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Memo: Southeast Municipal Approach to Small Cruise Ship Travel During COVID-19

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AML's Southeast members have been proactively working to address the public health emergency and economic crisis in their communities and region. Municipal officials have met regularly to discuss mitigation strategies, the fishing industry, and most recently cruise ship travel. Throughout there has been a clear sense of regional unity and concern, even as all have been committed to collaboration with industry and the State.

Municipal officials are responsible for public safety in their communities. Efforts to flatten the curve have been largely successful at limiting cases in communities, and interstate travel restrictions that require quarantine continue to limit potential new cases. If and when these restrictions are removed, and as economic recovery occurs, municipalities recognize that there will need to be procedures in place to support both public health and business activity.

The general sentiment from AML members has been to prioritize public health. Many communities have and may continue to have quarantine requirements for visitors, and/or will take extra precautions to limit community exposure. A small working group of Southeast port communities, within AML, has been established to help address questions and concerns, and to work more closely with the industry. Municipal officials have identified a number of questions and concerns they share, as well as an initial list of expectations to be considered.

When it comes to small cruise ship travel, a working group of municipal leaders met with industry stakeholders recently and discussed some of our shared priorities. These focused on two areas: 1) operational mitigation efforts and 2) community response. Things like testing and health-checks of passengers, social distancing measures, and sanitation were addressed in many operational planning documents. Below are some expectations for operational safety that have been articulated by AML members:

1. Testing to occur regularly
2. Temperature taking/checking throughout the voyage/itinerary
3. Potential to limit capacity on board
4. Vulnerable population tracking and support
5. Employee and passenger face coverings on voyage and onshore
6. Protocols in place for disembarking crew

Community response questions, however, have been left unanswered. Tour companies operating in Southeast need to be able to address – or work with the State to address – the resources necessary to move passengers (and family members) off ships and between communities to appropriate healthcare facilities. By appropriate, we mean with enough capacity to meet both visitor and resident needs.

1. Determination of quarantine procedures at start and throughout
2. Commitment to/resourcing of quarantine – feasibility plan
3. Commitment to/resourcing of transfer of sick passengers (and their families)
4. Commitment to/resourcing of contact tracing
5. Testing and passenger health data needs to be released to the community
6. If confirmed cases, (re)evaluation of landing procedures to include avoiding a community

In many cases, large cruise ships have mostly cancelled their 2020 seasons, but small cruise ship operations aren't limited right now by CDC guidance. We anticipate that small cruise ship activities will occur and that working together within the region and with industry will be most effective. Right now, it is difficult to weigh the costs and benefits of small cruise ship travel or evaluate them effectively. Municipal officials want to limit the spread of COVID-19 into the community; they also want local businesses to benefit from economic activity, and residents from much-needed jobs. It isn't clear how those two things happen together without impacting each other.

When it comes to small cruise ship operations in the region, the limitations that are necessary for shoreside operations ultimately mean less beneficial tourism – essentially, passengers may be transferred from the vessel to the excursion without the retail or restaurant experience that communities offer. This impacts the visitor experience and limits the actual benefits to the local economy.

Ultimately, municipalities would like to see conditions established that help communities feel safe, even as they assist in helping industry feel economically secure. This will take a collaborative approach between communities and with industry. Without public health concerns being addressed, municipal officials may feel more concerned about limiting activity than with these expectations being met.

Until unanswered questions can be addressed, we believe that even small cruise ship operations will face challenging conditions as it relates to access to communities. It seems prudent to wait for conditions to improve, for response planning to advance, and for industry and communities to come to agreement that the time is right. This can't be forced through any single company's or community's interest but should be a measured and deliberate step taken by all. At this time, Southeast cruise ports are respectfully requesting a moratorium on small ship cruising until mutually agreed upon protocols can be finalized between the industry and the communities.

With this collaborative approach, we know that not only will the industry benefit more, but visitors will experience an Alaska that includes healthy communities and thriving local businesses.

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