community and self-sufficiency imposed by the lack of easy transportation routes. Today only three businesses are in operation, with vacant commercial property and empty storefronts serving as reminders of better days. Early in 2004, recognizing the need to re-envision and revitalize Alsea's downtown, ACE sought a Rural Community Development grant from the U.S. Forest Service.

Oregon Downtown Development Association (ODDA) was selected to manage the downtown revitalization process. In a June meeting with ACE and ODDA representatives, county staff expressed willingness to coordinate the RUC planning process with ODDA's process for maximum benefit to the community. However, pressing needs related to construction of the new library required the attention of ACE members, and the downtown project was put on hold.

With completion of the library, downtown revitalization is once again an ACE priority, and Benton County will work with the residents of Alsea and the ODDA team to assure that design recommendations of the ODDA team are consistent with the zoning regulations proposed for downtown Alsea. Appendix E contains results of ACE's 2004 community meeting and a description of the grant project.

5.3 Economic Development

The economy of Alsea is the primary concern of residents and business owners. The interrelationships of business, land use, transportation, housing, and population dynamics are complex and interdependent. The isolation that once characterized Alsea has been replaced by a paved state highway that places the community within an hour's drive of Corvallis or Waldport. The economy of Alsea can now include tourist-oriented business, and many local entrepreneurs have proposed developing a niche marketing strategy for the region.

Oregon Economic and Community Development Department (OECDD) has expressed interest in assisting the Alsea region in exploring opportunities for

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expanding the economic base. Benton County will work with OECDD and ODDA in efforts to re-establish a strong economy in Alsea.

Appendices

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Special thanks to the staff of the Benton County Historical Museum, who provided valuable assistance with historical information and photographs.
