



In this Sept. 9, 2014 photo, a fishing vessel is dwarfed by the Norwegian Cruise Lines' Norwegian Jewel and Norwegian Pearl in Juneau's downtown harbor. (Michael Penn | Juneau Empire File)

Opinion: Facts needed, not myths about cruise tourism

This is the trade-off we make.

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Community discussions about cruise tourism impacts are most credible when focused on facts and solutions. They need to remain positive and avoid demonizing the industry.

After all, the “tourism industry,” so often maligned on social media and in newspaper opinion pages, is made up of hundreds of large and small businesses, predominantly local. These are businesses with employees that earn a living here and support our economy – making Juneau a better place for all to live.

Yes, there are impacts that need to be addressed. But characterizing tourists as “invaders” and many of Juneau’s small businesses as “greedy” doesn’t promote an environment where realistic solutions can be crafted.

Nobody, in the industry or not, favors totally “unrestricted tourism” as cruise critics would have you believe. Despite assertions 20 years ago that further tourism growth in Juneau was unsustainable, actual resident complaints have substantially decreased. The reason for that is because the industry was willing to regulate itself and impose guidelines that reduced impacts to residents.

Juneau’s Tourism Best Management Practices (TBMP) are continually being monitored, adjusted and remain in place today. In fact, it’s become a model for other cruise ports – especially in Southeast Alaska – where other communities are considering establishing similar programs.

Suggestions that “there is nothing to stop the cruise ship companies from coming with any volume they want” don’t make sense. Juneau’s port infrastructure limitations (dock length, number of docks) and geographical constraints impose de-facto limits on the size and number of additional cruise ships. Any company permitting a new dock would need to demonstrate mitigation of passenger impacts.

While citizen testimony is useful in identifying areas for improvement, the most important role of the Mayor’s Visitor Industry Task Force (VITF) is to gather factual information to help guide future decisions.

When misstatements of fact are made during public meetings, in newspaper reporting and opinion pages, the VITF should be the first to provide correction and clarification.

As an example, there is a persistent myth concerning the collection of sales taxes on tours sold onboard cruise ships. Comments regularly suggest that these sales are not taxed.

According to the CBJ Sales Tax Office, regardless of where and when a tour is sold, businesses providing tours in Juneau, with limited exceptions, are required to report their associated revenue and remit sales tax.

Another often repeated refrain is that tourists are “overloading” community resources and “crowding out” residents. I wonder if the city-owned Bartlett Regional Hospital sees it that way. Last year, they received over \$10 million in revenue from visitors (mostly cruise passengers) that helped support their operation.

Ditto with Juneau electric utility users benefitting from existing cruise ship purchases of shore power.

These misconceptions, along with others, promote a narrative that cruise visitors are not “paying their way” – which is simply not the case.

The VITF might also consider what numbers should be tracked. Currently, our method of measuring cruise visitors to Juneau is count every cruise ship visit during the five-month season, multiply that by the ship capacity and then use that number to gauge annual visitation.

This is a simplistic and misleading method to use when managing cruise passenger impacts. Vessels aren't always at full capacity. Some passengers never leave the ship. Only a small percentage of crew are allowed onshore. Ships arrive and leave at different times. The real number that needs to be managed is the flow of visitors throughout the day based on ships actually in port – not an inflated total annual visitation number on which an arbitrary cap is imposed.

Estimates of actual cruise visitors ashore in Juneau during parts of some days may top 11,000, but associated impacts are spread over 32,000 residents. Our neighboring towns of Hoonah and Skagway have estimated visitor ratios that are 30+ times that.

These impacts can be managed. But telling the industry they are no longer welcome or creating another government agency to monitor complaints isn't the answer.

We will never totally eliminate all impacts to all residents. For most of us, this is the trade-off we make in order to sustain a vital component of our economy that provides so much to our community.

• *Win Gruening retired as the senior vice president in charge of business banking for Key Bank in 2012. He was born and raised in Juneau and is active in community affairs as a 30-plus year member of Juneau Downtown Rotary Club and has been 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.*

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