



CITY AND BOROUGH OF SITKA

Meeting Minutes Tourism Commission

Officers: Chair Jeremy Plank; Vice Chair Bethany Lowrance; and Secretary Carol Bryant-Martin

Commission Members: Sherri Blankenship; Devon Calvin; Lillian Feldpausch; and Vaughn Hazel.

Ex Officio: Katie O'Neill, Visit Sitka Liaison (Ex Officio); Amy Ainslie, P&CD Director (Ex Officio); and Judson Rusk, Tourism Manager (Ex Officio).

February 19, 2026

6:00 P.M.

Harrigan Centennial Hall

I. CALL TO ORDER

Chair Jeremy Plank called the Sitka Tourism Commission meeting to order at 6:04 p.m.

Ainslie welcomed the new CBS Tourism Manager, Judson Rusk, to the Tourism Commission meeting. Rusk shared his previous work experience and work plan for the upcoming months while he transitioned from working remotely to being in Sitka full time.

II. ROLL CALL

Present: Sherri Blankenship; Carol Bryant-Martin; Devon Calvin; Lillian Feldpausch; Vaughn Hazel; Bethany Lowrance; and Jeremy Plank.

Ex-Officio: Katie O'Neill, Visit Sitka Liaison (via telepresence); Amy Ainslie, P&CD Director; and Judson Rusk, Tourism Manager.

Secretary Bryant-Martin confirmed quorum was present.

III. CONSIDERATION OF AGENDA

None.

IV. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

None.

V. NEW BUSINESS

A. Status update of Tourism Best Management Practices (TBMP) program.

Rusk introduced Katie O'Neill, representing Element Agency, based in Juneau. Element is the consulting firm selected by CBS to operate the Visit Sitka contract, which includes administration of the TBMP program. O'Neill is the primary contract manager for Visit Sitka. O'Neill presented a two-pronged approach to launching the TBMP program in coordination with ten to fifteen Sitka businesses during the discovery phase to review existing TBMP programs and case studies in other communities such as Juneau, Ketchikan, and Haines, as well as nationally and internationally. O'Neill explained that Element will focus on outward-facing efforts, which encompasses a call line, dedicated website, and branded decal stickers for participating organizations. O'Neill said the research will inform development of a program guidebook and website to present to the Tourism Commission by May. **No action was taken.**

B. Discussion and recommendations on Lincoln Street closure and other city operations for the 2026 visitor season.

Commissioners reviewed Rusk's memorandum dated February 9, 2026, with recommendations for Lincoln Street operations during the 2026 visitor season. Rusk stated that CBS staff conducted due diligence in researching scenarios of options for vehicle and foot traffic separately and for simultaneous use by both pedestrians and vehicles. Public Works employees weighed the pros and cons of developing a one-way traffic pattern in a west bound open and east bound closed for pedestrian walkway street pattern on Lincoln Street. City staff members reviewed a one-way configuration extensively, keeping west-bound traffic open and converting the eastbound into a walkway, as a viable option for safety precautions and the impacts of feeder streets connected to Lincoln Street. However, due to heavy infrastructure requirements of up to 200 waist-high jersey barriers running the length of the road, placed at the center of the road to physically separate vehicles and pedestrians, and time to deploy, city staff consensus is to keep Lincoln Street open during the 2026 visitor season. Rusk explained that acquiring, transporting, inspecting, and deploying the barriers would require additional time and cost. The earliest date to implement the Jersey barriers and reconfiguring parking spaces would be sometime in June or July. Once the configuration is set up, it could not be moved until the end of the visitor season. Ainslie suggested that setting up the one-way configuration of Lincoln Street could be revisited ahead of the 2027 to give more time for city planning and community input. Ainslie noted that, with Lincoln Street open to vehicular traffic, the upper portion of Maksoutoff Street would be closed to set up public restrooms. Drivers would be able to exit the Wells Fargo parking lot onto Maksoutoff Street similarly to prior years.

M-Bryant-Martin/S-Hazel moved to leave Lincoln Street open during the 2026 visitor season. The motion passed 7-0 by roll call vote.

C. Review code changes for cruise ship docks.

Due to a conflict of interest, Chairman Plank recused himself from discussion on this item; Vice Chair Lowrance moderated this portion of the meeting. Ainslie provided background on this item for new Commission members, explaining how this item had originated from a recommendation made by the Tourism Task Force, and the intent was to define cruise ship docks, require a permit for new cruise ship dock construction or operation, and to identify areas or scenarios in which new cruise docks would or would not be permitted. Ainslie walked through the draft ordinance to demonstrate the definitions, other proposed provisions, and the permitting process.

Commission members discussed whether the passenger limits that defined a minor versus major dock felt appropriate; there was general consensus that the draft definitions were acceptable but warranted further input from the public and in consultation with the Planning Commission. Blankenship inquired what enactment of this ordinance would mean for existing cruise ship docks; Ainslie explained that the ordinance would include a mechanism for issuing legal nonconforming use status and/or permits for these types of scenarios. Blankenship wished to revisit terms for legal nonconforming use permits once further developed in the draft ordinance.

Commission members also reviewed the proposed permitting process and generally agreed with what had been presented and reviewed by the Planning Commission at its meeting the previous night. Commission members requested a joint work session with the Planning Commission to review the ordinance more in-depth, and also to seek more community involvement. **No action was taken.**

V. PERSONS TO BE HEARD

Chairman Plank resumed moderating the meeting and recognized members of the public in attendance to speak.

In consideration of the draft ordinance regarding regulation of new cruise ship docks, Larry Edwards asked that the Commission explicitly determine whether Sitka is at, if not beyond, its capacity for cruise visitation and stated why he believes the answer is yes. If the Commission agreed with him, Edwards stated that the draft ordinance should prohibit the construction of new cruise ship docks of any size/capacity that is not de minimis. He recommended using the term “prohibition” rather in place of “moratorium” to remain consistent with zoning code terminology. In addition, he commented that the prohibition should extend to the entire borough of Sitka.

Leah Mason raised concerns about emissions that result from tourism in Sitka. She noted her appreciation for the TBMP program and the opportunity to weigh in as a community member, though also noted the work done on this effort by other community members during the Tourism Task Force and expressed her desire to recognize the work and ensure it was incorporated in future iterations of the program.

Rachel Roy with the Chamber of Commerce stated that if the city moves forward with a hybrid one-way Lincoln Street closure that city funding should be determined in advance for possible road closure in 2027. She remarked that while intentions for a one-way street closure are meant to be collaborative, ensuring stakeholders remain participants in further discussion is a duty of the tourism commission and planning commission. She stated that language pertaining to development in zoned and un-zoned areas should be specified in the cruise ship dock ordinance. In addition, Roy asked about documents presented during the meeting that were not included in the published packet.

Barbara Bingham spoke positively about the TBMP program. She remarked that an enforcement component would be helpful. She stated that Sitka does not need new cruise ship docks and expressed support for prohibited use of cruise ship docks in all zones of the borough. Bingham spoke about environmental concerns due to cruise ships including sewage released into the waterways and impacts on the ecosystem. She stated that year-round visitation to Sitka should be encouraged.

Teal West remarked that the collaboration process with businesses and community stakeholders is an important initiative for the CBS Assembly, Planning Commission, and Tourism Commission to continue.

VI. ADJOURNMENT

Motion: Seeing no objections, Chair Plank adjourned the meeting at 8:26 p.m.

Minutes By: Carol Bryant-Martin, Secretary