
Tourism Task Force Agenda

Monday, April 8, 2024 6:00 p.m. Harrigan
Centennial Hall

Commission Members:

**Rich McClear, Barbara Bingham, Camille Ferguson, Cambria Holmes, Chris McGraw, James Michener,
Jeremy Plank, Scott Wagner, Ryan Gluth, Rachel Roy (ex officio), Amy Ainslie (ex officio)
JJ Carlson (Assembly Liaison)**

- I. Updates to Regulations/Permitting recommendations
- II. Discussion on CBS lightering policy
- III. Discussion on history of cruise ship dock proposals in Sitka
- IV. Review incorporated Draft Tourism Task Force Recommendations

Tourism Task Force Regulation & Permitting Working Group Recommendations

Regulation

E-Bike rental effects options

- Classify E-Bikes as motorized vehicles
 - Would remove e-bikes as an allowed use on “pedestrian” sidewalks
- Determine which multi-use paths in Sitka should allow rental e-bikes and work with operators in the TBMP process to inform their renters.
 - May not be possible to regulate a portion of e-bike users based upon e-bike ownership, i.e. tourists vs locals.
- Require rental e-bike operators to install a GPS tracking system on their rentals to determine if being used in areas “off limits” in regulation or TBMP. This will also collect data to see use patterns for better future planning.
 - An additional option would be to have geo-tech fencing as part of the GPS system which would disable the motorization component of the e-bike if taken to areas not allowed for a rental e-bike.

Permitting

The CBS has six departments which issue various permits for the tourism industry. There have been comments received from the public that the industry would benefit from a streamlined permitting process within the CBS.

Required Tourism Industry permits

- Create a CBS position that would coordinate permit requirements for businesses engaged in the tourism industry.
 - There currently is a Tourism Position in the CBS budget which could potentially perform this role.
 - Position would also assess compliance with permits.
- Remove the hand food cart permitting from within the CBS PD to a more appropriate department.

CBS Harbors and GPIIP berthing policy related to cruise passengers/vessels

- CBS Harbor and GPIIP should align berthing policies and fees with each other.
 - May require forming a Sitka Port Authority which could encompass CBS Harbors, GPIIP, the CBS float plane facility and the CBS Rocky Guitierrez Airport.
- Standardize CBS head tax fees and collection.

Zoning

The CBS Planning and Zoning Department should evaluate zoning changes necessary to manage the current and future larger number of cruise passengers arriving in Sitka.

- Change Commercial zoning for all waterfront properties. Cruise passenger dock construction would require a conditional use permit.
 - Create a dock size or daily passenger limit definition.
- Zone the Katlian Bay region and include dock construction as a conditional use.
 - Currently Katlian Bay is not zoned by CBS.

Congestion

Overall there has been tremendous concern with congestion downtown on large cruise passenger days. The CBS should explore solutions to relieve the top concerns.

Jaywalking

- Currently jaywalking is not illegal in Sitka.
- Change code to make jaywalking illegal in the downtown corridor and along Harbor Drive
 - This change may face opposition from locals as targeted enforcement is not allowed.
- The CBS should work with DOT to address jaywalking safety issues primarily along harbor drive and across Sawmill Creek Rd to the Raptor Center.
 - Potentially additional crosswalks at these locations may reduce the local impact and safety issues.

Bus Drop Off

- Explore additional alternate locations for cruise passenger drop off locations to relieve congestion at Centennial Hall
 - Utilize the lightering under the O'Connell bridge as an additional drop off. This may require busses to travel to the location via Katlian St from Halibut Point Rd.
 - O'Connell bridge location does have existing bathroom facilities.
 - Identify other additional alternate locations for cruise passenger drop off in the downtown area.

Downtown Bathroom Availability

- Identify an additional permanent public bathroom location at the west end of Lincoln St.
 - Totem Square could be an option. It is State owned which may preclude its use for this purpose.
 - CBS could explore leasing a downtown underutilized business to create a public restroom.

Lincoln Street Closures

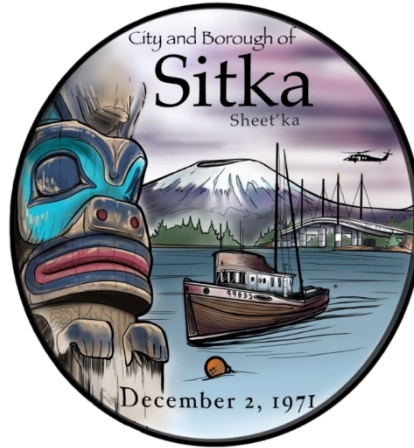
- Minimize Lincoln St closures when possible.
- Finalizing and completing the Lincoln St revitalization project would greatly assist with the need for street closures.

New items for discussion

CBS Cruise Ship Lightering discussion

- No lightering
- Lightering of vessels under X passengers
- Lightening of 1,2,3 vessels/day
- Unlimited lightering

History of cruise ship dock proposals in Sitka



CITY AND BOROUGH OF SITKA

TOURISM TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATIONS

Tourism Task Force Established by Resolution 2023-11
Final Recommendations Approved on April X, 2024

Members:

- Jim Michener, Chair, Downtown Business Corridor Category
- Rich McClear, Vice Chair, Community At-Large Category
- Camille Ferguson, Sheet'ka Kwáan Sitka Tribe of Alaska Appointee Category
- Scott Wagner, Ports and Harbors Commission Appointee Category
- Barbara Bingham, Sustainability Commission Appointee Category
- Jeremy Plank, Tours and Attractions Category
- Cambria Holmes, Business in General Category
- Chris McGraw, Sitka Sound Cruise Terminal Category
- Ryan Gluth, Community At-Large Category
- Rachel Roy, Ex-Officio, Visit Sitka
- Amy Ainslie, Ex-Officio, CBS Planning & Community Development
- Jessica Earnshaw, CBS Staff Liaison
- JJ Carlson, CBS Assembly Liaison
- Chris Ystad, CBS Assembly Liaison

Former Members:

- Phyllis Hackett, Chair, Community At-Large
- Laurie Booyse, Ex-Officio, Visit Sitka

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TOURISM TASK FORCE ESTABLISHMENT AND DIRECTIVES

The Tourism Task Force was established on March 14, 2023, by the passage of Resolution 2023-11 (“the establishing resolution”). The establishing resolution created the Tourism Task Force (“the Task Force”) with the intent to facilitate the City and Borough of Sitka’s (CBS) transition from short-term management of cruise tourism into a long-term perspective. It is notable that through the language of the establishing resolution and the initial joint-work session between the Assembly and Task Force that the focus of the directives and recommendations was to be on cruise visitation rather than the broader visitor industry.

The establishing resolution designated the following seats by category. All members were appointed by the Assembly.

- One seat filled by a member recommended by the Sheet’ka Kwáan Sitka Tribe of Alaska
- One seat filled by a member recommended by the Ports and Harbors Commission
- One seat filled by a member recommended by the Sustainability Commission
- One seat representing the downtown business corridor
- One seat representing tours and attractions
- One seat representing business in general
- One seating representing the Sitka Sound Cruise Terminal
- Two seats representing the community at-large

The establishing resolution also designated the following non-voting seats:

- Visit Sitka representative, ex-officio
- Planning and Community Development Director (or designee), ex-officio
- Staff Liaison
- Assembly Liaison

The establishing resolution gave the Tourism Task Force five main directives to explore and make recommendations on:

1. Levels of tourism in Sitka
2. Annual review cycle of CBS operations and tourism funding
3. Assisting in the development of a Tourism Management Best Practices (TBMP) program
4. Land use regulations and waterfront development policies
5. Regional strategies to advance Sitka’s interests regarding cruise tourism

Initial appointments were made on April 25, 2023. The establishing resolution required that the Task Force make its final recommendations to the Assembly no later than April 30, 2024.

MEETINGS AND PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

All meetings of the Task Force were open to the public.

- April 27, 2023: Assembly and Tourism Task Force Joint Work Session
- May 31, 2023: Work Session
- July 12, 2023: Regular Meeting
- August 9, 2023: Work Session
- September 6, 2023: Work Session
- September 28, 2023: Work Session
- November 1, 2023: Work Session
- November 27, 2023: Work Session
- December 6, 2023: Work Session
- December 13, 2023: Work Session
- January 4, 2024: Work Session
- January 25, 2024: Regular Meeting
- February 7, 2024: Work Session
- February 26, 2024: Work Session
- March 18, 2024: Work Session
- April 8, 2024: Work Session
- April X, 2024: Regular Meeting

Public engagement events:

- October 11 – November 1, 2023: Survey on Draft TBMP
- November 13, 2023: Town Hall Meeting
- December 7, 2023: Town Hall Meeting
- December 20, 2023 – January 15, 2024: Survey on Level of Cruise Tourism for Sitka
- January 16, 2024: Town Hall Meeting
- February 12, 2024: Attractions Focus Group

Throughout the process, the public regularly contacted task force members via email, letters, phone calls, and in-person conversation. Given the importance of the topic, and broad membership of the task force, members regularly reported upon the stories, concerns, and feedback received from the public through these channels.

**DIRECTIVE ONE:
LEVELS OF TOURISM IN SITKA**

A. Findings

The first directive was of most interest and importance to the public, and the “right” level of cruise tourism continues to be the most prominent topic of community concern and debate. For more detailed results/analysis of the public feedback on this directive, please review Appendices A – C which contain the results from two town hall meetings and the community survey. The following is a very abbreviated summary of findings, but aims to provide the key takeaways regarding levels of cruise tourism in Sitka.

1. Importance to the community

This topic carries incredible emotional weight for the community. Concerns about personal livelihoods, community character, Sitka’s unique lifestyle, economic sustainability, environmental impact, social justice and cohesion, and health/safety are all intertwined in the consideration of what the “right” level of cruise tourism is for Sitka. This finding is highlighted to emphasize the care and reverence needed in continuing conversation and deliberation on cruise tourism.

This topic is also very polarized, with strong opinions voiced in favor of both drastic reduction and continued/increased levels of cruise tourism. Finding a “middle” or “balance” point is challenging given the polarization.

2. Difficulties in a quantitative approach

A quantitative approach to determining the “carrying capacity” of Sitka for cruise visitation levels was not determined to be feasible (in the time given and without making significant assumptions that could invalidate the analysis) because there aren’t strict space constraints in evaluating the carrying capacity of the entire community. Carrying capacity analyses are usually performed in relation to more specific locations like a historic site, downtown/townsite, or park. Carrying capacity analyses have been performed within the independent traveler market which is possible due to its fixed constraints such as number of hotel rooms, rental cars, and daily airline capacities. Sitka’s capacity for cruise visitors is highly dependent on the variables of dispersion and the capacity of new tours and attractions, factors that will inevitably change over time.

3. Considering community impacts

A helpful framework for considering how the community is impacted by cruise tourism is a question asked at the first town hall meeting, “What makes Sitka a great place to live, and why do you choose to live here?”. By knowing what makes Sitka a great and desirable place to live, we can consider cruise visitation impacts on these grounds. The top themes were:

- Community and small-town feel: close knit community, familiar faces, caring neighbors, safety, and small-town atmosphere
- Access to nature/outdoor recreation: Natural beauty, wilderness, pristine environment, access to recreation and subsistence activities
- Pace of life: slower pace of life, lack of “hustle and bustle”, and peaceful, quiet, and relaxed lifestyles

Given the above, it follows that the biggest concerns raised in terms of community impact from growth in cruise numbers were those listed below. This feedback was also incorporated into recommendations for TBMP and land use regulations.

- Loss of small-town feel during the cruise season
- Fear of losing community character/uniqueness, and related fear of becoming an extreme seasonal community
- Safety issues experienced (particularly those related to transportation)
- Congestion (both vehicular and pedestrian)
- Overcrowding of recreational and subsistence sites
- Environmental impacts including emissions, noise, and litter

4. Financial and economic impacts

The financial and economic impacts of cruise tourism were prominent points in public discussions regarding levels of cruise tourism. Following strong interest voiced by the community in learning more, significant time on the part of the task force was spent on pulling together, sharing, and explaining how cruise visitation impacts the municipal budget.

Two-thirds of respondents at the November 13th town hall meeting cited economic benefit from the cruise industry in the form of direct benefits through jobs/businesses in the industry for themselves or family members, increased tax revenue, and benefits to the general economy.

There was broad recognition that the visitor industry as a whole is currently a critical industry for Sitka’s economy. At the December 7th town hall:

- 90% of respondents agreed with the statement, “I recognize that some of my friends, neighbors, and/or fellow community members rely on cruise tourism to make a living in Sitka.”

- 75% agreed that at least some level of cruise tourism is necessary for Sitka.
 - Public comments that cited the economic benefits of cruise tourism most commonly shared considerations for young Sitka residents and their opportunities to work in, or own a business related to, the cruise industry.

From a tax revenue perspective, the key findings were:

- Sales tax revenue, equalizing for inflation and online sales, has experienced significant growth from pre-pandemic levels to present. New and improved municipal services have been made available, and substantial contributions to public infrastructure have been made as a result.
- However, sales tax returns appear to have “diminishing returns” in relation to the number of cruise visitors. Based on predictive analysis performed for the December 7th town hall meeting, the sales tax revenue per passenger declines as the total of passengers per passenger increases, meaning that as passenger numbers go up, the increase in total sales tax revenue goes up by a smaller and smaller amount.

It is also notable that many felt that the financial and economic considerations had an outsized impact on the discussions regarding levels of cruise tourism. Almost two-thirds of respondents at the December 7th town hall disagreed that the economic benefits of cruise tourism should be the most important factor in determining the right level of cruise tourism for Sitka.

5. Public input on the “right” level of cruise tourism in terms of numbers

It was encouraging to see that 80% of respondents at the December 7th town hall meeting wanted the community to reach common ground so that Sitka can find a balance when it comes to cruise tourism. Another 70% agreed that the ideal number of cruise tourists for Sitka balances economic opportunities and benefits with preserving quality of life. In the community survey, 60% of respondents stated that they believe CBS should take an active role in determining the number of cruise visitors that come to Sitka. However, the “balanced” number was difficult to discern from the input received.

Daily Numbers

As a starting point, participants at the November 13th town hall identified that their top priority for managing cruise levels, by a wide margin, was the daily number cruise visitors. At that same meeting, 30% responded to what they thought the “right” level of cruise tourism is in the form of a daily number; the highest number of these responses (38%) cited a daily number of cruise daily passengers in the 5,000 – 5,999 range. The next highest priority was related – the days per week with “large ships”, the those with 4,000+ passenger capacity.

Somewhat polarized responses regarding daily numbers were received at the December 7th town hall:

- In response to the question, “On average, how many days per week in 2023 felt too congested?”, the highest responses were for zero and five days a week, with noticeably lower responses dispersed across one-four and six-seven days per week.
- In response to the question, “Going forward, what is the maximum days per week Sitka should have 7,000 or more passengers?”, the highest responses were for zero and seven days a week, with significantly lower responses dispersed fairly evenly across one-six days per week.

In the community survey, the following data points were collected regarding daily numbers of visitors:

- For those who felt there should be a maximum number of daily cruise passengers (81%), the average reported (less statistical outliers) was 5,484, and the median was 5,000.
- When asked to narrow their choice of maximum number of daily cruise passengers to the options of 3,000 – 7,000, the largest response was for 7,000 passengers (34%).
- There was not strong consensus around the how many days per week there should be large ships in town. Seven days per week had the highest response with 20%, followed by 15% for five days, and 14% for zero days.

Questions also arose concerning emergency/health service impacts in relation to daily numbers. Ultimately, the information found did not highlight a clear correlation. Reports from the CBS Fire/EMS as well as SEARHC did not indicate that volumes correlated to high-passenger count days. In fact, some of the peak volumes for emergency and health services correlated to low-passenger days, citing that the smaller cruise vessels have less capacity on-ship for health/medical attention.

A focus-group meeting was held with representatives from attraction sites, and daily passenger numbers were a strong topic of discussion. Fortress of the Bear, the Sitka Sound Science Center, and the Raptor Center had to institute their own daily limits (most consistently ~5,000/day) to appropriately manage congestion in their facilities as well as the stress put on animals at these facilities. Despite the significant growth in cruise visitation to Sitka between 2022 and 2023, visitor numbers at these facilities were similar between the two seasons due to their facility constraints.

Season Total

While a lesser priority as identified at the November 13th town hall, the season total of cruise passengers was continually discussed in public engagement. At that same meeting:

- 31% of respondents responded to what they thought was the “right” level of cruise tourism for Sitka in the form of a season total. The season totals shared as the “right” level did not have a strong lead response; 21% said 451k – 550k, 20% said 151k-250k, and 18% said 251-350k.
- 15% of respondents responded to what they thought was the “right” level of cruise tourism for Sitka in the form of an era/time period, with 52% citing 2023 levels and 44% citing pre-pandemic levels.

In the community survey, the following data points were collected regarding the season total of cruise passengers in Sitka:

- 55% of respondents stated that going forward, cruise tourism levels should be less than 2023 levels, and 44% felt it should be the same or more than 2023.
- For those who felt there should be a maximum number of cruise passengers per season (66%), the average (less statistical outliers) was 376,715, with a median of 350,000. The most common response (the mode) was 300,000.
- When asked to narrow their choice of season total maximum to 250,000 – 550,000, the highest selected option was 550,000 (38%), followed by 250,000 (27%), and 350,000 (22%).

Length of Cruise Season

While the public generally did not indicate that the length of the cruise season was a strong priority for cruise management, it was a strong priority raised in the attractions focus group. They voiced the enormous strain the lengthening of the cruise season (the introduction of ships in April - early May and late September - October) had put on their organizations and staff. They all cited the near-impossibility of finding seasonal staff for these shoulder months, and the stress put upon year-round staff to fill those holes. The visitors’ experience during these shoulder months were also reported to be largely negative, with bears being in hibernation and poor weather conditions.

Mitigations

Several “mitigations” to higher levels of cruise visitation were explored during the process. The most popular idea was for “designated quiet days”, which came from public comments at the November 13th town hall. Designated quiet days were proposed as consistent days of the week throughout the whole season with minimal cruise ship visitors (which the task force defined as 1,000 passengers or less), such as the example of “No Ship Saturdays”.

- At the December 7th town hall, participants identified Saturdays and Sundays as their top choices for designated quiet days.
- In the community survey, 59% stated that CBS should advocate for designated quiet day(s), with 44% preferring two per week, 29% preferring one per week

(27% skipped the question, presumably because they did not believe CBS should advocate for designated quiet days).

This and other mitigations considered at the December 7th town hall had low-to-moderate levels of potential effectiveness as reported by participants. Participants were asked whether they would support 2023 levels of cruise tourism going forward if:

- Passengers were more dispersed throughout town, meaning fewer came downtown at once: 45% agreed, 45% disagreed
- There was less noise and/or air pollution from shuttle buses: 33% agreed, 45% disagreed
- There was less pedestrian crowding and jaywalking around Harrigan and the nearby traffic light: 33% agreed, 45% disagreed
- There were 1-2 quiet days per week: 35% agreed, 55% disagreed

When asked whether participants would support limiting cruise ships at city docks to reach a more balanced level of cruise tourism, 30% agreed and almost 60% disagreed.

B. Recommendations

As evidenced through the findings, making a quantitative recommendation on the “right” level of cruise tourism in Sitka that is representative of overall community needs and desires is a difficult task, to say the least. Given the emotional weight of the topic, polarity of data collected, limitations on quantitative approaches to answer the question, and lack of data on what economic impacts would be experienced at different levels of cruise tourism, the task force was not prepared to make a recommendation on singular numbers defining the right level of cruise tourism. However, the task force does offer the following recommendations:

1. Pursue mutual agreements with the industry to achieve community goals for levels of cruise visitation

Following the examples of other communities in Alaska and nationwide, CBS should pursue mutual agreements (usually done in the form of a Memorandum of Agreement) to advocate for community goals related to cruise visitation. Specific points of advocacy are outlined in the recommendations that follow.

2. “Flatten the curve”

While maintaining current levels of cruise tourism will not satisfy those in the community who would like significant reductions from current levels, ensuring that at a minimum Sitka does not experience continued exponential growth such as that seen in 2022 and 2023 would ease the anxiety of many residents regarding future growth.

3. Take out the peak

As the public's top priority for visitor number management was the daily number, and most impacts cited were in relation to large visitor days (congestion, safety concerns, telecommunication challenges), CBS should advocate to reduce "peak" days in the cruise ship schedule. This should include limiting "large ships", the neopanamax ships with 4,000+ passenger capacity, to one per day. Also consider limiting their visitation on a weekly basis, with a potential range of two to four days per week. Based on the results of the community survey, it appears that a daily limit between 5,000 – 7,000 cruise passengers is most agreeable; that comes with the significant caveat that the range of responses was vast and lacked a clear majority consensus. Another element of "taking out the peak" includes operational considerations. The disbursement of visitors throughout town and staggering of ship arrivals can also contribute to reductions in congestion.

4. Shorten the length of the season

CBS should advocate to limit sailings in April – early May, as well as late September – October. Maintaining the historic, standard season of mid-May through mid-September would reduce the strain and burnout experienced by local businesses and the public generally.

5. Continue collecting data

Continuous data collection from the community, industry trends, evaluation methodologies for sustainable tourism, and economic data should be prioritized. Additional community surveys, impact studies, and economic impact studies should be commissioned.

6. Prioritize initiatives that enhance and protect Sitka's character and quality of life

Many of the recommendations made under the other directives speak to potential priority actions and projects that would enhance and protect both Sitka's character and quality of life. In addition to those recommendations made under directives three and four, the following should also be considered:

- Continue to invest tax revenues gained through cruise tourism in services and infrastructure that promote quality of life. Improve communication to residents about how the revenue and services/infrastructure are related.
- Promote and foster other industries, particularly those that operate year-round or in the winter months to keep Sitka a vibrant, year-round community with diverse economic pillars.
- Protect local enjoyment of holidays such as the 4th of July, and protect use of public facilities for important events such as voting by reducing conflict with cruise visitation. Advocate for changes in the cruise ship schedule and/or traffic re-routing to achieve this.

**DIRECTIVE TWO:
ANNUAL REVIEW CYCLE OF CBS OPERATIONS AND TOURISM FUNDING**

The rapid growth of cruise tourism in Sitka has necessitated the mobilization of new CBS operations, budgetary considerations, and the need for continued public input regarding tourism management. The establishing resolution noted that based on a recommendation by the task force, a permanent Tourism Commission may be pursued in order to have a permanent body that advises the Assembly on tourism-related issues. The task force makes the following recommendations:

1. Establish a Tourism Commission

A permanent body is needed to continue the work done by the Planning Commission on the Short-Term Tourism Plan, the recommendations of the task force, and additional tourism-related issues currently at hand and those that will undoubtedly arise in the future. A permanent commission is also the best way to facilitate a consistent annual review cycle. This commission could operate year-round, or could follow the seasonal structure currently utilized by the Ports and Harbors Commission (which does not meet in June, July, and August).

2. Annual review cycle

The seasonality of the visitor industry will largely guide the annual review cycle. Additionally, Ordinance 23-17 established an annual process to consider public proposals for use of commercial passenger vessel (CPV) excise tax contingent on Assembly authorization to call for such proposals each year. The following annual review schedule is proposed, starting at the beginning of the fiscal year:

- July – August (if meeting over summer)
 - Promote the availability of the public proposal process for CPV funds
 - Monitor CBS operations
 - Monitor public input received through community feedback line/TBMP feedback line
 - Continue work on near-term and on-going action items
- September
 - Review public proposals made for CPV funds
 - Provide recommendations on public proposals made for CPV funds to the Administrator for presentation to the Assembly
- October
 - Solicit community feedback on the most recent visitor season
 - Review TBMP data
- November – December
 - Using community feedback and other data/input, and consider potential recommendations for funding, regulation/land use provisions, changes or additions to CBS operations, and changes to TBMP provisions.

- Prepare an annual report to the Assembly on input collected and recommendations. Identify immediate actions to be taken before the next visitor season, near-term actions (those to be addressed over the course of the next 12 months), and long-term/ongoing actions
- January
 - Present annual report to the Assembly, seek approval for action items to be prioritized by the Commission
- February – April
 - Prioritize work on immediate actions
 - Continue work on near-term and long-term actions
- May – July (if meeting over summer) Promote the availability of the public proposal process for CPV funds
 - Monitor CBS operations
 - Monitor public input received through community feedback line/TBMP feedback line
 - Continue work on near-term and on-going action items

**DIRECTIVE THREE:
ASSIST IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF A TOURISM MANAGEMENT BEST
PRACTICES (TBMP) PROGRAM**

A Tourism Management Best Practices (TBMP) program is intended to service as a voluntary compliance structure that establishes the best practices for tourism related businesses to provide high quality visitor experiences, reduce the potential for conflict between businesses, and promote community interests related to tourism business operations. A successful TBMP program will have stated goals with a concise framework for administration, communication, training, monitoring and evaluation. Its recommended practices will be practical, adequate for desired outcomes and supported by member partners. It will also fairly and satisfactorily address concerns voiced by the wider community so as to gain broad support.

The initial, draft provisions of a TBMP program are included in Appendix D. It was largely based on Juneau's program, and edited to fit Sitka through industry review and contributions from a community-wide survey.

Overall, the task force is very supportive of a TBMP program in Sitka and is optimistic about the benefits it could bring. The task force makes the following recommendations regarding TBMP:

1. Determine program administration

The program must be administered by an organization with the capacity to manage the myriad responsibilities that come with the program including enrollment, monitoring, compliance, reception and dissemination of community feedback, and continuous improvement. This could potentially be included as a responsibility in the Visit Sitka contract, or by soliciting feedback from other interested organizations.

2. Implementation

The task force recommends a "soft launch" for the 2024 season to promote awareness of the program and some limited enrollment to trial provisions/processes. For the last two summers, a "community feedback line" has been operated by Visit Sitka; this should continue in 2024 and become part of the TBMP program.

3. Maximize participation and compliance

The program administrator should compile and continuously update a list of tourism related businesses to maximize outreach. **The CBS sales tax registration process could be used to identify and do outreach with new businesses to make them aware of the program.**

In Juneau, certain municipal permits require participation in the TBMP program. This should be considered in Sitka to bolster the effectiveness of the program.

A “Preferred Providers Program” should be developed to identify and reward program members for meeting and exceeding applicable guidelines potentially in the form of a Gold, Silver, and Bronze status system. This part of the program would require further development to define actions and standards for each status which could include provisions for documented employee training, collaboration with other program members, good reviews, responsiveness to reported problems/complaints, etc. Status in the Preferred Providers Program could come with identification in marketing materials and at their business.

4. Training is key

With many employees new to Sitka every year in the tourism industry, accessible training for TBMP members and their employees is key to ensuring familiarity and compliance with TBMP provisions. Training materials should be developed by the program administrator in conjunction with members and updated as needed. Track training completed, and consider mid-season training/check-ins to ensure program compliance.

5. Centralize information sharing

A searchable inventory of resources such as existing regulations and requirements for tour businesses, responsible tourism guidelines such as Whale Sense, Adventure Green Practices, health and safety practices, tool-kits, and printable signs should be established as a resource along with the TBMP program.

The program administrator should also serve as a centralized disseminator of information to program members and the public regarding the cruise ship schedule and changes, traffic disruptions, events, etc.

Additionally, guidelines for visitors should be provided regarding transportation, traffic safety, littering, smoking, and general courteousness that Sitkans ask of its visitors such as respect for indigenous culture, language, artwork, and sites, historical sites, the local ecosystem, trail etiquette, etc.

DIRECTIVE FOUR: LAND USE REGULATIONS AND WATERFRONT DEVELOPMENT POLICIES

Encompassing a wide variety of issues, findings and recommendations under this directive are organized by topic below.

A. E-Bikes

Through our public engagement efforts, the task force found that a top concern among residents is transportation-related safety issues on roads, sidewalks, and recreational trails resulting from e-bikes rented by visitors. The task force makes the following recommendations:

1. **Classify e-bikes as motorized vehicles**
This would better define their use, and ensure that they are regulated similarly to other vehicles in terms of traffic laws. A primary concern to address through this action would be ensuring that e-bikes are not used on pedestrian sidewalks.
2. **Identify multi-use paths to be used by rental e-bikes**
Determine which multi-use paths in Sitka should allow rental e-bikes and work with operators in the proposed TBMP program to inform their renters. Also consider whether a regulatory process such as a permitting requirement for e-bike rentals could be implemented to enforce multi-use path restrictions. A regulatory solution is included as an option rather than a definitive solution because of the potential challenges associated with regulatory differentiation between rented versus owned e-bike utilization of multi-use paths.

If a Tourism Commission is created, we recommend that they work in conjunction with the Parks and Recreation Committee to identify desirable/undesirable trails and multi-use paths for use by rental e-bikes.

3. **Require equipment on rental e-bikes**
Require operators to install bells on rental e-bikes. E-bikes can move at considerable speed, but are very quiet. The installation and use of a bell can help alert other pedestrians, rollers, or bikers that they intend to pass.

Require rental e-bike operators to install a GPS tracking system on their rentals to determine if e-bikes are being used in areas “off limits” as established through regulation and/or TBMP. This will also collect data to see use patterns for better future planning. An additional option would be to have “geofencing,” a virtual fence or perimeter, as part of the GPS system which would disable the motorization component of the e-bike if taken to areas not allowed for rental e-bike use.

B. Commercial recreational use permits

Closely related to the concerns related to e-bike use on multi-use paths, there were broad concerns raised by the public regarding overcrowding at recreational sites and on trails. CBS currently requires a “commercial recreational use permit” for those wishing to guide, outfit/rent equipment, or provide transportation services using municipal lands. The provisions for this permit and its administration are outlined in SGC Chapter 14.10. Currently, the Parks and Recreation Committee reviews all applications, and makes recommendations to the Administrator for their approval. The task force makes the following recommendation:

1. Identify and protect priority recreational sites

The task force gathered some preliminary information about priority recreational sites for residents at its November 13th town hall meeting. This information should be used as a starting point to more definitively identify priority sites, and establish acceptable levels of use at all sites by commercial recreational use permittees. An ordinance may be needed to adjust the permit regulations/administration to incorporate these findings.

If a Tourism Commission is created, we recommend that they work in conjunction with the Parks and Recreation Committee on this action.

C. Permit Administration

CBS has six departments which issue various permits related to the tourism industry. Public comments have indicated that the community and industry would benefit from a streamlining/centralizing these permits within CBS. In addition to making the permitting process more understandable and accessible to potential permittees, streamlining/centralizing tourism related permits would enable more responsive review/revision of the permit regulations and better ensure consistency of requirements, fees, and enforcement since the administration of said permits would be less dispersed throughout CBS. The task force makes the following recommendations:

1. Create a designated tourism position within CBS

Create a CBS position that would coordinate permit requirements for businesses engaged in the tourism industry. There currently is a dedicated tourism position in the Administrator’s Draft FY25 budget which could potentially perform this role. The position would administer the application processes and also assess ongoing compliance with permits.

2. Food cart permits

Relocate the administration of the “mobile, nonmotorized food cart” permits established in SGC 6.20.015 from within the CBS Police Department to a more appropriate department.

D. CBS Harbors and GPIIP Berthing Policy Related to Cruise Passengers/Vessels

Due to the existing organizational structure, berthing policies and fees for municipal harbors and the deepwater dock at the Gary Paxton Industrial Park (GPIP) are managed separately, meaning that there is not consistency between these facilities. The task force makes the following recommendation:

1. Align berthing policies and fees

If these facilities continue to be under separate management, alignment may be achieved in the short-term, but will likely diverge in the future. A new management structure which brings these facilities together is recommended. This may require forming a Port Authority or Port Director position which could encompass CBS Harbors, GPIP, the CBS float plane facility and the CBS Rocky Guterrez Airport. A particular priority should be standardizing CBS head tax fees and collection.

E. Zoning

The Planning and Community Development Department, Planning Commission, and Assembly should evaluate zoning changes necessary to manage the current and future larger number of cruise passengers arriving in Sitka. The task force makes the following recommendations:

1. Zoning for future cruise docks

Currently, the zoning code does not differentiate between types or sizes of commercial use docks. Commercial use docks are allowed by-right in the general commercial zones, the waterfront district, and the industrial district.

The task force recommends creating a separate use in the zoning code that would distinguish large docks that could berth cruise ships, and make that use conditional in all zones that currently allow commercial use docks. The definition could be based on the size of the dock, the size of vessel it can berth, and/or the number of passengers that could disembark from a vessel berthed at the dock. As a reference point, SGC 18.15.014 states that the Assembly may authorize an advisory vote that would authorize the sale or lease of municipal property for use of a dock or transfer facility that could be used by cruise ships exceeding 300 feet in length.

2. Zone Katlian Bay

While Katlian Bay and the uplands are in CBS jurisdiction, it is currently does not have a zoning designation which means that there are few, if any, zoning provisions that apply to land use in this area. With construction of the road to Katlian Bay by the State of Alaska, this area will become more accessible and more readily developable. The task force recommends that this area be zoned, and in particular, ensure that whatever zoning designation is applied makes development of another cruise ship dock not allowed by-right.

F. Pedestrian Safety

Overall, there has been tremendous concern from the public with congestion downtown on large cruise passenger days, and the resulting impacts to pedestrian safety. The task force makes the following recommendations:

1. Jaywalking

There is currently no provision in the Sitka General Code regarding jaywalking. The task force recommends changing the general code to make jaywalking illegal, particularly in the downtown corridor and along Harbor Drive. It is notable that targeted enforcement is not allowed, and that this provision would apply to locals who may oppose it.

2. Continue work with ADOT/PF to address critical areas

CBS should continue to advocate that ADOT/PF address pedestrian safety issues along their routes, with particular emphasis on Harbor Drive and on the section of Sawmill Creek Road near the National Historical Park and the Raptor Center. Potentially add or relocate crosswalks at these locations to reduce the local impact of vast pedestrian use by visitors and associated safety issues.

G. Bus drop-off locations

Harrigan Centennial Hall (HCH) is the sole drop-off location for shuttle buses that transport passengers from the Sitka Sound Cruise Terminal to the downtown area. While it has historically been utilized as a hub for cruise tourism transportation in the summer, alternate or additional locations should be considered. HCH and the Library which share parking areas are important community buildings, and cruise-related traffic can conflict with community needs/uses of these facilities. Additionally, the location of this facility creates traffic inefficiencies; visitors dropped off here must cross Harbor Drive to go to Lincoln Street (leading to jaywalking issues previously discussed), and the left-turn into the facility from Harbor Drive can slow traffic.

Explore additional alternate locations for cruise passenger drop off locations to relieve congestion at Centennial Hall

- Utilize the lightering under the O'Connell bridge as an additional drop off. This may require busses to travel to the location via Katlian St from Halibut Point Rd.
O'Connell bridge location does have existing bathroom facilities.
- Identify other additional alternate locations for cruise passenger drop off in the downtown area.

H. Downtown bathroom availability

A concern raised by the public were the lack of publicly available restrooms in the downtown area, and a desire to get away from use of the temporary restrooms currently in use during the Lincoln Street closures. The task force makes the following recommendation:

1. Identify a location(s) for permanent public restrooms

With restrooms at HCH and the corner of Lake and Lincoln Streets, the west end of Lincoln Street is a priority area for a new, permanent public restroom. Totem Square could be an attractive option, however it is owned by the State of Alaska which may preclude its use for this purpose. CBS could also explore leasing an underutilized business location downtown to create a public restroom.

I. Lincoln Street Closures

The closure of Lincoln Street on busier cruise-ship days came up throughout the public engagement process. While there are still mixed opinions in the community regarding the closures, a sizable number of participants at public engagement events who voiced preference for a reduction in cruise visitation cited the Lincoln Street closures as a primary reason for why visitor numbers should be lower than current levels. The task force makes the following recommendation:

1. Lincoln Street closures

Minimize Lincoln St closures when possible. The Lincoln Street Repaving Project should be prioritized, as a design that expands pedestrian space on the street could greatly reduce the need for street closures.

J. Downtown character and use

Another priority raised by the public was the character of our downtown. Highly valued for its unique, local feel, the public expressed concern with the number of vacant store fronts downtown, and fear that it will continue to decline in terms of year-round business and general vibrancy. The task force makes the following recommendations:

1. Addressing vacancy downtown

A proposal for a “vacancy tax” modeled on its use in other communities was considered. Ultimately, the task force was divided on making this recommendation. There was more agreement in favor of an incentive-based approach to address vacancy.

2. Downtown improvements

As noted above, the pending Lincoln Street Repaving Project should be prioritized to both enhance the function of downtown, as well as the aesthetics. Community members expressed interest in more amenities such as benches, planters, lighting, and plaza/food vending spaces. These improvements would enhance both the local and visitor experience, and help make the downtown area feel more vibrant.

3. Smoking in the downtown area

Current smoking laws prohibit smoking within 25 feet of a business entrance. This makes a significant portion of Lincoln Street a non-smoking area, at least on sidewalks. Designating smoking areas will better enforce smoking laws by providing an opportunity to redirect those currently violating this law, and, with proper receptacles, prevent more smoking litter.

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DIRECTIVE FIVE:
REGIONAL STRATEGIES TO ADVANCE SITKA'S INTERESTS REGARDING
CRUISE TOURISM

- Continued participation in the AML Port Communities group
- Continued participation at the Northwest Cruise Symposium
- Continued participation in the Green Corridor initiative
- Continued participation in industry groups like ATIA, Heritage and Cultural Tourism Conference

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