
VITF Comment

From Logan Miller

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To City Clerk <City.Clerk@juneau.gov>; Borough Assembly <BoroughAssembly@juneau.gov>

EXTERNAL E-MAIL: BE CAUTIOUS WHEN OPENING FILES OR FOLLOWING LINKS

Dear Fellow Community Members and Members of the Visitor Industry Task Force:

My entire life, there have been cruise ships in Juneau.

My family moved here in 1993, when I was a baby.

In 1995, there were 380,600 cruise ship passengers.

In 2002, there were 741,500.

In 2006, 951,400.

For most of my childhood, Juneau saw less than 1,000,000 passengers per year. That's about 6,000-7,000 passengers per day during May through September. Or roughly 2 to 3 medium-sized cruise ships each day.

I've always known summer in Juneau to come with the occasional drone of sightseeing planes and helicopters, and a slight increase in whale-watching boat traffic. I remember downtown getting busier, and as a kid I enjoyed marveling at the large ships tied up to the docks.

I left Juneau as a teenager in 2008, and recently moved back with my family, returning to the place I love so much and hoping to put down roots.

But the town I've always known as home has changed dramatically.

In 2024--the year I moved back--there were 1,677,935 cruise ship passengers. Most days of the summer there were 5 massive ships.

The once-occasional drone of seaplanes and helicopters is now a near-constant roar.

I watch swarms of whale-watching boats chasing humpbacks and orcas around the local waters.

The streets and sidewalks of downtown Juneau are frequently choked with cruise passengers. Driving through downtown has become an ordeal.

Housing has become scarce due to all the seasonal workers and AirBnbs for tourists. Downtown rent is inflated, making survival difficult for local small businesses that don't cater to tourists.

What's most disappointing is that Juneau often doesn't feel like a community anymore. Walking through downtown on summer days, it feels like I am walking through a strange city full of people I've never seen.

On top of this, there are plans to continue expanding---building new docks downtown and out North Douglas.

It sometimes feels like a hopeless situation; like my home is being sold out so cruise ship and tour corporations can endlessly expand their profits.

When I began to tune into the local tourism debate, I was surprised by the rhetoric.

I noticed how many locals insisted that the huge number of cruise ship passengers was necessary and good for our economy. I remember a thriving Juneau that welcomed less than 1,000,000 passengers per year. What changed?

Wanting to learn more, I read through the 2023 McKinley Research Group [report](#) on the *Economic Impact of Juneau's Cruise Industry*.

The report says that in 2023, a year with 1.67 million passengers, the "cruise industry accounted for \$375 million in direct spending in Juneau." The report said that the "cruise industry was associated with 3,850 jobs."

That sounds like a lot.

But it doesn't answer some important questions that many Juneau residents have.

How many of those jobs are worked by local people? And how many of the summer workers just leave town and take their money with them?

How much of the tourist spending actually stays in Juneau? And how much of the spending goes to jewelry stores and tour companies owned by outside corporations?

As far as I can tell, there's never been a report about the actual economic impact for Juneau residents.

But I'm not going to suggest that we need one.

A new report would cost a lot of money and it would tell us what we already know: Most of the tourism money doesn't stay in Juneau.

That's no surprise.

That's the way Alaska's whole economy is designed.

To see what that means, let's take a big step back.

Since the first Russians arrived in Alaska several hundred years ago, Alaska's economy has been one of corporate extraction.

Alaska's resources are exploited by outsiders, shipped away, and sold for profit.

This happened with furs. It happened with the salmon canning industry. It happened with mining. And logging. Then oil and gas. And trawling. And now it's happening with tourism.

At every stage of Alaska's economic history, huge, for-profit corporations from outside have come to Alaska seeking to get rich off the natural resources.

Alaskans, for the most part, have gone along with it, content to settle for the crumbs the corporations leave behind.

Some important exceptions include historical and ongoing Indigenous resistance to colonization, and those working toward a more sustainable economy.

But by and large, Alaskans have been eager to sell out the state's resources for a small slice of the pie. Just look at the recent LNG pipeline tax break debacle.

I'm not claiming to be above the problem. I've benefited from this system, and only in recent years have I begun to think critically about it.

I'm a descendant of settler-colonists. I've worked in commercial fishing and mining. I now work for the State, which is funded largely by oil.

I understand that people need jobs, and, in today's Alaska, most jobs come directly or indirectly from resource extraction.

But I hope there will come a time when Alaskans decide we don't want to just be a doormat for corporate wealth.

Someday, we could take back control of our economy and make sure that it provides for Alaskans first.

We could move away from corporate resource extraction, and take care of the place we live.

We did it with salmon when we banned fish traps so that we could have sustainable salmon runs.

We did it with logging when we limited the clear-cutting of old-growth forests in the Tongass.

And now we could do it with tourism, in Juneau.

The voluntary agreements to cap passenger numbers are a positive step.

But they are not nearly enough.

For-profit corporations, by their nature, will try to maximize their profits at our expense.

So it's up to us to set limits and enforce them.

Here's a simple idea: Let's shoot for 1,000,000 passengers per year.

That's 2 to 3 mid-size cruise ships per day.

Plenty to sustain a thriving tourism economy. But not so much that our community is diluted and polluted.

We could learn from places like Bhutan and the Azores -- regions that have created thriving economies with high value, low volume tourism.

We could follow the example of Bar Harbor, Maine, which successfully defended corporate lawsuits against its reasonable cruise passenger limits.

It doesn't have to happen all at once. We can plan for a gradual decrease over time.

Here's another idea: We could tax sightseeing tours---whale watching, helicopter flights, bus tours, etc.

A tour tax could create revenue for the city, incentivize low volume/high value tours, and limit tourism impacts.

By setting reasonable limits, we can begin to reclaim our integrity, and reclaim our home.

Will there be challenges during the transition? Of course.

Will there be lawsuits by the corporations? Almost certainly.

But we can handle it. And I think we should give it a go.

Because the future of our home depends on it.

Thank you,

Logan Miller