From: Sean Rielly
To: City Clerk
Subject: VITF comment
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Greetings,

Thank you for your efforts this season to address and better understand the impacts associated with the growth in seasonal tourism in Juneau.

I encourage the Assembly and City staff to continue focusing on measures that address tourism-related impacts, including community crowding, noise, air and water pollution, and the protection of the qualities that make Juneau a special place to live and visit.

Pollution

I appreciate the work that has been done to date; however, I believe the City needs to take a more active role in monitoring and addressing air and water quality impacts associated with cruise ship operations. Relying primarily on reviewing ADEC violations and a reporting hotline is insufficient. The Ocean Ranger Program has been eliminated, and State visual opacity monitoring efforts and enforcement presence in ports have not always been consistent. There are often notices of violations from method 9 opacity monitoring, but there are far fewer issued violations.

The State regulates individual vessels as point sources, yet Juneau often hosts multiple large cruise ships simultaneously. Collectively, these vessels contribute to substantial emissions that can affect the health of residents and the surrounding environment. Monitoring should be more robust and transparent, including consideration of continuous air quality monitoring with publicly accessible real-time data, similar to the PurpleAir sensor network previously utilized through ADEC efforts.

In addition, cruise ships should be required to burn lower-sulfur fuels before entering local waters, while preparing to dock, and while at berth, regardless of scrubber use. Open-loop scrubbers should also be prohibited in close proximity to CBJ waters and shorelines. Federal and state regulations establish minimum standards, but the City should advocate protections that reflect the concerns of local residents and the unique environmental values of our community. As a long time resident, I have concerns about living near the core area especially with the expanding footprint of the Huna-totem dock.

Noise

The volume of flightseeing tours conducted by helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft continues to be significant throughout the tourism season. Thank you for pursuing additional noise studies and exploring options to reduce noise impacts on residents, wildlife and visitors seeking a quiet outdoor experience.

Whale Watching
The growth in whale watching activity has also become increasingly noticeable. I am concerned that vessel congestion around whales may be affecting both wildlife behavior and the overall experience on the water. In recent years, I have observed less of the dynamic whale activity, such as bubble-net feeding, that has historically occurred in local waters.

This season was a welcome exception. A group of whales in Saginaw Channel frequently engaged in bubble-net feeding, providing a remarkable opportunity to observe this behavior. However, their presence often attracted a large concentration of whale watching vessels, leading to crowded conditions around the animals. On many occasions, I chose not to stop because the area was already overly congested.

High concentrations of vessels not only affect the viewing experience but can also create navigational challenges for other boaters. Congestion around whales can force vessels into closer passes with one another and with nearby reefs and shorelines. In addition, whale watching vessels traveling to and from viewing areas generate substantial wakes. Accessing facilities such as the Auke Bay Commercial Loading Facility and the Auke Bay Harbor launch ramp has become increasingly challenging. On several occasions this season, I encountered breaking waves at the launch ramp caused by wakes from whale watching traffic operating in Auke Bay.

Thank you for examining options to expand no-wake zones and reduce wake impacts. I believe the next important step is to establish a limited-entry licensing program for whale watching operations that caps the number of operators and vessels. Based on my time on the water, the current level of activity has contributed to congestion, navigational challenges, and increased wake impacts in heavily used areas. A limited-entry program, coupled with an evaluation of fleet size, could help balance economic opportunities with the long-term protection of marine wildlife, the boating experience, and public safety. From my observations, a reduction in overall fleet capacity should be considered as part of that discussion.

Downtown Congestion
I appreciate the City's efforts to manage downtown congestion through measures such as directing pedestrian flows, improving crossings, and modifying traffic signals to improve vehicle circulation. While these actions may help direct movement, I see fewer efforts aimed at reducing congestion itself and ensuring that downtown remains welcoming and accessible for local residents and independent travelers. As Juneau continues to evaluate tourism management strategies, I believe there should be continued discussion regarding daily ship limits and overall passenger capacity. Equally important is ensuring that residents and non-cruise visitors can continue to comfortably access and enjoy the downtown core and other popular community spaces.

As a final note, given Juneau's aging infrastructure and annual visitation approaching two million cruise ship passengers, I believe additional studies are needed to better understand the full economic, environmental, and municipal impacts of the cruise industry. Continued evaluation of costs and benefits, including impacts on public infrastructure, municipal services, community livability, natural resources, and quality of life for residents, will help ensure future decisions are informed by comprehensive and objective data.

Thank you again for your continued work on these issues and for considering public input as the City evaluates the future of tourism management in Juneau.

Cheers
Sean Rielly