

More to come

Ketchikan has been well known as a fishing town, a mining town and a timber town.

It's now a tourism town.

Like it or not, it's what the community has become.

We like it. It's opportunity knocking. It's the present and the foreseeable future.

Fortunately for Ketchikan, the tourists' interest is piqued by the First City.

This past cruise ship season, 1.17 million passengers disembarked onto the community's downtown streets, spreading out across the island in shops and on tours especially designed for their entertainment.

Often, the goal is adventure and wildlife experiences. But shopping for Alaskana is no small component of a visit.

By the end of the 2019 season, much of Ketchikan was ready for a break from crowds from the cruise ships. The past two seasons have been particularly hectic because of a couple years of roadway and sidewalk upgrades along Stedman, Mill and Front streets. That officially completed in September.

The upcoming season should be an improved environment for cruise ship passengers, downtown merchants, tour bus operators and locals alike. Traffic of all kinds should move more smoothly.

The potential is great.

It is projected that Ketchikan will experience sizable growth in the tourism industry over the next decade, adding about another half million cruise visitors.

The city is seeking proposals for expanding its dock space to accommodate ships, particularly the larger ones as the industry experiences a building spurt during the next few years.

The city also is focused on upland improvements and traffic flow for efficiency.

The city isn't the only game in town, though. The Ward Cove Dock Group came on the scene earlier in the year. It intends to build two berths in Ward Cove for ships, first and most specifically for Norwegian Cruise Lines.

The Ward Cove operation anticipates the first ships to be calling in the second half of summer 2020.

This will give Ketchikan a total of six berthing opportunities.

And, with cruise ships being the community's biggest immediate economic opportunity outside of government, schools and the Ketchikan Medical Center, the goal should be to fill them all up. Other industries also will thrive given time.

The visitors are coming to see the First City. The best hosts are the locals who have lived here and know about what they say. It is their stories, their experiences, that the visitors are most interested in.

This is our town. Through local government and business owners and operators, it's up to us to figure out how to present ourselves in a way that will sell the community to the visitors, keeping them and their acquaintances coming back to enjoy new and different experiences season after season. Or to repeat an experience that made an impression that brings them back again.

This can be done without losing our identity and preserving our own sense of community. Paramount in achieving this is handling the increased motor vehicle traffic that busing cruise ship passengers between Ward Cove and downtown will create.

The Ward Cove group spoke about entertaining the idea of shifting passengers from the cruise ships to smaller craft to ferry in and out of downtown. That in itself can be part of the Alaska adventure and would alleviate the potential traffic congestion and wear and tear on the highway and recently reconfigured and resurfaced downtown streets.

But however the Ward Cove Group and the City of Ketchikan address the challenge, tourism is here.

Ketchikan simply has grasp the opportunity to the full extent and make it K-town unique.

The First City is a tourist town now.