

October 2, 2013

via Email

TO:

Honorable Mim McConnell, Mayor

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City Administrator:

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REGARDING: DOWNTOWN BUSINESS CONCERNS

Dear all:

We are writing as concerned Lincoln Street business owners and operators of retail stores that depend on a viable downtown Sitka business environment. Together we represent an important economic engine for our community through sales tax revenues generated, through the dozens of employees that depend upon us for their livelihoods, and through the support and contributions that we make everyday to the great town of Sitka.

Historically, the summer tourism industry in general, and the cruise-ship passengers specifically, have contributed the majority of our sales revenues enabling us to stay in business and continue to add to an attractive and vibrant Lincoln street. For the last few years, we have seen our lifeblood, the influx of tourists to Sitka, gradually decrease due to multiple economic and logistical factors in the Sitka environment and in the tourism industry as a whole. Many main street businesses are closing, multiple retail spaces are for sale or rent with no takers, and the "revitalization" of our downtown area has become a major issue.

Any further deterioration or disruption in the shrinking tourism "pie" could push many other heretofore successful, contributing business over the edge into failure, adding to what is already a difficult situation that should be of real concern to our elected officials and City administrators whose budgets depend upon our contributions.

(we are thinking maybe San Francisco style trolley cars), that would run continuously throughout the day from Crescent Harbor down Lincoln St and back on Harbor drive; a continuous circle where passengers could jump on or off at will at 4-5 designated stops. This could be funded, staffed and maintained with the head-tax monies that apparently the City has had a difficult time finding the best ways to spend.

In conclusion, we the undersigned are concerned that the recent and proposed upgrades to the Centennial building area is pressuring the City Administration and Assembly leaders to advocate for making the Centennial Hall area the "center" of town regarding tourism. If you focus ship offloading and pickup solely on Crescent Harbor, in our opinion the unintended consequences may be quite grave: first, it would deal a death knoll to many of the already struggling retail businesses west of the Russian Orthodox Church due to serious decreases in foot traffic. Secondly, it would again create major conflicts in Crescent Harbor due to conflicts with commercial and charter operators who are berthed there, causing disruption, disagreement and political fallout just like it was before we built the O'Connell Bridge dock. Again, as in the past, ***we suggest and insist on a fair and equitable distribution of passengers utilizing both docks, as the City should not be responsible for adversely affecting so many businesses, their owners, and their workers who have contributed so much to the City all of these years.***

We would be available to discuss this issue with any of you personally at any time. Thank you for your consideration, and we await your answers to our grave concerns.

Respectively, from the owners and employees of the following Sitka businesses:

Agave
Baranof Jewelers
Brenner's
Chocolate Moose
Ernie's Old Time Saloon
Grandfather Frosts Russian Christmas Store
Harry Race Pharmacy
My Favorite Store
Robertson's Gallery
Russell's
Russian American Co / Random House
Sitka Bazaar
Sitka Fur Gallery
Sitka Hotel

Therefore, we are respectively asking for your help and consideration of the following proposals that we feel could help to alleviate the current situation:

1) EQUITY AND CONSISTANCY IN CRUISE SHIP LIGHTERING ASSIGNMENT.

Most of us have been established retailers in Sitka for over 10 years at least; and we are well aware of the history of why a second dock was built at the O'Connell bridge. At that time, there was much pressure from the commercial and charter fleet based out of Crescent Harbor that the congestion from the cruise ship lightering process was extremely disruptive, caused safety issues, and was causing economic harm to our resident fishers. At that time the downtown retailers politically supported adding the second bridge dock only ***"as long as there was and equal distribution of numbers of passengers disembarking at each dock throughout the cruise ship season"***. Plainly speaking, any deviation from this policy, that which would favor one dock or another, could irrecoverably negatively impact the businesses that are more distant. Practically speaking, the Church in the middle of town becomes an outer limit past which many cruise-ship passengers (mostly elderly) will not walk. Thus no matter which dock, roughly only half of the passengers will make it past the church, no matter which direction they are walking. We are adamantly opposed to any changes in the historical equity in spreading the passengers by using both public docks. That was always supported by the downtown business community, and agreed upon by past elected officials, City Administrators, and the Harbormaster as being reasonable and fair.

2) SCHEDULED AND STRUCTURED DOCK ASSIGNMENTS.

This year has been trying for downtown retailers as many "scheduled" dock assignments have been changed without warning, causing us some real harm financially as we have to staff based upon knowing our traffic; there is a major difference between the traffic flow from Crescent or the walking traffic low from the bridge Dock. Once we have staff on hand, it costs us hundreds of dollars a day to have them in our stores; if we are not informed of a dock change well in advance, the necessity of adding or reducing staff cannot be made at the last minute. We urge you to develop the docking schedule well in advance, publish it, and then unless some kind of emergency, do not deviate, as changing it just kills us financially.

3) DOWNTOWN TROLLEYS ?

In the spirit of offering solutions, one way to distribute cruise ship passengers equitably throughout the downtown area regardless of which dock they are lightering to would be to have special free City tourist buses