



This rendering depicts Huna Totem Corp.'s proposed new cruise ship dock downtown now being considered by the Juneau Assembly. (City and Borough of Juneau)

Opinion: Approval of new cruise dock moves forward

By Win Gruening

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Aak'w Landing, the long-proposed cruise dock development in downtown Juneau is one step closer to reality.

During an Assembly Committee of the Whole meeting on March 17, Assembly members approved a draft ordinance empowering the city manager to begin negotiations to allow the project to proceed. The ordinance now heads to the full Assembly for a hearing and formal approval at their April 7 meeting.

With few exceptions, discussion remained positive and productive. Most Assembly members clearly realize what an economic boost this project will provide to Juneau's economy.

The \$200 million enterprise includes a cruise dock, welcome center, retail and dining options, a public park, underground parking, and an Indigenous Knowledge, Science and Cultural Center. The development will generate significant city property and sales taxes, promote healthy growth, and help staunch our declining population and shrinking tax base.

Project owner Huna Totem Corporation (HTC), has plowed through a multitude of bureaucratic and legal requirements that delayed the project for years.

However, the Assembly's predilection for overregulation and micromanagement was on full display. Leading up to the meeting, Assembly members submitted numerous draft amendments to the proposed enabling ordinance authorizing the city manager to negotiate and execute a necessary tidelands lease.

While some amendments were fairly innocuous, others revealed a lack of understanding of their possible impact.

Among the more benign proposals were suggestions for HTC to participate in collaborative scheduling of cruise ships, inflation adjustments to lease payments, and a ban on rental car facilities and commercial activities on the Seawalk. Most had already been discussed informally or were standard lease provisions.

Some of the more questionable amendments included:

- Ships at dock no larger than 4,400 passenger capacity.
- Lease incentives to encourage clean fuel usage and shore power development.
- A right-of-first-refusal for CBJ in the event of project sale.
- U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) written assurance of dock compatibility.

During Assembly discussion, several members pointed out that these amendments could be problematic, particularly since they only pertain to the HTC dock but not the other four docks in Juneau (two of which are owned by CBJ).

Ultimately, the passenger capacity amendment and the USCG approval amendment passed, but the right-of-first-refusal and lease incentive amendments were defeated.

These actions are precedent-breaking, since up to now, cruise activity has been adjusted through mutual negotiation with cruise lines. Examples include limits on daily cruise passenger numbers, hot berthing, anchoring, and lightering, as well as a five-ship daily limit which caps additional cruise ships within the borough, regardless of the number of docks.

Apparently city leaders are comfortable inserting restrictions on a new dock that don't apply to other docks including their own. In fact, no other Juneau dock has any significant restrictions except borough-wide negotiated limits.

So why disadvantage one dock over another? Negotiating voluntary restrictions among cruise lines that apply to all docks is a more equitable approach.

Regarding the requirement for written USCG approval that the HTC dock won't impede docking of the new icebreaker, there's no existing mechanism to obtain that. The USCG has no authority to "approve" someone else's dock. Surely the city can rely on its own approved simulations or studies, as has been done in the past.

Particularly disturbing was a last-minute amendment spearheaded by Alicia Hughes-Skandijs that would arbitrarily charge above market rate for the tidelands lease. The inherent conflict of interest should be obvious since the city's docks will compete with Aak'w Landing. The idea was tabled, but may surface again.

HTC has not only satisfied concerns about the project raised during public meetings, they've gone well beyond what's required of other docks in Juneau. At their expense, HTC will construct a seawalk and offer shore power, even though similar existing dock improvements have been funded with passenger fees.

It isn't in anyone's best interest for city leaders to levy duplicative, overly-restrictive, and self-serving requirements that threaten project financial viability and ultimately could lead to further deterioration in Juneau's

economy along with higher taxes on a shrinking population.

It takes political courage to tell naysayers, “I want this city to grow, because this is the only way it will be affordable to live here.”

Thankfully, the Assembly has taken the first step.

• After retiring as the senior vice president in charge of business banking for KeyBank in Alaska, Win Gruening became a regular Opinion Page columnist for the Juneau Empire. He was born and raised in Juneau and graduated from the U.S. Air Force Academy in 1970. He is involved in various local and statewide organizations. Columns, My Turns and Letters to the Editor represent the view of the author, not the view of the Juneau Empire. Have something to say? Here's how to submit a My Turn or letter.

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