



CITY AND BOROUGH OF SITKA

A COAST GUARD CITY

MEMORANDUM

To: Mayor Eisenbeisz and Assembly Members

Thru: John Leach, Municipal Administrator *John Branth*, Acting

From: Amy Ainslie, Planning & Community Development Director *AA*

Date: July 1, 2025

Subject: Visit Sitka – Request for Information

Background

At its May 29th meeting, the Assembly reviewed the response CBS received to its Request for Proposals (RFP) seeking interested operators for Visit Sitka and asked that the Tourism Commission provide review and a recommendation of the response to inform whether the Assembly wished to direct staff to begin drafting a contract. However, prior to the Tourism Commission's June 12th meeting, the respondent notified CBS that they were retracting their response and no longer seeking award of the Visit Sitka contract.

The Tourism Commission instead shifted the focus of its conversation to next steps on the Visit Sitka contract. The Commission's recommendation was to proceed with issuing a Request for Information (RFI) to gauge market interest in providing the various services that fall under the Visit Sitka contract.

Analysis

An RFI is used to gather market information – they are generally non-binding, and responses are kept confidential so as not to disadvantage a respondent to competitors should a more formal bid for the service be issued in the future.

Should the Assembly choose to move forward with issuing an RFI for Visit Sitka services, it would likely include the scope of services included in the previously issued RFP, but would ask respondents to indicate which of those services they are interested in providing (rather than a required response to all), a rough order of magnitude cost estimate, a statement of qualifications to provide the services, and feedback on the structure of a bid/contract for these services. Based on public comment at the Tourism Commission, staff also recommends asking respondents whether they would like to

have limited information (i.e. contact information and a list of services they are interested in providing) released to other potential bidders in order to facilitate joint-bids.

Relating to another item on the Assembly's agenda tonight - the supplemental appropriation for temporary continuation of Visit Sitka services – would extend the Chamber's operations of Visit Sitka through December 2025, and fund transition/handover to a new operator in January 2026 if approved by the Assembly. In order to meet that timeline, staff will need early direction from the Assembly on desired/expected review and approval procedures. The anticipated timeline for this approach is:

- Mid July: RFI Issued
- Mid August: RFI Returned
- Early September: RFP/RFQ Issued
- Early November: RFP/RFQ Returned
- Late November: Assembly D/D/D on proceeding with contract preparation (with results of staff evaluation team recommendation and negotiated terms)
- Early December: Supplemental Appropriation 1st Reading
- Late December: Supplemental Appropriation 2nd Reading & Draft Contract
- Early January: Contract signed with new Visit Sitka operator

This is a fairly aggressive timeline, and somewhat unfortunately timed with the visitor season as potential respondents may be busy with summer operations during the RFI opening in particular. Staff's intention would be to make the RFI as simple to respond to as possible (ideas such as accepting submissions by letter format rather than a more complex bid response packet, allowing email submission rather than through BidExpress, etc.). With the tight timeline, staff would not be able to bring the RFI to the Assembly prior to issuance.

Alternatively, the Assembly could elect to not issue an RFI, and move right into a new RFP/RFQ. In this case, staff would make best efforts to incorporate the Tourism Commission's feedback (including public comment made there) during review of the previous RFP response and discussion on next steps. This timeline is less compact and therefore may be more achievable, however, we would miss out on what could be very helpful information to make a subsequent bid more successful.

Fiscal Note

There is no fiscal note at this time – the RFI and subsequent bid process will better establish anticipated costs for the service. Minor costs associated with advertising will be accommodated through budgeted operating funds.

Recommendation

Staff recommends that through its discussion, the Assembly consider the following questions:

1. Is the Assembly's goal to have a new Visit Sitka operator under contract by the early January timeline?
2. Does the Assembly wish to first issue an RFI before a subsequent RFP/RFQ?
3. At what stages should the Tourism Commission provide review? (*This will assist staff with back-planning review dates*).
4. What is the Assembly's preferred bid style (RFP/RFQ) if any?

Encl: Visit Sitka RFP – Scope of Services