

Local Government Focus Group Meeting

Project Name: Waterfront and Economic Development Plan
Project No.: WHI-24-01
Prepared By: Linda Pringle

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Time: 6:00 pm

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Focus Group:

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Scott Korbe	Public Works Director	Skorbe@whittieralaska.gov

Discussion:

Item Topic

1.0 Introductions

David Borg: a lot of information over the last three days in the stakeholder meetings.

- Smitty's Cove and access to this area is a huge discussion topic for transportation folks and recreational users. Kayak access has been a large conversation piece.
- Garbage, trash. Bus staging areas, meetings points, places to go in Whittier. If you drop people off, where do they go, what do they do, what do they have access to? Pick-up points to move around the city or go back to the cruise ship docks.
- Aging infrastructure with restrooms, walkways. Positive feedback of the improved waterfront walkways. Hits to the aged wooden walkways at the north side of the harbor.
- Topics of supporting the fisheries, with an ice plant, providing ice, general parking.
- Signage was a big topic of discussion, where to go, how to get there, what to do when they get there.
- Had a discussion with the DOT representative about their upcoming traffic plan.
 - Confirm DOT representative discussion and traffic plan

Scott Korbe: Surprised by the limited discussion on available lands for future development and what the different people want to see in the harbor front area and the HOB. What is there now and what can be there in the future.

- Discussion on maximization of tourist activities, once we get people here, what can we provide to them, what are we lacking on.
- Infrastructure, not enough water or sewer to facilitate growth. Just because it works this way, it doesn't have to stay this way.
- June, July, August (100-day window), not a lot of discussion on shoulder season and the winter season. How do we preserve some capital or rate structure during the winter months to offset the winter activity.

- Marketing of Whittier. What are Whittier's buzz words/key attractions. Lack of land, Funding improvements, to many stakeholders in a condensed area, Dry areas or shelters in the harbor area, HOB has no city infrastructure (Water, Sewer, Roads)

Kris Erchinger: Safety and convenience with parking. Parking trailers on other side of railroad tracks and then walking over to the launch ramp. Future potential more convenient launch parking at HOB. People getting stuck behind the train, park their boats and then waiting.

- Smitty's Cove launch ramp is in deplorable condition. Enormous potential with the DeLong Dock. In poor condition, but freight numbers and report show that Whittier plays a substantial role with freight. How can Whittier be part of food security for Alaska? Back up the Port of Anchorage as a military location. Develop this as another economic driver in Whittier, diversification of economy.
- Inadequate public restrooms, an immediate need, puts pressure on businesses.
- Water, sewer, infrastructure in the harbor – interested in the physical location of infrastructure and should it be moved? Move to develop restrooms, where is the space. Critical need. Haven't been enough discussion on where larger washrooms are going to go and whether we have water/sewer infrastructure to service these restrooms and can they be open in the winter?
- HOB – road conditions will become a problem if we don't have better road access when we have more traffic.
- A lot of people talking about starting small businesses in Whittier, some people don't have enough resources to do that? How can we encourage small businesses that aren't going to be brick and mortar businesses. If we encourage small businesses what does this look like?
- Signage is a big deal. Congestion in the harbor is a big thing in the summer, when talking about a new harbor at HOB, but it could reroute the heavy duty traffic if there are larger vessels to the HOB and keep smaller vessels in the harbor.
- Trash, not just the volume, but where can it be located so that it doesn't lose its convenience but isn't detracting from the view of the waterfront.
- Trashiness of Whittier. Clean up their act and enforce their own codes, remove Conex trailers from sites that don't allow it, spare boats, car parts, fishing nets, etc. Zoning code violations. A lot of work to clean that area up.

Jamie Loan: Business owner and vice president of the chamber, parks and rec, ports and harbor, and help businesses on the waterfront. Very much agree with Kris's list and defining what Whittier is.

- Walkable waterfront, beaches, trails, history. Where could a sign go that says trails, museum, and directing people. People only seeing a small waterfront without seeing what is actually in Whittier.
- More bathrooms, trash, etc.
- Parks and Rec: we did start painting the pavilion and trying to do small projects, seems that anything associated with Parks and Recreation on the waterfront gets overwhelmed or lost in the fray. If picking up trash, people are behind throwing more trash on the ground.
- They created an in depth survey through Parks and Recreation with a lot of questions related to the waterfront, can pass the data along. Answers are almost opposite from residents to non-residents.
- Seeing a lot on trailheads too. Having a way to not turn it into Disneyland, but clean it up a bit, and enforce rules.

Monica Stockburger: zoning and planning for four years, second full term. Sits as the current chair. Agree with everything that is discussed and with the rental car picture, people who live in Whittier treat it the same way as tourists. Residents don't seem to be above that behavior.

- Rewriting the code and spent a lot of time reading code from other places, concerned about sewage system and how much raw sewage in quantity is being dumped. Don't want to be a participant in actively polluting the sound.

- Handicap access for the restrooms, to the ramps, to the recreational areas. Talking about all disabilities, age, vision impairment, had a hard time crossing from boat launch to triangle.
- Concern about access to the docks, currently only have one ramp that goes down to the public dock, and this may be a safety concern. If there is a fire somewhere, only one access.
- Feel that the waterfront is focused on commercial and there is very little space dedicated to public space that is covered. Families have somewhere to enjoy food, bring a picnic down, come off their boat. Talking about more than the pavilion, maybe more sheltered.
- RV dump sites, limited places for RVs to go. Had one dump site and then it was paved over. See a lot of illegal dumping at the campground, HOB campground, side of portage road. More prevalent than we think. Sewage is a big concern. Clarification on sewage system and where the sewage is going.

Nick Olzenak: Several different angles, most of it is in the form provided. Clearly this group is hearing resonating input from the community members. Aging infrastructure, age old comments about garbage.

- Traffic flow, boat launch, Smitty's Cove, commercial application, are all commonly discussed.
- Trying to get people to think like a resident. Residents are thinking like owners, treating community like they don't want visitors in this community. Think like a visitor, if everyone who lives here is a visitor and visits Whittier with a fresh set of eyes.
- Conex buildings on properties and a lot of other stuff that doesn't belong. It is very low hanging fruit.
- Harbor was able to replace the boardwalk and it is a safer more accessible access to businesses and the waterfront. Very low hanging fruit and easy to implement and provides a much better visitor and resident experience. Small improvements like that can really make a difference.
- Some standard for ramp access to the harbor on the docks.
- HOB is an interesting discussion, money on the table from a federal standpoint, breakwaters and potential to ease traffic flow issues and congestion. People he knows refuse to go to Whittier because of traffic congestion. But they need to get what they have right before they try and replicate it somewhere else. Focus on what has been heard, focus plan on what is already there and has become complacent.
- Not a 100-day place, there are businesses that operate 12 months of the year, 7 days a week. Permanently parked vehicles on sidewalks in Whittier, it doesn't have to be a seasonal town. Changing perspective from a seasonal town to a year-round town.

Peter Denmark: Owner and operator of Alaska Sea Kayakers and on City Council. Cliffside parking lot – leased to a private party twenty years ago with some pretty great terms. Has advocated for some time that City buy out lease for that property and would allow the City to develop its parking plan at the HOB and use the Cliffside Marina, campground, and harbor uplands under a single parking authority. Then via a private enterprise or by the City and run a shuttle all day long all summer long from HOB, no one would have to wait 15-20 minutes max. Park at HOB and take a shuttle to the harbor to get on your boat or cruise or to do what you are doing.

Jason Cates: Speaking with fire hat, safety is a concern. Ensure there is adequate spacing for their apparatus (fire truck). Any improvements need to accommodate access for the fire truck. Fire lane would be 21' wide.

- Parking is a big one.
- Need to get away from 'it's just Whittier' mentality. Unsure what the answer is. Pride and ownership, paint, fixing boardwalk, fixing sidewalk. Safety is big concern.

2.0 Opportunities

Nick Olzenak: come to Whittier and enjoy our backyard and respect it. If the community can create the culture that is clean streets, picking up after themselves, not dumping. City starts enforcing code. This is part of building culture. Things are already there to follow, which will set the example to the visitors. This is a topic that should be resonated in these meetings.

Kris Erchinger: a lot of these plans don't go anywhere because there isn't any money. With all the people coming in, Whittier is in a unique position where they will have access to money to start implementing plans and to do great things in the harbor. What are the highest and best uses for the money to address the big issues. What are your need to haves, then nice to haves, and then big scary dreams. Unique position compared with most communities.

End of Meeting