



CITY AND BOROUGH OF SITKA

A COAST GUARD CITY

MEMORANDUM

To: Mayor Eisenbeisz and Assembly Members

Thru: John Leach, Municipal Administrator , Acting

From: Amy Ainslie, Planning & Community Development Director 
Kevin Knox, Parks & Recreation Manager 

Date: October 22, 2025

Subject: 2026 Commercial Recreational Land Use Plan

Background

Over the course of 2024 and 2025, the Planning & Community Development Department has been working to overhaul the commercial recreational land use permitting process under the guidance of the Parks & Recreation Committee in accordance with Strategic Plan Action 1.4, *“Review the impacts and benefits of tourism, and develop policies that prioritize the quality of life for all Sitkans”* and Tourism Task Force Recommendation #18, *“Identify and protect priority recreation sites”*.

This effort had two primary components; the first was a revision to SGC Chapter 14.10 to establish the new permitting process which was passed as Ordinance 2025-02 and takes effect on November 1, 2025. The revised code also calls for the second part of this effort, which is the commercial recreational use plan (“Plan”). The Plan includes specific guidance, conditions, use limitations, and fees for commercial recreational use of CBS owned/managed recreational assets. If adopted, the Plan will be used to issue commercial recreational land use permits for the 2026 season.

Data that informed the Plan includes:

- Existing levels of use for recreational assets through historic permit data, deployed trail counters, and mobile analytic data
- Consultation with the US Forest Service (USFS) to align carrying capacities for joint-jurisdictional assets
- Public input gathered through surveys and public meetings
- Permit holder consultation
- Parks & Recreation Committee discussions and permit hearings

Public process for the Plan's development has included:

- 2024
 - 2 Open House meetings
 - Operators focus group meeting
 - Community survey
 - Various advertising/PSAs
 - Parks & Recreation Committee meetings
 - Assembly review
- 2025
 - An email list of over 250 operators and interested members of the public was used to communicate all public input opportunities for the Plan
 - A variety of advertising mediums were used throughout the process including social media, PSAs, Morning Edition on KCAW, and coverage by the Daily Sitka Sentinel
 - Community survey/comment period open 9/1-9/21
 - Open House meeting 9/25
 - Sitka Tribe of Alaska
 - Reviewed by the Transportation & Community Development Committee 10/9
 - Review by Tribal Council 10/15 (CBS staff attended both meetings, written comments not available at time of this memo but motion was made to request delay of new fee schedule to 2027)
 - Parks & Recreation Committee
 - Discussed at regular meetings with public comment opportunities in July, August, and October
 - Held a special meeting October 21st at which the Plan was unanimously recommended for Assembly adoption

Analysis

All changes between the 2025 draft version of the Plan and the 2026 Plan version now before you have been tracked in the enclosed "Change Log". Primary changes include removing guides from the definition of maximum group size (and removing limits on number of guides), increasing maximum group sizes at all water access assets to 6 (to match 6-pack licensing and to have even numbers for kayak guides who generally use double kayaks), aligning maximum group sizes to USFS limits for joint-jurisdictional trails, and provisions for Goddard Hot Springs (see below).

The enclosed "Summary of Public Comments" contains high-level/summarized written comments received (thru 10/15), the survey, and at the Open House.

Goddard Hot Springs

Discussions regarding commercial recreational use of Goddard Hot Springs ("Goddard") featured heavily throughout this year's Plan development. At their October 21st special meeting, Chair Hughey aptly noted that while there was disagreement about what "balance" for this area's use looks like, it seemed like there was a baseline consensus

among the public and the Committee that goals for managing use at Goddard included preserving access and availability for local use, and preventing large-scale commercialization of the area. To those ends, the version of the Plan recommended for approval by the committee (with respect to Goddard):

- Water taxis are allowed, subject to a maximum group size of 6 and 14 groups per week
- No use of Goddard involving guiding/outfitting use is permitted
- Water taxis are subject to the permit filing fee, but not the per client fee
- Water taxis must provide instruction to their clients to include bathing etiquette, address food and drink use, where to wait when tubs are full, and to keep their party's use to one tub at a time.

Other provisions/allowances were discussed, but the Committee felt that additional use beyond what is outlined above needed Assembly consideration given the importance of the area to the community and the (often) wider reach for public comment.

Additional commercial recreational use of Goddard discussed, but not advanced, by the Parks & Recreation Committee:

- Allowing guided/outfitted use for non-motorized watercraft (i.e. kayaks) with small group sizes (4 or 6), and limited groups per week (1-2)
- Allowing guided use by vessels that provide overnight lodging with small group sizes (4 or 6), and limited groups per week (4-6, limit each permittee to 1 group per week)

Fiscal Note

The following table provides analysis of CBS revenues that would result from a few different scenarios for implementation of fee increases. As recommended for approval by the Parks & Recreation Committee, the fee schedule is split between general use areas (i.e. all non-special use areas) with a \$400 annual fee and a \$5/client fee, and special use areas that include Baranof Warm Springs and Goddard Hot Springs with a \$400 annual fee and a \$10/client fee.

Assumptions in this analysis include:

- Annual Fee Revenue: Based on number of permittees for 2025 issued permits plus assumption of 5 water taxi permits for Goddard
- Client Fee Revenue: Based on 2025 forecasted client numbers as reported on permit applications by operators, actuals not yet available as permittees have thru December 31st to complete year-end reporting and reconciliation
- 6% sales tax assumed (given use is almost exclusively in summer months)
- Annual fee only for Goddard use (no client fee revenue)

	Status Quo	Postpone General Use Fee Increase, Implement Special Use Fee Increase		Implement Fee Increases for General and Special Use Areas	
	All Areas	General Use Areas	Special Use Areas	General Use Areas	Special Use Areas
Per Client Fee	\$2	\$2	\$10	\$5	\$10
Annual Fee Revenue	\$14,000	\$14,000		\$14,000	
Client Fee Revenue	\$12,200	\$21,200		\$36,125	
Sales Tax Revenue	\$1,572	\$2,112		\$3,008	
Total	\$27,772	\$37,312		\$53,133	

Of note, with the recent adoption of the Cooperative Resource Management Agreement between CBS & AK DNR for Baranof Warm Springs, operators using Baranof Warm Springs will only be subject to CBS commercial recreational permit fees and not State fees (which included a \$400 filing fee every 3 years, a \$1200 annual fee, and a \$4/client fee). When comparing the Parks & Recreation Committee's recommended fees for special use areas with what operators would have been required to pay under previous permit requirements, an operator would have to bring 296 clients to Baranof Warm Springs in order for fees under this new structure to cost more than fees under the old structure; no operators in previous years have reported this level of use.

Recommendation

Adopt the 2026 Commercial Recreational Land Use Plan. The Assembly can make any changes to the Plan through motions for amendment, or can adopt the Plan as recommended by the Parks & Recreation Committee.

Encl: DRAFT 2026 Commercial Recreational Land Use Plan
Change Log
Summarized Public Comment