



# City and Borough of Sitka


PROVIDING FOR TODAY...PREPARING FOR TOMORROW


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*Coast Guard City, USA*

## MEMORANDUM

**To:** Mayor Eisenbeisz and Assembly Members  
Chair Spivey and Planning Commission Members

**Thru:** John Leach, Municipal Administrator 

**From:** Amy Ainslie, Planning Director 

**Date:** April 7, 2021

**Subject:** **Joint Work Session – Tourism Planning**

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### Background

At their March 9<sup>th</sup> meeting, the Assembly moved and unanimously agreed “...***to request the Planning Commission develop a Tourism Master Plan to address the 2022 tourist season and plan going forward.***”

This request came about because recent forecasts for the 2022 cruise ship season predict that approximately 400,000 cruise ship visitors will come to Sitka over the summer season. This is substantially larger than even Sitka’s largest cruise ship season, which per Chamber of Commerce records was 289,753 passengers in 2008. The Sitka Sound Cruise Terminal, the private cruise ship dock located at 4513 Halibut Point Road, is working to improve its facilities such that it could host two Quantum-class ships which each have capacities in excess of 4,000 passengers. With two of these ships in, Sitka’s day-time population could nearly double on a given summer day. Discussion at the Assembly table on 3/9 primarily focused on the tactical/logistical needs for managing these high passenger numbers.

Sitka has previously engaged in tourism planning, with large efforts undertaken in 2006 and 2007. Both plans have been enclosed for review.

The Sitka Visitor Industry Plan Version 1.0 was a comprehensive overview of the visitor industry in Sitka undertaken primarily by the Long Range Planning and Economic Development Commission. The plan sections covered Visitor Industry Plan Oversight, Marketing and Promotion, Incentives and Policies, Transportation and Infrastructure, Outreach, and Gathering/Managing Information and Data. This plan had two actions that spoke to the logistics of cruise passenger movement throughout town. One spoke to the need to make 3-ship days feel like 2-ship days and manage congestion downtown. Suggestions for trial and study were: closing all or part of Lincoln Street to vehicular traffic, improving shuttle services in the downtown area, and/or eliminating

parking on one side of Lincoln Street to have more pedestrian walking paths. Another action in the Transportation and Infrastructure section of this plan spoke to the need for a congestion mitigation plan on heavy visitor days, and suggested that we trial some of the strategies listed above for a season.

The Sitka Visitor Industry Plan Version 2.0 was adopted by the Assembly in the Summer of 2007, worked on by the Sitka Visitor Industry Working Group, comprised of representatives from the Chamber, STA, SEDA, the Visitor's Bureau, the Forest Service, local business/commercial fishing businesses, the Long Range Planning and Economic Development Commission, Sitka Charter Boat Operators Association, and the cruise industry. This version of the plan included context for the visitor industry locally and statewide, broad goals for tourism in Sitka, big picture strategies, and plans to reach the stated goals including improving attractions, events, access, tourism marketing, training and business support, and coordination/information. On access/congestion, the plan had very similar suggestions to the Version 1.0 plan: make Lincoln Street one way, drop parking on one side, or close it (partially or fully) to vehicular traffic for more pedestrian/walking areas. There was also consideration for more walking paths between lightering docks and shuttling in the downtown area.

While these plans did a lot of the “big picture” planning work – documenting the impact of the visitor industry in the community, creating a community driven vision for how tourism in Sitka looks, and plans for marketing Sitka as a tourism destination, there are two major gaps in terms of our ability to use these plans given the current landscape of the cruise industry in Sitka:

- The plans were written pre-development of the Sitka Sound Cruise Terminal and therefore could not address the new needs we have for passenger dispersion and transportation, and
- Suggestions were made for improving congestion in the downtown area that need to be decided upon and trialed.

## **Analysis**

Staff feels that there are a few key questions that the Assembly and Planning Commission should answer together in terms of lining out a process to move forward:

- What is the scope of the plan?
- What is the timeline for delivery?
- Is there a preference for how the plan will be developed: done by the Planning Commission, a subcommittee, a task force that the Planning Commission is the steering committee for?
- Are there other bodies/organizations that should be included in the planning effort, and what should the extent/formality of their involvement be?
- What are the expectations for public and business engagement?
- What are the expectations for communication/check-ins between the Planning Commission and the Assembly?

Based on the concerns staff has heard from Assembly members, Planning Commissioners, the visitor industry, and the community, we believe there are four areas of tourism planning that need to be addressed and could essentially serve as the scope of the plan:

1. **Dispersion:** How do we ensure that cruise ship passengers are dispersed throughout town in an equitable way?
2. **Transportation:** What are our preferred strategies for transporting passengers into/throughout town?
3. **Traffic:** How can we manage vehicular and pedestrian traffic in a way that alleviates congestion and balance the needs of visitors, businesses, and locals?
4. **CPET Funds:** How can CPET funds be leveraged to help us achieve the identified strategies for dispersion, transportation, and traffic?

### **Fiscal Note**

There is no fiscal request at this time, as staff wanted to understand what the scope of work for the plan was before determining the need for consultant or temp worker assistance. If support is needed, a request/appropriation will come forward at a future meeting, and staff will investigate the extent to which CPET funds can be used for these efforts.

### **Recommendation**

Staff recommends that the Assembly and Planning Commission determine the scope, deliverables, process, and timeline for this planning effort in the work session.