




CITY AND BOROUGH OF SITKA

A COAST GUARD CITY

MEMORANDUM

To: Mayor Eisenbeisz & Assembly Members

Thru: John Leach, Municipal Administrator

From: Amy Ainslie, Planning & Community Development Director 
Kevin Knox, Parks & Recreation Coordinator

Date: December 11, 2024

Subject: Draft Commercial Recreational Land Use Plan

Background

The Planning & Community Development Department has been working over the course of 2024 to overhaul the commercial recreational land use permitting process under the guidance of the Parks & Recreation Committee and in accordance with the Strategic Plan (Action 1.4 “*Review the impacts and benefits of tourism, and develop policies that prioritize the quality of life for all Sitkans*”) and Tourism Task Force recommendation #18 (“*Identify and protect priority recreation sites*”). This effort has two primary components: a code revision to support the new permitting process, and a Commercial Recreational Land Use Plan (“Use Plan, or Plan”) which includes specific guidance, conditions, and use limitations for CBS recreational assets which would, if adopted, be used to issue permits going forward. The draft Use Plan, as recommended for approval by the Parks & Recreation Committee, is now before you for consideration.

Analysis

The following information and process was used in the creation of the draft Use Plan:

- Existing levels of use for recreational assets as shown through historic permit data, deployed trail counters, and mobile analytic data
- Consultation with the USFS to align, as much as possible, carrying capacity limits for joint-jurisdictional assets
- Public input as gathered through a survey and at public meetings
- Permit holder consultation
- Parks & Recreation Committee discussions and permit hearings

There are several key tenants of the draft Use Plan:

- **Conditions of Approval**
 - Standard Conditions: Conditions of use that will be applied to all permits
 - Special Conditions: Conditions of use that are asset-specific which will be applied to all permits for use of those assets accordingly

- **Special Guidance:** Certain assets carry special guidance provisions which are preferred or best practices when utilizing an asset for commercial purposes. While these provisions should be followed as closely as possible, it is understood that there may be some need for flexibility/deviations on occasion. This is why special guidance is distinguished from conditions of approval which are generally interpreted to be inflexible.

- **Maximum Group Size:** The maximum number of people allowed in a commercial use group for each asset. The maximum group size includes clients plus guides.
 - Survey respondents indicated that managing group sizes was their top management priority.
 - The maximum group sizes in the draft Plan were informed by survey results and public input in which respondents indicated their preferred group size for each asset.
 - Staff also compared the resultant maximum group size from public input to USFS maximum group sizes in their Commercial Use Allocation on Sitka Area Trails and Roads Environmental Assessment (2019) to create as much alignment as possible.
 - Generally, resultant maximum group sizes from the survey matched USFS allocations closely. A minor adjustment was made to Indian River Trail, as the survey results indicated a preferred maximum group size of 7 compared to USFS 8; the draft Use Plan aligned to the USFS group size of 8.
 - However, there was one significant deviation – Thimbleberry/Heart Lake trail. The USFS maximum group size is 15; our survey respondents preferred a significantly lower number of 7. Many public comments were received both through this process and through the Tourism Task Force process that this trail is of particular concern and importance to the community, and that current group sizes were too large. The draft Use Plan used the preferred maximum of 8 resulting from public/Committee input.
 - The Parks & Recreation Committee adjusted some maximize group sizes to normalize limits across asset types (i.e. trails, water accesses, remote areas, etc.) where possible.

- **Maximum Groups per Week:** The maximum total number of commercial client groups allowed per week for each asset.
 - Survey results indicated that managing the number of groups per day at recreational assets was their second highest management priority.

- The maximum groups per week in the draft Plan were derived from the survey results and public input in which respondents indicated their preferred number of groups per day for each asset. A weighted average calculation was applied to arrive at a single number for each asset, as the results from the survey did not indicate a clear, majority preference for any asset. To facilitate permit administration/issuance, this was converted into a maximum groups per week.
- Across most assets, there was a fairly even split between those who wished to see commercial use on weekdays only or any day of the week, and some who indicated a preference for no commercial use. To account for these differences, the maximum groups per week was calculated by multiplying the overall preferred number of groups per day by the weighted average preference for days of week (5 for weekdays only, 7 for any day, etc.)
- **Fee Schedule:** Based on comments from the Parks & Recreation Committee, the public, and permit holders, increased fees are included in the draft Use Plan.
 - Currently, CBS charges a \$250 application fee and has a \$100 minimum client fee. A \$100 application fee and \$300 annual fee have been proposed (resulting in a net increase of \$50 per permit).
 - The per client fee for general use areas has been raised from \$2 to \$5
 - The per client fee for special use areas including Goddard Hot Springs and Baranof Warm Springs has been raised from \$2 to \$10
- **2025 Exceptions**
 - The draft Use Plan includes a provision that exceptions from Use Plan limits may be granted to permit holders who have existing permits for joint-jurisdictional assets where there is conflict in regulations/limits between management agencies.
 - The draft Use Plan also includes a general provision that exceptions from Use Plan limits may be granted to 2024 permit holders where it can be demonstrated that business decisions (i.e. pre-sold/booked tours, staffing levels, equipment purchases, etc.) for the 2025 season were made based on previously approved levels/types of use.

Fiscal Note

The following table provides analysis of CBS revenues that would result from various permit fees based on 2024 levels of commercial use which included 25 total permits (10 for general use areas and 15 for special use areas), and 3,857 total clients (3,055 for general use areas, and 802 for special use areas). Given that most activity takes place during the summer months, the 6% summer sales tax rate was also applied.

		Per Client Fee						
		All Areas				\$5 for General Areas, Varying Fees for Special Use Areas		
		\$2	\$5	\$8	\$10	\$8	\$10	\$20
Annual Fee	\$250	\$14,802	\$27,067	\$39,332	\$47,509	\$29,617	\$31,318	\$39,819
	\$400	\$18,777	\$31,042	\$43,307	\$51,484	\$33,592	\$35,293	\$43,794
	\$500	\$21,427	\$33,692	\$45,957	\$54,134	\$36,242	\$37,943	\$46,444

The approximate 2024 permit revenue for 2024 based on current permit fees is \$14,802. With the proposed changes to permit fees, the total revenue would be \$35,293.

Recommendation

Provide staff with any feedback/changes and adopt the Commercial Recreational Land Use Plan.

Encl: Draft Commercial Recreational Land Use Plan