



The waterfront area for Huna Totem Corp.'s proposed Aak'w Landing. (Michael S. Lockett / Juneau Empire file photo)

My Turn: Aak'w Landing offers growth opportunities amidst declines in Juneau

By Max Mertz

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Juneau has two bright possibilities for economic development along the waterfront: the U.S. Coast Guard icebreaker Storis and Huna Totem Corp.'s proposed Aak'w Landing — a new cruise ship dock and uplands development.

The government-funded Storis won't directly increase our tax base, but it should bring more people to town and potentially help to alleviate population decline, especially in the younger demographic. Hopefully families will be part of the mix of new Coast Guard staff coming, with kids coming to the schools and families looking for housing, but that is several years away.

Huna Totem's privately-funded Aak'w Landing presents potential for great impact and benefit to all of Juneau. Huna Totem is a for-profit corporation. It is distinct from other tribal entities in Juneau in that it pays taxes on its earnings, it pays property tax on all its property and it pays sales tax on its local sales. Because of Huna Totem's tax status, the Aak'w Landing will be subject to property tax. The project will likely be in the top five of all property taxpayers in Juneau right behind the mines and AEL&P. This project will easily generate at least hundreds of thousands of dollars in property taxes. It will pay for police officers, firefighters and other first responders. It will pay for parks and recreational activities. It will pay for other government services. In short, it will grow our economy and overall tax base.

And the dining and retail sales from Aak'w will be subject to sales tax further adding to our government coffers.

The final price tag of Aak'w Landing will likely be much more expensive than the currently quoted \$150 million. Whatever the final cost, it will bring needed construction jobs, and in the long term will add year-round and seasonal employment. These are jobs that attract younger workers. The direct, but also indirect, benefit of the project to Juneau will be significant. Also, Huna Totem is positioning the Aak'w Landing dock to ensure the adjacent icebreaker can access USCG facilities and the new dock will accommodate buoy tenders and other smaller USGC vessels.

Juneau's population is aging and our overall population is set to decline. Opportunities for economic growth have been infrequent. State employment has fallen. The recent growth seen in the cruise industry visitors, which brought much-needed new sales tax dollars, is forecasted to level off. Our mining industry, while also very important, is stable. Juneau's economy is stagnant at best and the forecast is grim. Projects such as Aak'w Landing should be cheered by both the Assembly and the community.

We all know Huna Totem. Their corporate offices have been based in Juneau for decades. Roughly half of their shareholders live in Juneau. They contribute to our local economy and our nonprofit and youth groups. Their proposal will be a significant undertaking for them that we will all benefit from. We should support them. It will increase our jobs, our tax base and our economic future. It is a win-win for Juneau.

- *Max Mertz is a long-time Juneau resident, a CPA and [business](#) owner.*