From: Deborah Rakos
To: City Clerk
Subject: Response to Draft of VITF
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Public Comment Regarding Helicopter Flightseeing and Community Noise Impacts

Thank you for the opportunity to provide additional comments on the Visitor Industry Task Force's recommendations regarding helicopter flightseeing.

I submitted comments in August expressing my concerns about the increasing helicopter noise during the summer tour season. Unfortunately, these concerns remain, and I believe it is important to reiterate them as the Task Force considers its recommendations and next steps.

I live near the airport, so I understand that some aircraft noise comes with that location. I expect to hear planes taking off and landing. However, helicopter noise is an entirely different issue. During the summer tour season, the frequency and volume of helicopter traffic have become increasingly disruptive and, at times, unbearable.

There are currently two operators using the airport for arrivals and departures, and they frequently arrive in groups and depart in groups. On busy cruise ship days, the noise can be nearly continuous. When Thunder Mountain is obscured, additional operators may fly over the area, further contributing to the problem.

This is not an occasional disturbance. It is persistent, intrusive noise that affects our ability to enjoy our homes, spend time outside, and experience the peace and quiet that makes living in Alaska so special. The helicopter noise is often loud enough to be heard inside our homes, meaning that even going indoors does not provide relief. The constant noise has become an intrusion into our daily lives, not simply an inconvenience when we are outside.

I am encouraged that the Visitor Industry Task Force has acknowledged that the status quo needs to be addressed and has recommended a new noise study, seasonal monitoring, community data collection, and an evaluation of alternative heliport locations. I strongly support these recommendations. However, I want to emphasize that these efforts must lead to meaningful action. Documenting the problem is important, but simply studying it without implementing solutions will not improve the situation for residents.

1. Noise reduction and helicopter technology

The proposed study comparing current and older helicopters with the H130 is important.

However, I would like to see the study evaluate not only differences between aircraft but also the cumulative impact of helicopter frequency, flight patterns, and the concentration of operations during busy cruise ship days. The goal should be measurable noise reduction for the surrounding community.

I would also like to see the study consider whether limiting the number of flights during peak periods, staggering departures, or making other operational changes could meaningfully reduce noise.

2. Operating hours and accountability

The TBMP guidelines indicate that helicopter operators should operate between 8:00 a.m. and 7:00 p.m. I have personally witnessed flights departing after 7:00 p.m.

Are these hours voluntary guidelines or enforceable expectations? How are they monitored, and what happens when operators do not follow them? Residents need a clear process for reporting concerns and confidence that those concerns will be addressed.

3. Flight paths and sensitive areas

The guidelines also indicate that helicopters should stay away from Spaulding Meadows. I hiked to the John Muir Cabin twice this summer, and on both occasions helicopters flew directly overhead. This raises questions about compliance with existing recommendations and whether additional protections are needed for areas where residents and visitors go to enjoy the natural environment.

I would like to see designated routes and altitude recommendations evaluated to reduce noise over residential neighborhoods and popular recreational areas, to the extent permitted by aviation safety requirements.

4. Learning from other Alaska communities

I would encourage the Task Force to examine how other Alaska communities have addressed helicopter impacts through their policies and agreements with commercial operators.

Haines Borough, for example, has established specific operating expectations for permitted commercial heli-skiing operations. These include flight-route expectations, altitude guidance, separation distances from recreational users and wildlife, GPS flight data collection, compliance spot checks, and complaint investigations.

Although these policies apply to permitted heli-skiing rather than all helicopter flightseeing, they demonstrate that more specific operational expectations and monitoring mechanisms can be developed at the local level.

I believe Juneau should examine which elements of the Haines approach could be adapted to its flightseeing industry. In particular, GPS-based flight monitoring, designated routes, altitude recommendations, and a transparent complaint and compliance process deserve serious consideration.

The fact that another Alaska community has taken steps to monitor and manage commercial

helicopter activity should encourage us to explore similar approaches.

5. Alternative heliport locations

I strongly support a serious evaluation of alternative heliport locations. If relocating some helicopter operations could reduce the noise impact on residential neighborhoods, that option deserves a thorough assessment, including noise impacts, feasibility, and cost-benefit considerations. It should not be dismissed without careful examination.

6. Community involvement and monitoring

Residents who experience this noise daily should have a meaningful role in documenting its impact. I support the recommendation for ongoing seasonal monitoring and community data collection.

I would also like to see complaint volume and geographic distribution considered so that the experiences of affected neighborhoods are accurately represented. An effective system should allow residents to report concerns, have those concerns documented and investigated, and receive information about the outcome.

Previous experience with TBMP and resident concerns

I previously contacted TBMP regarding helicopter operations outside the recommended hours. Unfortunately, that interaction left me feeling that there was little interest in understanding the impact on residents.

When I asked about operators flying after 7:00 p.m., I was told that it was probably a local job and that the operator would be asked about it. I agreed, and I was subsequently copied on the email exchange. However, TBMP indicated to the operator that I had “pressed” the issue, which was not the case. I simply answered yes when asked whether I wanted the matter addressed.

I found this interaction discouraging. Residents should be able to raise legitimate concerns without feeling that they are being unreasonable or creating a problem simply by asking that existing guidelines be followed. I hope future efforts will provide a more constructive opportunity for community members to be heard and taken seriously.

The broader impact on our community

I want to emphasize that this is about more than individual complaints. The cumulative impact of helicopter noise affects the character of our community, the enjoyment of our outdoor spaces, and the quality of life of people who live here year-round.

I support tourism and recognize its importance to our local economy. I am not suggesting that helicopter operations should disappear. However, the economic benefits of tourism should not come at the expense of the quality of life of the people who live here.

There must be a reasonable balance between the interests of tourism operators and the ability of residents to enjoy their homes and surrounding environment without excessive, persistent noise.

Moving forward

I would appreciate clarification and follow-through on several important issues:

- What is the timeline for commissioning the recommended helicopter noise study, and will the findings be made available to the public?
- How will residents participate in seasonal noise monitoring and community data collection?
- Will alternative heliport locations receive a serious and objective evaluation?
- What mechanisms will be established to monitor flight paths, operating hours, and compliance with existing guidelines?
- Will the Task Force examine Haines Borough's helicopter management policies and determine which practices could be adapted for Juneau?
- How will the Task Force ensure that its recommendations result in actual operational changes and measurable noise reduction?

I would also like to reiterate my previous invitation for members of the Visitor Industry Task Force and TBMP to visit my home on a Sunday afternoon and experience firsthand the level of helicopter noise, both inside and outside of my home. I believe hearing it from a residential setting, rather than simply reviewing reports or hearing from operators, would provide valuable perspective on the impact this activity is having on those of us who live here.

The Visitor Industry Task Force has already recognized that the current situation needs to be addressed. I hope this acknowledgment represents a genuine commitment to change. Residents deserve more than additional studies, assurances, and voluntary guidelines. We deserve measurable improvements, meaningful accountability, and a willingness to consider solutions that may require changes to how and where helicopter operations are conducted.

Thank you for considering my comments. I hope the Task Force will prioritize the concerns of residents as it moves forward with these recommendations.

Deborah Rakos