

Denali Borough's eclectic economy

Park tourism, coal, and military gel around a major highway

By SARA WHITNEY

Over 12,700 square miles in Alaska's Interior, the Denali Borough encompasses a broad section of Denali National Park and Preserve and a narrow corridor of the George Parks Highway connecting Anchorage and Fairbanks.

Although the borough is more vast than nine states — it would fall between Maryland and West Virginia in size — the small stretch of the Parks is where nearly all residents live. That corridor is book-ended by Anderson to the north and Cantwell to the south, with Healy, the largest community and winter hub, in the middle.

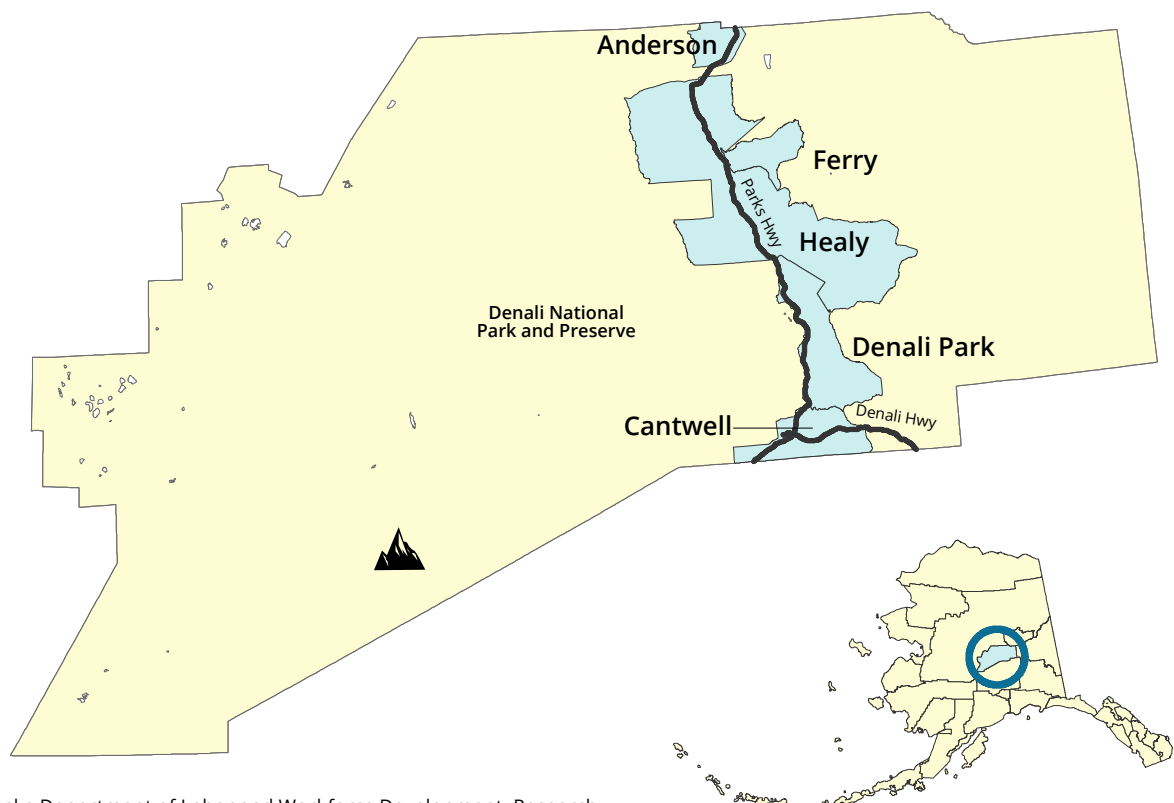
Within the borough are three discrete but

sympiotic economies: the smaller energy- and military-based economies around the Parks Highway and the booming tourism stoked by Denali National Park and Preserve.

Three pillars: Denali National Park, coal mining, and military

Denali National Park and Preserve is home to the highest mountain in North America, and its visitor industry is supported by the communities around the park's entrance. Denali, Koyukon for "The High One," draws hundreds of thousands of visitors into the heart of Alaska every year. About 60 percent make their way into the Interior from cruise ships

Denali Borough is larger than Maryland, centered around Parks Highway



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

that visit Southeast.

The park was established in 1917 by President Woodrow Wilson as Alaska's first national park. However, the area's history began with nomadic Alaska Native groups using the area for subsistence for millennia. Miners eventually struck coal, and camps sprang up around what is now Healy in 1902.

The Alaska Railroad enabled further settlement in the 1920s, allowing the coal mining industry to expand into the middle of the 20th century. As the century progressed, the railroad further supported an explosion in tourism, transporting growing numbers of visitors into the park.

Federal military investment arrived during the Cold War with the construction of Clear Air Force Station, now Clear Space Force Station. The station operates radar systems that detect ballistic missile launches, support U.S. missile defense, and track objects in Earth's orbit.

About 80 active-duty service members are stationed at Clear. The installation also employs nearly 40 civilians and hires contractors in the area.

Population triples in summer, but Healy is year-round foundation

While the entire area booms in the summer and Healy's population more than triples, Healy also anchors the year-round economy with Usibelli Coal Mine, which has operated there since the 1940s.

Usibelli, Alaska's only coal mine, has more than 100 employees and recovers between 1.2 and 2 million tons of coal per year. That coal supplies six Interior power plants, including Clear Space Force Station and the two Fairbanks-area bases, Fort Wainwright and Eielson Air Force Base.

Denali Borough population, 2020-25

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Denali Borough	1,619	1,656	1,639	1,664	1,606	1,631
Anderson	177	227	244	246	232	241
Cantwell	200	196	196	198	189	188
Denali Park	163	160	149	156	139	149
Ferry	17	17	17	17	15	14
Healy	966	944	927	941	933	940
Balance	96	112	106	106	98	99

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

Borough jobs often seasonal, 2025

Industry	Annual jobs	Jan jobs	July jobs
Total, All Industries	2,062	947	3,718
Total Private	1,738	652	3,369
Leisure and Hospitality	1,075	148	2,512
Accommodation and Food Svcs	963	121	2,270
Arts, Entertainment, Rec	112	27	242
Trade, Transportation, and Utilities	258	159	3,191
Retail Trade	138	63	226
Sporting, Hobby, Music Instruments	31	*	69
Scenic and Sightseeing	26	14	51
Transit and Ground Passenger	6	*	7
Professional and Business Services	203	178	236
Administrative and Waste Services	188	170	206
Professional, Scientific, Tech	15	8	30
Construction	40	24	62
Financial Activities	14	8	21
Total Government	325	295	329
Federal Government	185	150	234
Local Government/Public Schools	119	125	93
State Government	21	20	22

*Suppressed for confidentiality
Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section

International coal exports ended in 2016 as overseas demand declined. The Alaska Railroad eventually sold the specialized railcars needed to haul coal to the export terminal in Seward. In the past, however, Usibelli supplied coal to Chile, South Korea, Japan, and several Pacific Rim areas.

The next-largest towns after Healy are Cantwell and the incorporated city of Anderson, which has some year-round government employment. (See the table below for the rest of the borough's communities and their population trajectories.)

Other small places mainly provide tourism infrastructure and seasonal employment near the park's entrance.

Highly seasonal, borough's jobs are dominated by tourism

The area's job numbers and industries reflect these large seasonal swings. The table above gives the yearly employment averages by industry, but looking at the peak and low months tells a more complete story.

The entire borough is home to around 1,600 people and averaged 2,062 total jobs in 2025, but the employment peaked in July at 3,718 jobs. The

vast majority were linked to tourism, with 2,512 in leisure and hospitality. Of those, 2,270 were in accommodation and food services.

In contrast, the job count fell to 947 during the January lull, with 295 of those in government. The summer powerhouse, leisure and hospitality, provided just 148 jobs at the winter low.

Most of the borough's federal employment is also connected to the park. The largest agency by far is the National Park Service, with monthly employment ranging from 102 in December to 189 in August.

For local government, the Denali Borough School District is the largest employer at close to 100 jobs throughout the year.

State government is small, and mostly in the Department of Transportation and Public Facilities.

Tourism taxes fund most of the borough's operations

The borough is almost entirely funded by tourism, with its overnight accommodations tax bringing in \$5.7 million in fiscal year 2025, making up 79 percent of its total general fund revenues.

It has no sales tax, but alcohol, marijuana, and severance taxes made up an additional 7 percent.

Visitor patterns at the park and the challenge of permafrost melting

Denali National Park received about 543,300 visitors in 2025, a visitor count second in Alaska only to Glacier Bay, a major cruise ship destination in Southeast near Gustavus.

Denali's visitor count took a hit early this decade, dropping from about 601,150 in 2019 to just 54,850



Entrance to Denali National Park, photo by Flickr user [Marco Giazzi](#).

in 2020, the first COVID-19 year. Visitor numbers have climbed each year since, and in 2025, the count reached about 90 percent of its pre-pandemic level.

The park's drop in visitors wasn't just due to COVID, however. A landslide that had been advancing slowly for decades, Pretty Rocks, finally overtook the single road into the park in 2021, limiting vehicle access beyond the slide point. The road is scheduled to reopen in 2027.

The landslide was the most visible obstacle and expense resulting from years of permafrost melting with a warming climate, as the shifting ground caused the landslide to accelerate.

That instability has taken a toll on the roads, too. In a 2022 Planning and Environmental Linkages study, DOT&PF reported that the Cantwell-Healy corridor of the Parks has persistent maintenance problems caused by frost heaves, drainage problems, and unstable ground.

Its study recommended major reconstruction projects, noting that patching is no longer the most effective long-term strategy. These problems are increasingly common with highways throughout the permafrost-heavy Interior.

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