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Assembly: Look for a way to keep beaches

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The Ketchikan Gateway Borough Assembly unanimously directed the mayor to convene a roundtable discussion with interested parties on public beaches in the near future, as well as suspending action on negotiations for a public works maintenance facility. Many members of the Ketchikan Beaches Association as well as other citizens asked the Assembly to direct staff to look at alternatives to get beaches owned by the Alaska Mental Health Land Trust to remain accessible for public use.

Eric Muench, KBA member, during public comment, said the association wants the borough's backing to start looking at different ways to keep the beaches public. He suggested an exchange of land.

"If it is to get serious attention, it has to have the borough's backing," Muench said of a suggestion to look into an idea of exchanging land with the trust. He did note that it was "an unusual request" to ask the Assembly to direct staff to search for alternatives.

He said the beaches association supported the idea of a "mini-summit" with the interested parties because it would get a discussion started with the trust.

Kathy Carrsow, speaking during public comments as a someone who had worked with the trust in the past, urged the borough to get behind the idea because she had seen it work in other communities.

She said the trust does have a mandate to get the maximum profit for its lands but it also has direction to benefit people in the community to have access in beaches because it helps people with mental health problems.

"They are not just a developer with one goal in mind," she said.

Joan Aegerter said she first set foot on Coast Guard beach 60 years ago and has spent many happy times at the beach.

Soren Wuerth, a middle school teacher, said there was going to be a staff meeting this week to talk about students going out on survival camping trips and said Coast Guard beach is an "incredible opportunity for kids to explore the muskeg."

Assembly Member John Harrington moved to have a roundtable discussion set up by the mayor with trust officials, borough officials, KBA members, state parks, U.S. Forest Service and other agencies represented at the meeting. The Assembly passed that motion unanimously.

Assembly Member Dave Kiffer said he did not know that a round table discussion would accomplish anything and the Assembly would be hearing this same issue in a month's time.

“I will probably never trust the trust,” he said. “I hate the fact that we will have to ransom back our beaches.”

A letter received Monday from the Wendy C. Woolf, acting executive director of the Alaska Mental Health Trust Land office, was read by Assembly Member David Landis. The letter stated that “the trust land office has no immediate plans to dispose of its beach properties in Ketchikan.”

The letter also said that the trust had discussions with KBA and the Southeast Alaska Land Trust members in February when the trust was not interested in entering into a negotiated sale with its properties. But the letter states that, on reconsideration, the trust land office would be willing to work on a negotiated sale with the borough for the South Point Higgins beach. Woolf did not mention the other trust-owned waterfront properties in her letter.

Borough Manager Roy Eckert said the trust has worked with the borough to keep beach access open to the public.