

Group works to secure long-term public access to Coast Guard and South Point Higgins Beaches

By VALERIE HENDLE & SitNews

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Ketchikan, Alaska - Life in Ketchikan is defined by water and the vitality of the town and its people seems linked to it. On a very rainy Sunday in early December, twenty-five people attended a meeting of the Ketchikan Beaches Association (KBA) in an effort to secure long-term public access to the Coast Guard and South Point Higgins beaches located north of Ketchikan.

This work-group meant business with the home-based meeting area set up with three long work tables and a multitude of chairs lining the periphery. A power point presentation and worksheets sat poised at the head of the tables.

There are no easy labels to attach to those who attended the December 2nd meeting. "These are people who care deeply about their community," says Soren Wuerth, English Teacher. "They're here on a rainy Sunday to work."



Coast Guard Beach
Photograph by Ardath Piston

Carrie Dolwick, the group's Coordinator, presented the day's agenda as chili bubbled on the stove. This gathering of concerned citizens organized around a shared vision - "the acquisition and maintenance of our community beaches." In addition, says Dolwick the group works "to provide opportunities for residents to participate in the

land use and planning process in order to protect natural areas for permanent access and recreation."

The Ketchikan Beaches Association's most immediate concern at this time is "Planning for a formal solution to provide long-term public access to the Coast Guard and South Point Higgins Beaches." Located north of town close to North Point Higgins Elementary School, these beaches have been popular spots for public education and recreation and many Ketchikan residents have become deeply attached to this bit of publicly accessible undeveloped coastal land.

"Both beaches are used for beachcombing, walking dogs, family camping, hiking, picnicking, wildlife viewing, collection of edible and medicinal plants, clam digging, and kayaking," says Ardath Piston, one of the Ketchikan Beaches Association's co-chairs. In addition, the area is site to numerous outdoor programs and campouts for the Elementary students and Boy Scouts.

In 1986 a lease was granted for the construction of trails accessing the beaches. The first half of the trail begins at Point Higgins Elementary and crosses over Borough Land to the Coast Guard Beach. A grant was pending for the completion of the second half of the trail project.

The rub is that the Coast Guard and South Point Higgins beaches are not public lands. They are both owned by the Alaska Mental Health Land Trust (MHLT) and are part of the holdings used to generate revenue for the Mental Health Authority. The lands held by MHLT were conveyed according to the Alaska Mental Health Enabling Act. The Trust Land Office (TLO), an office within the Department of Natural Resources, manages the lands and is charged with "maximizing long-term revenue from Trust Land," per TLO mission statement. According to Doug Campbell of the Trust Land Office, the Coast Guard Beach Tract (uplands) was "part of the original Mental Health Trust selection and conveyed in 1963 as part of a larger selection that included what is now the South Point Higgins School site and Point Higgins subdivision property."

Earlier Leslie Real of the Ketchikan Borough Planning and Community Development Department, said the Trust Land Office had not submitted a formal rezone application. The Trust Land Office had earlier stated its intent, however. In a letter to the Ketchikan Gateway Borough dated November 15, 2006, the Trust Land Office requested that the "Borough enter into a Memorandum of Agreement to design a master plan for the tract that would incorporate a residential subdivision and an easement for the Coast Guard Beach Trail."

UPDATE

However, Carrie Dolwick coordinator of the Ketchikan Beaches Association in a recent letter to SitNews said the grant to complete the trail from Point Higgins School to Coast Guard Base, is no longer pending. "The news that the grant is held up is a huge disappointment for the Borough, who invested financially to complete and submit the grant, and to many community members who have invested time, energy and resources into the trail and the important public recreation opportunities it gives to community members," wrote Dolwick.

Dolwick said in November 2006, the Ketchikan Borough Assembly unanimously

passed resolution 2012 that authorized the submittal of a grant application and 2013 that authorized the Borough manager to request an update and extension of a Revocable License for Land Use between the Mental Health Land Trust and the KGB to allow the trail on the Alaska Mental Health Land Trust land. The second half of the trail traverses MHLT property."

"The Alaska State Parks grant was stalled when the Alaska Mental Health Land Trust would [not] allow the pursuit of necessary permits necessary for the grant award and placed stipulations on the Revocable License," wrote Dolwick. "During the process to update the license, the MHLT stated in the final grant application that the extension of the land use license authorized in Resolution 2013, would authorize use of the trail by the general public and will not authorize trail construction, reconstruction or maintenance until such time as rezone and subdivision of Trust land, USS 3762, also local known as Coast Guard Beach, is complete and a permanent trail location has been determined," said Dolwick.

Dolwick stated, "This statement called into question the readiness of the grant application by the grant administrator and thus led to the end of the grant possibility."

"The trail from Point Higgins Elementary School to Coast Guard Beach is extremely important for the community," said Dolwick. "Teachers, members of the PTA and volunteers started planning for a trail from Point Higgins Elementary to CGB when the school was completed in 1986. Thousands of dollars of materials and services were donated by community members to complete the first half of the trail. The trail is historically and currently used by the school to access CGB for educational trips and experiences. It is part of the school's core curriculum. The trail is also used for community Toughies camp outs where youth learn outdoor survival skills," said Dolwick.

Dolwick wrote, "For now the trail will go un-improved, but it will not stop the community from frequenting the beach for educational and recreational opportunities. The demise of the trail grant has no effect on the mission of Ketchikan Beaches Association to plan for formal solutions to provide long-term public access to the Coast Guard and South Point Higgins Beaches and uplands."

And just how many feet of coast line are open to the public and accessible by foot in Ketchikan? Jim Pomplun of the Ketchikan Borough Planning and Community Development Department said, " Not counting Coast Guard or South Point Higgins beaches, we roughly estimated perhaps 7,000 linear feet of coastline."