

THE SKAGWAY NEWS.

March 26, 2021

Skagway, Alaska

\$1.50

Traveler testing, social distancing rule repealed

By Melinda Munson

The assembly voted five to one to immediately repeal Resolution 20-44R, which required Skagway arrivals coming from communities with active COVID-19 cases to social distance until a negative COVID-19 test was procured seven days after arrival. Those who did want to test for the coronavirus were asked to practice strict social distancing for 14 days.

The resolution was passed on Dec. 17, 2020, before most Skagway adults had access to the COVID-19 vaccine. It was sponsored by Assemblymember Reba Hylton, chair of the Health, Education and Welfare Committee.

Resolution 21-07R, which ends the testing and self isolation mandate, originally stated the repeal would take effect on April 16, a date Hylton said was a compromise for parents worried about their children finishing the school year in-person.

She noted she would feel comfortable with a more timely repeal date as Skagway City School currently requires staff and students who return to town to stay out of school until they receive two negative tests, at least seven days apart.

"The school is not going to change their policy," Hylton said.

Assemblymember Sam Bass urged the assembly to cancel Resolution 20-44R immediately, stating that Skagway has achieved necessary numbers for herd immunity.

Assembly Steve Burnham disagreed with Bass' interpretation of herd immunity, based on an approximation

continued on page three



Photo by Paul Munson

A TEMSCO helicopter lowers supplies needed for the Buckwheat COVID Classic. The Municipality of Skagway is sending a memorandum of understanding to TEMSCO addressing future plans involving their lease after the contract with White Pass expires. The move came after a controversial letter campaign. See the story on page 2.

Mask mandate passed, vetoed four days later

By Melinda Munson

Skagway Mayor Andrew Cremata has repeatedly said he feels mask policies should come from business owners, not be legislated by the borough assembly. The assembly apparently disagreed. In a vote of four to two on March 18, they passed Resolution 21-08R which requires face coverings while in buildings open to the public where six feet of social distancing is not possible.

The mandate came into effect on March 19 after being reviewed by the borough attorney. It was vetoed on March 22 by Cremata.

"I found this particular resolution to be confusing ... if I don't understand it, there are business owners that don't understand it," he said, pointing to vague language regarding public and private businesses.

The assembly meeting in which 21-08R was passed went nearly four hours with assembly members volleying varying viewpoints.

"...The business community has been working on a medallion program related to COVID protocols and they are close to being done with this process. The real tourist season doesn't start for another month, so I have no issue with waiting for that process to mature before making any unilateral health-related decisions from the assembly table that affect the entire community," said Cremata.

Assemblymember Jay Burnham, who voted aye, didn't see the mask mandate as invasive.

"I don't feel it's infringing on my rights anymore than my rights have already been infringed on. It's just being nice to your neighbor," Jay said.

The mandate required everyone five and older to wear face coverings unless they had specific medical needs. Exceptions were made for activities such as "while in the act of consuming food or beverages." The resolution was amended to drop the \$10 fine, meaning failure to comply would result only in a warning, and no longer recommended that individuals wear masks while outdoors.

Resolution 21-08R was sponsored by Assemblymember Steve Burnham, who said procedurally, putting the initiative forth in his name was the only path to get the resolution on the agenda. Steve said he was "picked on by community members" in the last week.

"It's not very cool, and it doesn't feel good," Steve said. "The people who are saying those things don't

understand the process and that we're trying to make and hold these discussions in ways that the public can participate in. That they can come and read what we're talking about and know when they're commenting to us, that they have an opportunity to affect what we're going to decide on."

He noted that the Health, Education and Welfare Committee has been discussing a mask resolution at their meetings since last November. Steve proposed Resolution 21-08R when it seemed likely the testing and quarantine mandate, Resolution 20-44R, would be repealed.

"The goal would be to protect others ... to protect visitors to our community ... to protect those who don't have a vaccine," Steve said.

According to the CDC, *continued on page three*

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We hope you are enjoying the return to the printed version of The Skagway News.

When the borders closed in March 2020 due to the pandemic, we were cut off from our printer in Whitehorse. When the cruise ships didn't arrive, like all businesses in Skagway, we lost a major portion of our income. Printing the paper became impossible, both logistically and financially.

We exhausted all possible and affordable options over the year to get the paper from Whitehorse. In the meantime, we pivoted to a PDF version on our website.

Last fall, the Municipality of Skagway offered a grant to all Skagway businesses, then later, the SNOW grant. We felt the best way to utilize the funds we were awarded was to return the

money to the community in the form of a physical paper.

Now the paper is printed by the Frontiersman in Wasilla. Gretchen handles the mailing and shipping from Chugiak. The paper will arrive two days later, but it's the best we can do under the circumstances.

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While we received some CARES money last October from the state, that was the first and last time we received any sort of salary.

We continue to produce The Skagway News because we believe in small town newspapers. We believe in this town. We believe that publishing The Skagway News is our contribution as members of the community as we all pull together to ensure Skagway's survival.

Thank you for your support.

-Melinda Munson & Gretchen Wehmhoff
Co-owners/The Skagway News

'There is no plan to remove TEMSCO'

By Melinda Munson

The assembly voted on March 18 to send a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to TEMSCO, following a public show of support for the helicopter company to remain in its current location after Skagway takes back control of its port in 2023, when its lease with White Pass expires.

"This MOU will serve as a vehicle through which the Municipality and TEMSCO will openly communicate to plan for future utilization of the Port of Skagway by TEMSCO, and for the transition from the current long-term sublease, in which both parties and the Skagway community have a beneficial mutual interest," the memorandum states.

"It's not an agreement to agree," Assemblymember Orion Hanson reiterated, pointing to the MOU's language.

"Welcome to government," Andrew Mayor Cremata joked.

After TEMSCO was not included in the first stages of the 2023 Skagway Port Master Plan, the municipality received over 60 letters from concerned parties.

Tom Cochran, chair of the Ports and Harbor Advisory Board, didn't think the letter writing campaign was organic.

"It was an orchestrated, targeted campaign," he said.

"There is no doubt that

they are an asset to this community," Cochran said, but asked residents to look deeper.

"I believe it is important to reiterate that TEMSCO is owned by Southeast Stevedoring, who also owns Cruise Line Agencies of Alaska and AAmak Towing. They are also owned or at least controlled by Survey Point Holdings which claims to have a majority stake in the ownership of White Pass. So in that light, is TEMSCO just another head of the beast that currently controls our waterfront?"

"Let's be perfectly clear," Cochran said. "There is no plan to remove TEMSCO. The lease that TEMSCO currently has is a lease with White Pass. That lease expires in 2023 just like all the other waterfront leases."

Cochran stated it was his personal belief that "TEMSCO is in the best possible place they could be."

In correspondence sent to the assembly for the March 18 meeting, TEMSCO stated, "TEMSCO's waterfront location is the only location in Skagway that provides the highest level of separation between helicopter and fixed wing air traffic, reducing the risk of a catastrophic mid-air collision. This improves safety for residents and visitors."

TEMSCO also emphasized that their current location and flight paths reduce

noise pollution.

Long-term resident Donna Griffard described TEMSCO as, "a kind, giving, visually appealing company who are good land stewards," and advocated they be allowed to remain at their current location. She noted the service they have given to the community.

"Over the years TEMSCO has aided in many search and rescues and at times was the only option that was available. They have medevaced locals when planes and ferries were unavailable and other options didn't yet exist. One time, a quick thinking pilot with an employee even hovered over the ocean and pulled passengers from the freezing water when the plane they were in went

down. Lives have been saved due to skilled, fast actions of TEMSCO employees that were in the right place when they were most needed," Griffard said.

Red Onion Saloon owner Jan Wrentmore said she too loves TEMSCO, but "you can't design your port around any single business entity. That's not what planning should be and it shouldn't be a popularity contest."

Wrentmore described TEMSCO's current locations as "one of the most beautiful scenic views in the whole valley."

"I don't think they need to land their helicopters right on the riverbank. We should have access to that," Wrentmore said.



Photo by Peter S. Johnston

Professional photographer, Peter S. Johnston, catches the light in Lynn Canal over TEMSCO operations. Johnston titles this "TEMSCO Point." (2020)



Photo by Melinda Munson

A mannequin at Duff's Backcountry Outfitters reminds shoppers to wear a mask while in the store.

Mask mandate debate to continue in April

from FRONT page

dividuals who are vaccinated may still contract and spread COVID-19, although they are more likely to be asymptomatic.

“Being vaccinated does not mean an immediate return to normal,” said Assemblymember Reba Hylton, advising the assembly to err on the side of caution. “We’re saying continue doing what you’re doing,” Hylton said, pointing out that any businesses that accept SNOW grants from the municipality are already required to mask. “We are in a real life pandemic. That has not gone away.”

Assemblymember Dustin Stone, an avid supporter of masks, voted against the measure, as did Assemblymember Sam Bass.

“I don’t think mask mandates work in the climate we find ourselves in,” Stone said. “If you’re still arguing the efficacy or the necessity of masks, you’re behaving like a selfish a-hole. Selfish a-holes don’t follow mask mandates with \$10 fines.”

Assemblymember Orion Hanson said wearing a mask is “really not that big of a deal” but added, “This resolution is a little too cumbersome for me to get behind. Maybe we make another stab at it at a different format, different version.”

After the resolution passed, Assemblymember Orion Hanson, who voted yes, asked that the vote be reconsidered at the next meeting. Due to a clerical er-

ror, reconsideration of Resolution 21-08R was not in effect for the April 1 assembly meeting.

“As an elected body we’re looking to find the best language,” Orion said. “We’ll get it right.”

Orion believes masks are the new reality in Skagway.

“In the future, for us to have a vibrant tourist plan, that’s going to maybe be the reality moving forward. We might be wearing a mask a whole lot more than we like,” Hanson said.

Cremata said another reason he vetoed the resolution was because “he didn’t feel like the intent of the assembly was met.” He acknowledged that the meeting went long which may have added some confusion to the process.

This is the first time Cremata has used his veto power. He said the assembly can override his veto “if I’m wrong.”

Traveler restrictions repealed

from FRONT page

of 800 Skagway residents.

“That is not a static number. It’s a number that will change...” Burnham said, pointing out that the addition of seasonal workers and visitors could drastically alter the percentage of people in town who are vaccinated.

The municipality received a stack of correspondence regarding the repeal of Resolution 20-44R, a vast majority in support of moving forward with ending testing and self-isolation requirements.

Mayor Andrew Cremata, who has approached COVID-19 with a “better safe than sorry attitude” was in support of a speedy repeal.

“We need to send a clear message that Skagway is ready for visitors. Indeed, the Save Our Skagway program depends on it. If we wait another month to repeal, few people are going to make travel plans because they won’t know whether the assembly will continue to extend the end date,” he said.

Assemblymember Dustin Stone, who kept his bed and breakfast, At the White House, mostly closed as a precaution against COVID-19, described the decision as being between a rock and a hard place, knowing that local businesses need visitors to stay afloat.

“In my opinion, it’s time to move forward with this cal-

culated risk. It’s for survival at this point,” he said.

Assemblymember Burnham emphasized that the Emergency Operations Center still has the power to enact emergency measures.

Cremata assented.

“We are still in a state of emergency. They are still a nimble body and have full authority to implement pretty much anything related to these issues,” he said.



Photo by Melinda Munson

At the White House is open for visitors after turning away guests for much of the past year due to COVID-19.

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Editors Column



By Melinda Munson

Housing for the Munsons, like so many Skagwegians, has been problematic. It started in January of 2020 when Publisher Larry Percily awarded The Skagway News to myself and business partner, Gretchen Wehmhoff.

Gretchen would remain in Southcentral Alaska with long visits to Skagway. My plan was to relocate to the cruise ship destination as soon as possible.

"I don't know how you'll find housing but I decided that's your problem," Larry said, clearly worried my family of seven kids might end up homeless.

We bought a church

I can move mountains when necessary, so I started flexing. There was a house in Dyea. I called -- gone. There was an apartment on Sixth Avenue. Not big enough -- but we could rent two units for a total of \$4,000. I called the campgrounds and trailer parks. Could we stay the entire summer, until seasonal workers left and housing opened up in the fall? No, and no.

I was finally introduced to Jean Worley who was putting in a new three-bedroom modular. Her prospective tenants had fallen through and she was crazy enough to rent to our brood. It was her idea to give the master bedroom to the kids. We installed two bunk beds and loaded in four children. My husband and I took one of the smaller rooms, the three-year-old who bites got his own room, and the eight-year-old who pinches got the couch.

It was like living in a ship. If something wasn't tidily put away, the whole system

fell in on itself. We kept our two upright freezers full of wild fish in the living room. My husband's "garage," a tall metal shelf stacked with tools and crabbing gear, sat by the front door.

As much as I tried to be grateful that we had safe lodging, I began to get house hungry. I studied the exteriors of Skagway's homes as I walked to work, noticing the number of windows, the porch with storage that wasn't being used, the fenced in yard where kids could play. I became a little obsessed. I didn't wish anyone harm but wasn't there someone in town who wanted to move where it was warmer and the wind blew softly?

After our eight year old had to be separated from his siblings and put into his own rental, my anxiety escalated. What would happen to him when we had to give the employee housing back in the spring? Buying a house no longer meant increased square footage and a lower

house payment. It meant my son wouldn't have to live in a group home in a different borough, accessible only by ferry or small plane.

It was a happy day when a friend of our former police chief phoned. The chief was leaving town and wanted to sell his house. I should call. Hallelujah.

The chief and his wife could have sold their house to a jewelry company and made more money, but they said they wanted their home to go to a family. After three excruciating months of working with a mortgage broker and an \$1,800 appraisal, we bought the little red house on a double lot. The property includes a second building -- a light yellow church whose congregation hosted free burger nights every Wednesday. (The chief was also a pastor.)

We plan to turn the church into an unofficial group home. By the end of the year, three kids will be residing a few steps from the main house.

We didn't hire an inspector to look at the buildings. It seemed like a futile effort in a town where housing prices are fixed and many residents wait ten years or more for their chance at the American Dream.

Every day we discover something quirky about the house, built (maybe) in the 60s and added onto at various points in time. One room is always stiflingly hot, while the room next door is frigid. The stairs are a little off but if you fall, they're heavily carpeted so it doesn't hurt.

The house beams with natural light and the various nooks and crannies are perfect for hide and seek or when Mom wants a minute of quiet with a chocolate bar.

We can't wait for the thaw to see what treasures the yard holds, to visit with the chickens and to install our beehives. One thing we will remember: never fire up the grill on Wednesdays, or the whole town will appear expecting a free meal.

Yukon musher, Michelle Phillips, places 11th in Iditarod

By John Tonin
The Whitehorse Star

After eight days, one hour, 30 minutes, and 56 seconds on the Iditarod trail, Yukoner Michelle Phillips crossed the finish line in Deshka Landing in 11th place last Monday.

Phillips crossed the finish line with 11 dogs still in the harness. In a year devoid of long-distance dog races, Phillips said it was nice to complete a close to 1,000 mile race.

"It was a competitive race,

it went well," said Phillips, who spoke to the Star from Alaska. "(1,000 miles) that is what we train for."

In the 2020 and 2017 Iditarods, Phillips finished in 13th place, jumping two spots in the standings was a big accomplishment for her.

"I'm happy for sure," she said. "It was definitely nice to move up. I just worked hard and did my thing."

Phillips said the 2021 Iditarod was a competitive race.

"You just have to look at the standings," said Phillips.

"There were so many past Iditarod champions in the field."

She wasn't the only one feeling the competitive nature of the race. Phillips said her dogs were eager to be out there.

"They are driven and competitive," said Phillips. "The dogs all did great."

Phillips said throughout the race, she had many leaders but it was Dragon and Indy at the lead when she crossed the finish line in Deshka Landing.

The race trail, Phillips said, had its challenging locations.

"There was some overflow in spots," said Phillips. "It was also -40, -50 but overall it was pretty good."

The race trail did not follow the traditional route from Anchorage to Nome. Because of COVID-19 restrictions, the race followed a loop.

The Iditarod began and finished at Deshka Landing. Musher and their teams traveled to the Iditarod checkpoint before looping back. The race fell slightly short of the 1,000-mile

mark, race estimates pegged it about 848 miles.

"We didn't go to the villages," said Phillips. "There were tents set up along the way. There was tons of strategy involved because the race was completely different."

Mushers had three mandatory layovers during the race. They had to take 24 hours between the Skwentna to Iditarod stretch, those to checkpoints included, before hitting the flat for the return journey.

They had two eight-hour layovers as well. First in between the Rohn to Rohn stretch and then finally at Skwentna, the penultimate checkpoint, on the return trip.

Dallas Seavey was the 2021 Iditarod champion, arriving in Deshka Landing after spending seven days, 14 hours, eight minutes, and 57 seconds on the trail.

Seavey, one of only two five-time Iditarod champions, returned to the race after a three-year hiatus. After the 2017 race, in which his father Mitch won, Seavey had four dogs test positive for a

banned substance. He was cleared by the Iditarod Trail Committee but still took a break from the Alaskan race.

Seavey won the race in 2012, 2014, 2015, and 2016 before capturing the 2021 crown.

After finishing fifth in 2020, Aaron Burmeister moved up the standings to finish second in 2021. He was about three hours behind Seavey.

Coming in third was Brent Sass, the three-time Yukon Quest winner. His most recent Quest wins were back-to-back, in 2020 and 2019. He finished the Iditarod about one hour after Burmeister.

Phillips began the journey back to the Yukon from Alaska on Friday.

Ahead of her is a two-week self-isolation, but that is of no mind to her.

"I live out in a cabin," said Phillips. "It won't be anything different. It was just nice to get out and race."



Whitehorse Star photo

Yukon musher Michelle Phillips, pictured leaving Pelly Crossing during the 2020 Yukon Quest, posted her best Iditarod finish last Monday placing 11th.

Retiring from a life of working outdoors and the love of local archives

Deb Boettcher settles into a volunteer schedule with a dash of Tai chi

By Gretchen Wehmhoff

Deb Boettcher retired from the National Forest Service (NPS) at the end of February, but she didn't get far. Now, in her newly discovered free time, Boettcher volunteers for the park service and the Klondike Gold Rush National Park (KGR) museum, the very place she spent more than the last decade of her life.

Boettcher is helping the new NPS intern inventory the unique collection of books housed in the museum. Afterwards, the books will be cataloged into the NPS system.

Managing collections is what brought Boettcher to the museum. While she started as a volunteer to sort and identify plants, she was soon tasked with categorizing archaeological artifacts from the different properties being restored in Skagway over the

years. This led to her working part time at NPS and part time with White Pass & Yukon Route cleaning trains.

Eventually Boettcher found herself deep in the Rapuzzi Collection.

In addition to their own extensive collection of artifacts, George and Edna Rapuzzi also acquired a collection from Martin Itjen. Itjen came to Skagway during the gold rush and started a streetcar company in the 30s.

The cataloging and inventory of the massive package took years. The collection included several buildings. The Rasmussen Foundation purchased the buildings and gave the property to Skagway and KGR.

Boettcher is a lifelong Alaskan. Her early travels took her to Iran with the Peace Corps and an all-woman Alaska Fish & Game Field Camp in South-

central Alaska. Previous attempts to work in field positions counting fish in other parts of the state, specifically Bristol Bay in the 70s, were thwarted because she was a woman.

Boettcher finally made it to Bristol Bay to count fish from a tower, then spent time in Port Alexander and Petersburg where she worked for public radio. When she arrived in Skagway in Sept. 1994, the last cruise ship had just departed.

"It was like I had just moved to a ghost town," she said.

Now Boettcher spends her days volunteering at the museum and trying to keep herself fit with yoga and tai chi.

"I've been taking both classes on YouTube," said Boettcher. "Tai chi is gentler, yoga is for a different group who can balance more."



Photo by Annie Madsov with the National Park Service

Deb Boettcher displays a violet-green swallow's nest built with natural contents including pink boa feathers found "naturally" around Skagway. The nest was discovered during the renovation of the Pantheon building.

Fielding named DDF Coach of the Year, tough season for team



Fielding

By Gretchen Wehmhoff

Skagway School's Debate, Drama and Forensics (DDF) coach, Kent Fielding, received the 2021 Coach of the Year (COY) Award after the state tournament.

Skagway's coach for 15 years, he was nominated by Mt. Edgecumbe and selected by fellow DDF coaches statewide.

Fielding coached at Mt. Edgecumbe where they won a state title in drama, before his tenure at Skagway School. This is his third nomination and first COY title. Fielding led Skagway to Alaska state forensic titles in 2018 and 2019.

"He's always so encouraging to his kids, my kids, everyone's kids," said Mt.

Edgecumbe DDF coach, Marcia Drake.

Drake said Fielding was instrumental in staying positive when the competitive season looked like it might not happen due to the pandemic. Along with other coaches and partners with DDF, Fielding encouraged the Alaska State Activities Association to work with the coaches to make the year work for the students.

The tournaments went online and judges tuned in from across the state.

Fielding says this was a tough year for Skagway in the state tournament. With the death of Karen Garduque and the relocation of her daughter, Loren Garduque, the team captain and spiritual leader, the group lost several weeks of work.

"Without Loren we were unable to continue our readers theatre, which was based on Black Lives Matter and Breonna Taylor," said Fielding.

Fielding believed the readers theater troupe had an excellent chance of making finals at the State Championships.

While the coach praised Callia Fielding and Tessa Murphy for their performance in the individual events, he said they really turned it on for the Western Washing Qualifying Tournament. These event leads up to the National Speech and Debate Association National Championship (NSDA) and the National Catholic Forensic League's (NCFL) Grand Tournament.

Callia qualified for NSDA in Informative speaking and in oration for NCFL. Murphy is the first alternate for NSDA in dramatic interpretation.

Fielding says he has been lucky to have "many talented students and coaches."

"The list of students who have won state or awards at state and/or qualified for nationals is long," said Fielding.

The coach shared his gratitude for other coaches and team volunteers: Jonathan Baldwin, Danny Brady, Sadie Murphy, Darsha Sqartsoff and Shelby Surdyk.

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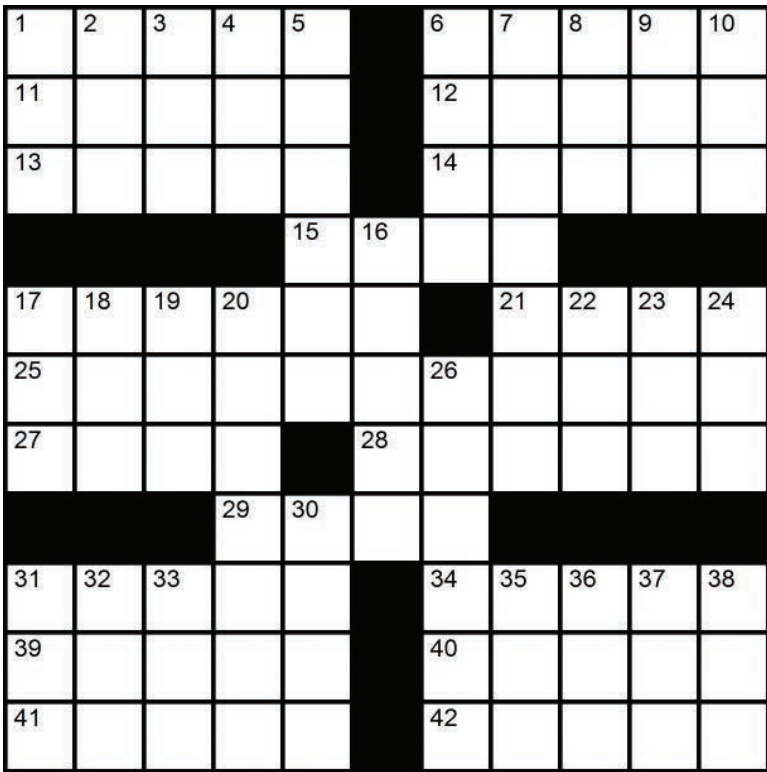
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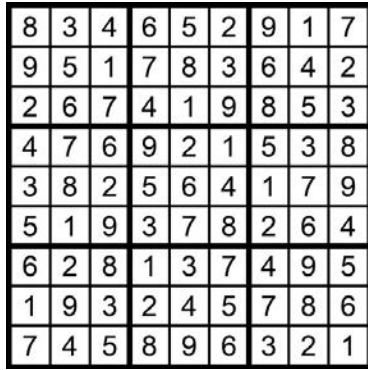
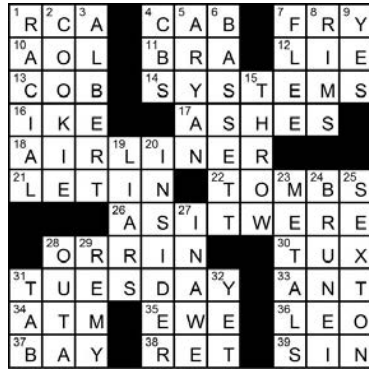
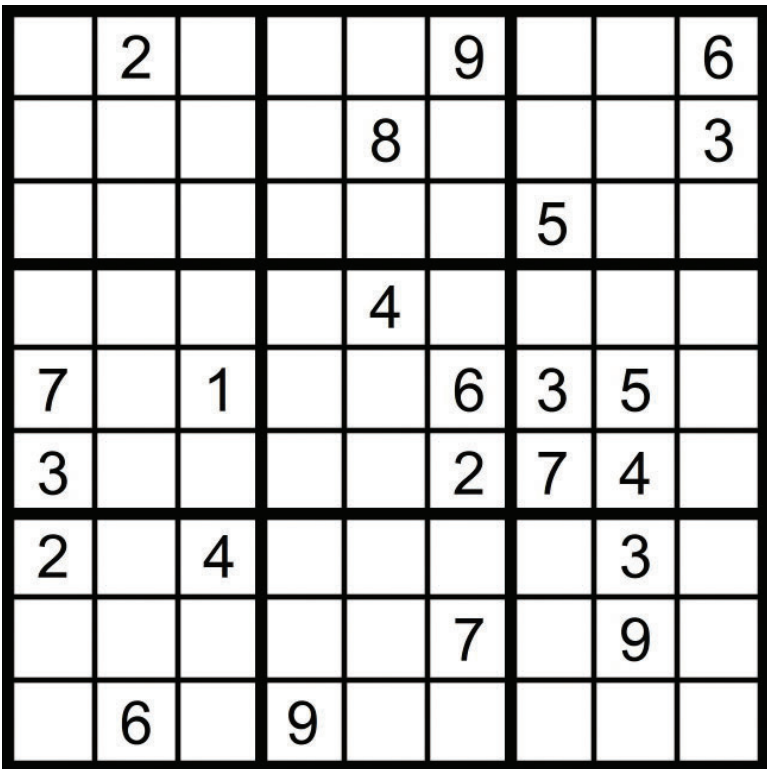
Across

- 1 Taffylike
- 6 Nautical entrance
- 11 What the Jumblies went to sea in
- 12 O3
- 13 Belief of more than a billion
- 14 Promotable chessmen
- 15 Czech runner --- Zátopez
- 17 Mountain plant
- 21 TV trophy
- 25 Country on the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf
- 27 Easterly projection of a church
- 28 Neutralize
- 29 Sends up
- 31 Solo employer of old

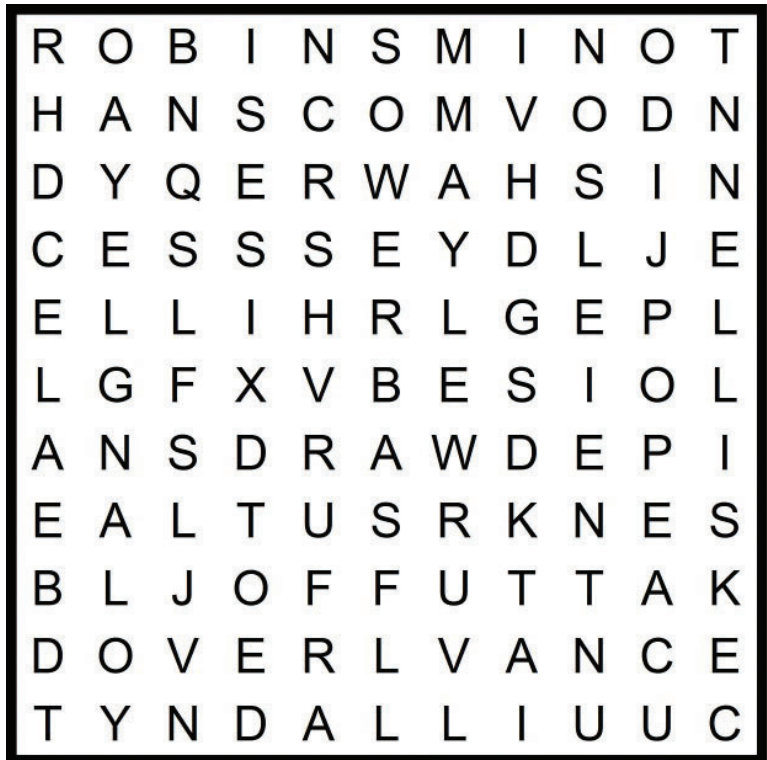
34 Mournful verse

- 39 What not to build a dam on
 - 40 In Montreal, it's "voir"
 - 41 Follows orders
 - 42 Ahead
- Down**
- 1 Hit CBS forensic series
 - 2 That man's
 - 3 Fish which might shock you
 - 4 Mountain state
 - 5 Likely to be an adherent of
 - 13 Across
 - 6 Squash blossom tribe
 - 7 Acid-loving shrubs
 - 8 Unspun fibers
 - 9 Wolf Blitzer's channel
 - 10 Guys
 - 16 Maryland fort

- 17 Hungry --- bear
- 18 Lick
- 19 Sign of infection
- 20 In the best of all possible worlds
- 22 Bus. deg.
- 23 "Peace", which fell to earth in 2001
- 24 Sweet potato, in the South
- 26 --- the occasion
- 30 Darlings
- 31 "The X-Files" topic
- 32 Arrest
- 33 Stimulus
- 35 Wolf Man --- Chaney
- 36 Superlative ending
- 37 Former GM marque
- 38 Not nope

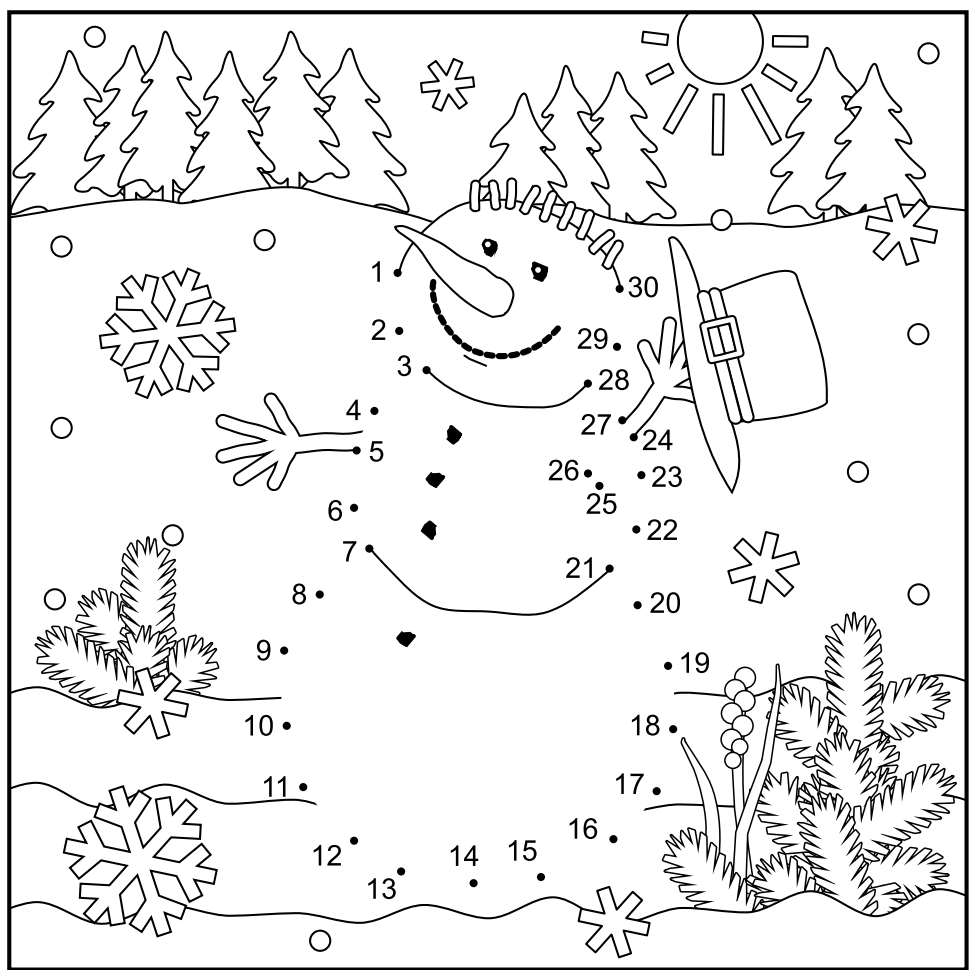


Last issue's answers



U.S. Air Force bases

- | | | |
|----------|---------|---------|
| Altus | Hanscom | Pope |
| Andersen | Hill | Robins |
| Beale | Keesler | Shaw |
| Dover | Langley | Travis |
| Dyess | Luke | Tyndall |
| Edwards | Minot | Vance |
| Eglin | Nellis | |
| Eielson | Offutt | |



Color me

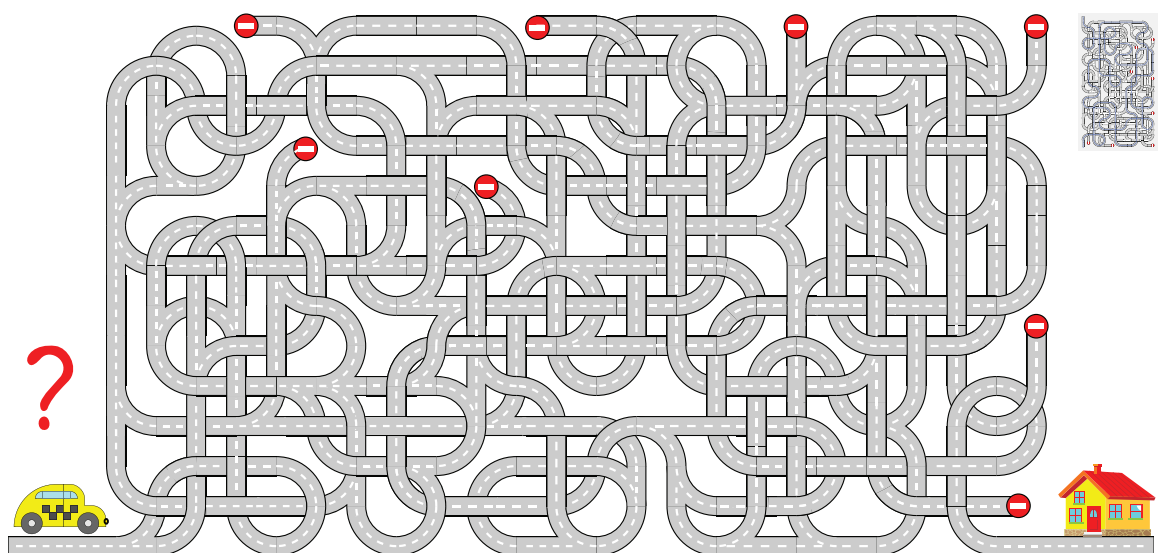




Photo by Gretchen Wehmhoff

The MV Tazlina, which is not a fast ferry, docks in Skagway.

State sells fast ferries to Spanish operator

Larry Persily
Wrangell Sentinel

After spending almost \$1.1 million to keep the vessels out of service to save money and safely tied up the past several years, the state last week sold its two fast ferries — built at a combined cost of \$68 million less than 20 years ago — for just over \$5 million.

Mediterranean-based catamaran operator Trasmapi offered around \$4.6 million for the Fairweather and Chenega. The company serves the Spanish island of Ibiza, about 70 miles off the coast. The state was able to negotiate the final price to \$5,174,444.

The price for two never-used spare diesel engines for the ships is being negotiated separately, said Sam Dapcevich, spokesman for the Alaska Department of Transportation.

Trasmapi was the only bidder for the 235-foot-long ships. The company runs a fleet between the Spanish mainland and Ibiza, a top destination for European vacationers.

The state had asked for a minimum bid of \$10 million.

The sale proceeds will be transferred into the state's vessel construction fund, an account used for future Alaska Marine Highway System (AMHS) ship maintenance

and construction. The deal closed March 10.

"Selling the fast ferries is a move to right-size the fleet and lets AMHS redirect funds used for their storage to operations. This moves us toward our goal of a more sustainable and affordable level of service for Alaskans," Transportation Commissioner John MacKinnon said in a prepared statement.

The Fairweather and Chenega have been tied up at Ward Cove in Ketchikan the past few years, at an estimated total cost of \$1.1 million through this fiscal year for shore power and security and moorage fees, according to a department presentation to the Senate Finance Committee transportation budget subcommittee on March 3.

The ships, which traveled about twice as fast as the rest of the state ferry fleet, were popular with passengers. But they struggled to perform in rough seas and burned much more fuel. The ships, each powered by four diesel engines, burned through about 600 hours of fuel an hour, according to the Alaska Marine Highway System website. That's more than double the consumption rate of the Matanuska, which can carry more than twice as many passengers and vehicles as the smaller ferries.

A heavy-lift vessel is expected to pick up the ships and take them to Spain via the Panama Canal this month, Dapcevich said.

Legislators, governor differ on ferry system advisory board

Larry Persily
Wrangell Sentinel

Gov. Mike Dunleavy wants to create a new state ferry system advisory board with one state official and 10 public members to replace an existing advisory panel, similar to a separate proposal from coastal lawmakers. The difference being that the legislative proposal would protect board members from dismissal by a governor, while under Dunleavy's bill, the members would "serve at the pleasure" of the governor.

The governor would appoint the entire board under Dunleavy's bill, while the Legislature would name almost half the panel under the measure sponsored by lawmakers.

Under either bill, the panel would advise the state Department of Transportation on ferry system operations, including long-term planning.

"Hopefully, the Legisla-

ture will put some teeth into it," said Robert Venables, of Haines, chair of the existing Marine Transportation Advisory Board, which was created under Gov. Frank Murkowski 18 years ago.

Venables would prefer members of the advisory panel be protected from removal every time a new governor takes office to guard against the "revolving door" of changing political opinions on how to run the ferries.

The Alaska Marine Highway System "is in worse shape now than it's ever been in its history," Venables said, acknowledging the advisory board has been unable to stop the deterioration.

A steep budget cut in Dunleavy's first year in office significantly reduced ferry service to coastal communities, while passenger travel and revenue have been in decline for years.

"As we continue efforts to restructure and modernize

the Alaska Marine Highway System, it is imperative the long-term operations and finances are addressed," the governor said in a prepared statement introducing his bill. "Our goal remains the same, to create a more reliable and efficient Marine Highway System to serve coastal Alaska for years to come."

The governor's proposal would create the Alaska Marine Highway System Operation and Planning Board and direct the Department of Transportation to consult with the panel in developing a short-term and long-term plan for the ferry system.

The legislative proposal would call it the Alaska Marine Highway Operations Board, with a similar consultation role.

"The governor's bill doesn't do enough in terms of making real, needed change in terms of management of the Marine Highway System," said Ketchikan Rep. Dan Ortiz, who also represents Wrangell.

Ortiz said he would prefer more independence for the advisory board and "real authority to make changes."

The representative is co-sponsor of House Bill 63, along with House Speaker Louise Stutes, of Kodiak, that would protect members of the advisory board from dismissal by each new governor.

The bill was scheduled for a public hearing at 1:30 p.m. on March 18 in the House

Transportation Committee. It is the bill's second hearing in the committee. Lawmakers have yet to schedule a hearing on the governor's proposal, House Bill 134, or its identical Senate bill.

The governor's bill does not solve the problem of political interference with the ferry system, said Sitka Rep. Jonathan Kreiss-Tomkins. "There is still a much more politicized aspect" to Dunleavy's proposal, the legislator said. "It's kind of like rearranging the deck chairs," without saving the ship, he said.

Though the Legislature is about halfway through the session, Kreiss-Tomkins said it's still possible lawmakers could approve a new advisory panel with expanded authority this year.

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