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RE: JEDC Comments on the Blueprint Downtown Area Plan

Members of the CBJ Planning Commission and Community Development Department,

Thank you for turning your attention to the Blueprint Downtown planning document. On behalf of the Juneau Economic Development Council (JEDC), I appreciate the opportunity to provide comments on Chapters 3 and 5, in particular.

First off, please keep in mind that vibrant downtowns have an important and positive impact on the overall economic vitality of any community. Amongst the focus areas of the JEDC, we single out Downtown Juneau as one of our main priorities. Downtown Juneau is key to our community's role as Alaska's Capital City, with the Legislative, Judicial, and Executive branches all sited in downtown Juneau. Juneau is also the most visited city in Alaska in the summer, with the downtown core being a significant part of the Juneau visitor experience. Downtown Juneau is also a hub of governments and regional economy, with the presence of CBJ Government, Tlingit and Haida, Federal Agencies, State Office Building, Sealaska Corporation, Sealaska Heritage Institute, Centennial Hall, and the majority of arts and culture venues (including the JAHC) all located in downtown Juneau. In addition to being the Capital of Alaska and a major tourist attraction, downtown Juneau is also the Northwest Coast Arts Capital. Kudos to Sealaska Heritage and their vision and action to make this a reality.

The Blueprint Downtown Area Plan recognizes the importance of a vibrant and well developed downtown. And, in general, identifies many useful actions to strengthen our downtown area. The challenge is to provide the resources and coordination to realize the goals and objectives. The JEDC found that our interests in a vibrant and attractive downtown align very strongly with the interests of the Downtown Business Association, which we have partnered with for over a decade. The DBA has more than doubled in membership (120+ members post Covid) since our partnership began and now represents the vast majority of the commercial interests located in downtown Juneau.

Chapter 3: Economic Vitality

Our principal comment regarding this section is to underscore the economic importance of downtown Juneau to our community, including the highest density of jobs and the most efficient use of physical space.

The Blueprint Downtown Area Plan recognizes the need for housing and the synergistic benefits of increased housing and population downtown and the positive impacts that can have on the businesses and vibrancy of downtown. Juneau attracts thousands of seasonal workers each year, many of which would prefer to live in the downtown area, close to restaurants, activities, and, for many, their place of work. Housing is needed for a diverse group, but attention needs to be paid to providing housing that is attractive for employees of the State Legislature, employees of downtown businesses, and seasonal employees.

Recommendations:

- A. Fund the Downtown Ambassador program. This activity has operated for almost ten years and, like many cities much larger than Juneau, offers hospitality to visitors and additional "eyes and ears" on the streets of

Juneau. The program operates only during the cruise season and is paid for by Passenger Fee dollars—it is in jeopardy of not being funded this year. The Downtown Ambassador Program addresses “Downtown Clean and Safe” services.

- B. Support year-round activities. Downtown Juneau does well during the visitor season, struggles during the Fall, and is critically needed during the Legislative Session. When cruise visitors are not in port, many downtown businesses struggle. For Juneau to have an array of restaurants and businesses that serve the Legislature (and locals), funding for activations and promotions (via staff) needs to be provided when cruise ships are not present.
- C. Support downtown Entrepreneurship. The Blueprint Downtown Area Plan calls for preferential business loans for businesses that operate downtown. JEDC could facilitate that with capital contributed by CBJ.
- D. Fund wayfinding and lighting improvements. The DBA has created a Light Up Juneau initiative to outline with LED lights buildings in downtown Juneau. The goals of this program are to increase ambient lighting in the winter and make downtown more visually appealing. This initiative has moved slowly due to its costs (mostly borne by members of the DBA). There have also been delays due to agreement over access to electricity outlets at CBJ light poles.
- E. Fund and Staff a dedicated agency. JEDC and DBA have partnered for many years to support a more vibrant downtown, which is also good for local businesses. The financial support from CBJ has been minimal. At most, funding from CBJ has supported a half-time FTE. JEDC has a history of funding the other portion of time of this staff person to conduct other work. The limited number of resources (and time) and the split focus of this role has made it challenging to achieve results that are transformative. There is certainly potential, and the funding helps produce events like Gallery Walk—which attracts less people than the 4th of July but almost as many as the annual Juneau Maritime Festival.
- F. Supporting a Business Improvement District (BID) sounds good but is likely not a great fit for Juneau. BIDs typically result in increased taxation of the member businesses. Businesses in downtown Juneau are already disproportionately larger contributors to both Sales Tax and Property Tax than most similar businesses in other parts of Juneau. If a BID were structured in such a way that it did not result in an increased financial burden on businesses (such as through a credit for a certain portion of taxes paid) and these funds were matched by contributions from CBJ, it could be attractive.

Chapter 5: Downtown Activities and Tourism

CBJ needs to embrace and fully support a vision for downtown Juneau as the center of our civic, cultural, social, and economic life. The Aak’w Kwan Village District is part of downtown Juneau and investments and attention need to be directed to that part of our downtown as well—finding easier connection between the traditional downtown core and this district. As the most visited community in Alaska in the summer months, tourism is an important part of Juneau’s economy.

- A. Promote and Fund Winter Tourism Development. Juneau’s economy has become more seasonal over time. We need more year-round jobs in the winter (and more year-round housing, or more seasonal housing). Given our expertise in tourism development from years of working with non-winter tourism, we have the knowledge, networks, and capital to support tourism in the winter, which would also benefit from and rely on downtown Juneau.
- B. Continue to Fund the Downtown Ambassador program. This hospitality service during cruise season enhances the visitor experience and contributes to “Downtown Clean and Safe.”
- C. Fund the promotion of activities downtown during the period of October through April, when fewer cruise ships are in Juneau.
- D. Support a downtown circulator. The current “free Capital Transit” option is very limited and seemingly unknown to most visitors (and locals). While promoting this would be helpful, it would serve Juneau better to have a more robust service in clearly marked vehicles that distributed visitors to Juneau’s downtown throughout the downtown area, including Aak’w Kwan Village area and Federal Building.
- E. Keep City Hall downtown. It is critical to the civic character of our community to keep city government located downtown. And within downtown, it should strive to be as near to the downtown core as

reasonable, as the presence of city workers downtown on a daily basis provides an important base clientele to downtown businesses.

- F. Fund the DBA to coordinate downtown activities, in coordination with JEDC.
- G. Fund data collection about downtown Juneau. Downtown Juneau is important to the future of our broader community in so many ways. We will benefit from identifying indicators specifically tied to downtown to measure how successful we are in transforming it into a place where locals visit, families feel comfortable, workers live, Legislators and their staff enjoy, and visitors find attractive.

Dedicated Entity to Oversee Downtown Improvements

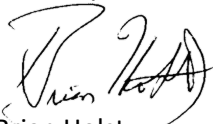
*The Planning Commission has already asked for more information on the Blueprint Downtown Area Plan goal to create and fund a **dedicated entity to oversee downtown improvements**. JEDC's thoughts on this idea would be appreciated.*

We have commented on the importance of funding an entity to permanently support downtown Juneau but will do so again here in more detail. JEDC recommends that funds be allocated to a non-CBJ employee/entity, such as the DBA (or the DBA/JEDC partnership). For downtown Juneau to be responsive to needs and opportunities as they arise, we believe that this is a better fit for a non-profit organization than a city employee or function. The work of supporting downtown will always be coordinated on certain elements with local government. And if CDD or another City Department is designated a liaison to help address issues that are primarily the jurisdiction of city government, that would be welcome.

One of the four main focus areas of JEDC's work is for Juneau to be a Great (Capital) City, which includes being a great Capital AND having a great downtown. We have partnered with the Downtown Business Association for over a decade, providing administrative (accounting) and staffing support to them. The DBA has its own Board of Directors, elected by its members that serve three-year (staggered) terms. We have found that the alignment of the business interests of downtown business owners and that of JEDC (and, we believe, the community) is very close. The challenge has been funding the work. While the DBA is a member organization, the majority of members are fairly small businesses, and the number of businesses is relatively small. Pre-Covid, paid membership peaked at 160 (before dropping during Covid) and is now above 120. There is not much room for membership growth, which means the financial resources from membership dues are limited. The DBA has, with the programmatic support of JEDC and financial support of CBJ, achieved Main Street America status. CBJ has regularly funded DBA over the years, but never more than \$75,000. This amount of resources is not adequate to pay for one full-time position, not to mention provide sufficient funds for promotional activities or many of the activities identified in the Blueprint Downtown Area Plan. Even this modest level of funding—which is leveraged by the support provided by JEDC—is often questioned by the CBJ Assembly (in FY24, it was reduced to just \$40,000).

JEDC expects that meaningful progress on the Blueprint Downtown Area Plan would emerge with a funding level of \$200,000+ annually. This would ensure that the DBA could hire at least one full-time staff person and then have resources to put towards promotions, projects, studies, and leverage grants. The partnership with JEDC provides strong financial and administrative support so that the DBA can stay focused on programmatic issues related to downtown.

Sincerely,



Brian Holst

Executive Director