

Sitka Visitor Industry Plan

version 1.0

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Prepared for the City and Borough of Sitka

Coordinated by the Long Range Planning and Economic Development Commission

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Sitka Tourism Plan Executive Summary

Mission Statement: To create a sustainable plan that maximizes the contributions and minimizes the impacts of the visitor industry so that a good quality of life for Sitkans is realized.

Receiving visitors is a way of life for Sitkans - it is woven into the fabric of this community. Travelers range from Mt. Edgecumbe students who come from all points of the state to cruise ship tourists who come from all points of the globe.

What makes Sitka an attractive place to visit is also what makes it a great place to live. The landscape and rich natural resources are easy to see. Yet even a visitor who comes for a few hours to this town can realize that there is much more: a diversity of people and lifestyles, a thriving arts community, rich history and culture, a diverse economy – the list goes on. Above all, a strong sense of community, a strong sense of place.

It is clear that the visitor industry influences far more than Sitka's economy. Visitors – how and why they come, and what they do when they are here – influence how residents live. The visitor industry affects Sitkans' quality of life now and can have great influence over Sitkans' quality of life in the future. Assuring that the visitor industry's course in this community **maximizes the contributions and minimizes the impacts so that a good quality of life for Sitkans is realized** requires a plan as unique as the people that make up this very special place.

The Sitka Visitor Industry Plan was created by a diverse group of community members through a facilitated collaborative process. Over the course of one year, these individual community members forged a common understanding of the complex issues surrounding the Visitor Industry to create a planning framework that could benefit all of Sitka. While this plan includes specific recommendations for a course of action, it also provides the opportunity for ongoing oversight and review of how the Visitor Industry enhances and impacts the community.

The key to this structure is that it aims to balance adverse visitor impacts with their contributions, and ensure that Sitka's unique assets remain intact.

This document illustrates a set of Overarching Principles and a framework of six Strategic Directions. Together, they provide a foundation that can support action plans for every aspect of the visitor industry. Initial action steps are recommended for the next two years, and provisions have been made for additions and alterations within these two years and beyond.

This proposal is a living framework to be used for ongoing planning. It is a dynamic structure that is open to new input and recommendations and must be reviewed regularly. Many of the elements are inter-related and depend upon each other for implementation.

This planning process has not been without contention. While some Stakeholders expressed fears that growth in the visitor industry would lead to an unacceptably altered community character, others worried that the elements of this plan would stifle potential economic growth for

Sitka. The goal of this process was for people of differing perspectives to come together and propose a plan acceptable to all. To bridge the points of view within the community that range from a desire to see rapid growth in the Visitor Industry to those who think there is already too much growth and all other perspectives along that continuum, this plan recommends **managed growth**.

The process to develop this plan was initiated by an Assembly resolution on November 15, 2005, which directed City resources toward the facilitation of a planning process and development of a tourism plan. This process was conducted under the auspices of the City's Long Range Planning and Economic Development Commission. The content of this plan was created by a diverse group of community members (the "Stakeholders") through a highly participatory, transparent public process. The Stakeholders held thirty 3-hour meetings over the course of one year. Over 3,000 community volunteer hours are represented in this work. Nearly every word spoken at these meetings was posted in notes and reports on the plan's website (www.sitkatourismplan.org).

Finally, this planning process has created another key resource: a core group of Sitkans committed to seeing that this plan is implemented. In working together through this process, Stakeholders have become well versed in the many facets of Sitka's visitor industry. They find creative, win/win solutions where others see only barriers. They are ardently anticipating the work ahead to bring this plan into action.

THE PROCESS

At the outset of the planning process, a convening group identified the vital perspectives and experiences that should be reflected in the Stakeholder group. Throughout the course of the process, exhaustive, documented efforts were made to seek and maintain representation from all of those perspectives and experiences. In reality, it was difficult to sustain full participation throughout the process for a variety of reasons. However, it is important to note that the viewpoints and comments of all participants, irrespective of their level of participation, were documented and included. The core group of Stakeholders respected and valued diverse viewpoints, and to the best of their ability, they kept those concerns and ideas alive throughout the plan. Additionally, as the Steering Committee has heard in feedback from some former Stakeholders, attrition from the process does not necessarily mean non-endorsement of the content.

Although the group was charged with creating a long-range tourism plan, the Stakeholders decided early in the process to think more broadly about the opportunities and impacts of all visitors to Sitka, regardless of the time of year that they visit, how they arrived (airplane, ferry, cruise ship), or the purpose of their visit (business, pleasure, conference, health care, school trip, etc.) By substituting "visitor" for "tourist," the Stakeholders felt they were better able to consider the needs and expectations of all types of visitors.

THE FRAMEWORK

The **Overarching Principles** are value statements that reflect the Stakeholders' emphatic desire to uphold and enhance the high quality of life enjoyed by residents of Sitka.

These principles provide the filter through which all Visitor Industry planning should take place. They apply to every recommendation made in this document and should apply to any future actions or decisions.

The Principles are the important underpinnings that protect Sitka's unique qualities and sense of community. They remain constant even as needs, resources, and other environmental factors change.

The Overarching Principles are:

- No community remains special by accident.
- Sitka's unique character must be maintained.
- Sitka wants to be a high value, moderate volume visitor destination.
- Sitka is characterized by locally owned and operated businesses.
- The Visitor Industry will continue to be an important component of a diverse and healthy economy in Sitka.
- The Visitor Industry will optimize its benefits to the residents of Sitka.
- Partnerships are critical for implementing this plan and making unified decisions regarding the Visitor Industry.
- Dialogue and decisions about the Visitor Industry that have community impacts should include the appropriate people and be based on good information, through a process that invites public participation.

The **Strategic Directions** channel the overall plan into six broad categories that help move the community toward a common vision. Each Strategic Direction is comprised of several **Action Focus Areas** to guide the overall movement of the direction. The Strategic Directions act as a rudder and the Action Focus Areas provide the momentum. Together they work to navigate around the obstacles and toward the vision. Both the Strategic Directions and the Action Focus Areas are intended to remain constant for at least five years.

Benchmarks for the next two years are included as first steps in each Strategic Direction. Each benchmark is written as a completed act and included in the quarter where it is anticipated to be achieved. As these Benchmarks are accomplished, it is evidence that the community is moving in the Strategic Directions. The benchmarks identified at this point have been carefully arranged in context on a timeline; some of them are dependent upon the completion of others. The section on "catalytic strands" (included in the full report) illustrates some examples

of how several benchmarks act as guides along the same path – one must be accomplished before advancing to the next. There are other benchmarks that are more independent and not as relevant to previous or subsequent actions. The narratives for each Strategic Direction (also in the full report) offer more specific insights to how individual benchmarks relate to others in the plan.

Benchmarks are the most variable aspect of the plan – the ones included here are not static or exhaustive. Similarly, not every step needed to accomplish each Benchmark is included – just the key points along the path.

The most dynamic aspect of this plan is that it has the capacity to incorporate new concerns and ideas as they arise in the community, and find an appropriate way to respond to those new topics through innovative solutions that provide widespread benefits.

Listed below are the six Strategic Directions and a statement of intent for each. A complete map for each of the Strategic Directions, including the Benchmarks, is attached.

Visitor Industry Plan Oversight

Visitor Industry entities, local government leaders, and residents working together in continual oversight of the Visitor Industry Plan.

Outreach

To encourage meaningful dialogues within the community, with corporations, and with other governments regarding the visitor industry to move this plan forward.

Marketing and Promotion

To market and promote Sitka within the guidelines of the visitor industry plan.

Incentive and Policies

To create proactive strategies to maintain and enhance the qualities that make Sitka a special place to live and visit.

Transportation and Infrastructure

To provide the framework of structure and support for Sitka's Visitor Industry and optimize visitor access to Sitka's community and natural assets.

Information and Data

Ongoing data collection about Sitka's visitor industry, which will be used to inform other committee/community decisions.

THE FUTURE

The Stakeholders created this plan to realize their shared vision and enhance the quality of life for all Sitkans. Just as these elements were the foundation for the planning process, they are also the goals. In constructing the vision statement, Stakeholders were challenged to envision tangible pieces of evidence they would find in the future that show how this plan has worked for the community. They believe the following statements can intentionally be realized or maintained as a result of implementing this plan:

- Beautiful, efficient public spaces and amenities
- Unique year-round attractions, festivals, and celebrations
- Distinct city identity focused on meeting residents' needs
- Visitor industry contributes to a healthy local economy
- Active stewardship of historical and cultural resources and the wild and clean environment
- Broad array of transportation choices to, from and within Sitka
- Broad community consensus on implementation of visitor industry plan
- Balanced community-supported visitor numbers
- Unique educational opportunities

The Stakeholders worked to create a plan that would balance the contributions and adverse impacts of the visitor industry, in order to ensure a high quality of life for Sitkans. Implementing the plan's recommendations for minimizing adverse impacts and maximizing contributions will help to maintain and enhance these common elements of a good quality of life, as defined by the Stakeholders:

- Sense of place
- Sustainable equitable diverse economy
- Participatory responsive leadership
- Healthy natural environment
- Safe and tolerant community
- Community support services and infrastructure
- Subsistence lifestyle
- Diverse lifestyle choices
- Community wellness
- Cultural and civic institutions

This is a unique plan. It was initiated by a powerful vision to invest in the knowledge and passions of this diverse community. It uses the community's collective wisdom to develop creative solutions. It was produced through long hours of dedicated and focused work. Along the way,

inspiration came from the words and actions of the people of this community – sometimes from unexpected people in unexpected ways.

What remains is to act on this work. If implemented in the same spirit by which it was developed, this plan can support a sustainable visitor industry as a vital part of life in Sitka, and do so in a way that does not lose the unique qualities of Sitka that make it such a special place for its residents.