

# HAINES *Alaska* NEWS

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Volume II Issue 21

www.hainesnews.net

September 16, 2010

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## Latest Articles

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- Haines Tourism Director Stepansky Moves On
- Arctic Aurora Watch
- Candidate's Residency is a Big Deal

Alaska Alliance for Commerce  
P.O. Box 784  
Haines, AK 99827

Editor:  
Roger Maynard

Email:  
[editor@hainesnews.net](mailto:editor@hainesnews.net)

## Cruise West Restructuring Affects Local Vendors

*Local tour operators are rocked in the wake of Cruise West financial woes*

by Roger Maynard

Cruise West's press release on September 8, 2010, announcing that it was closing operations and would be restructuring under new ownership, left some tour operators in Haines wondering if they will ever be paid for recent services.

"We knew Cruise West was having trouble by the middle of the 2009 season," says Chilkat River Adventures owner Karen Hess. "In fact, we had some trouble getting paid so we had to play 'hardball' with them this year."

According to Hess, this year River Adventures required a deposit at the beginning of the season to cover tour costs before they would do any business with Cruise West.

*(Continued on page 4)*



*U.S. Coast Guard photo  
Spirit of Glacier Bay aground in Tarr Inlet, 2008.*

## Lutak Oil Spill Upsets Locals

*U.S. Coast Guard; Alaska DEC investigation continues*

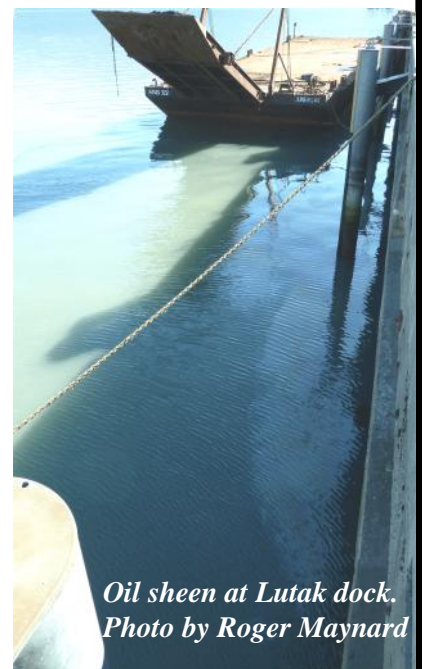
by Roger Maynard

Alaska Marine Highway terminal workers reported an oil sheen in front of the Alaska Marine Lines dock and the AMHS terminal, with a smell of diesel in the area at 10 am Sunday, September 12th.

Personnel from the harbor-master's office responded immediately. "We did everything by the book — we

responded to the scene and made contact with the captain of the Southeast Marine Transportation tug that had been there overnight," said Harbormaster Ed Barrett, "We started a log and called in a report to the U.S. Coast Guard and Alaska DEC through the National Response Center. There was a strong smell of diesel in the

*(Continued on page 2)*



*Oil sheen at Lutak dock.  
Photo by Roger Maynard*

# Know Your Local Candidates

Opportunities to opine and ask questions

by Roger Maynard

Municipal elections are less than three weeks away. On Tuesday, October 5 we will cast our ballots for two Assembly seats and three School Board members.

Here are 3 ways to get to know your candidates:

1. The Haines Chamber of Commerce Luncheon, noon, September 24 at the Library will feature all of the local candidates run-

ning for office. This candidate luncheon is an annual event sponsored by the Chamber.

2. Meet & Greet the Assembly & School Board Candidates Geise, Hess, Jones and Swinton at the Chilkat Center Lobby on September 25th from 2-4 p.m.

Visit the Haines Candidates Forum at <http://hainescandidates.wordpress.com> or visit the link under "Haines Election Candidates" on the Haines News website. Each participating candidate has a web page and can read your comments or answer your questions.

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## LUTAK OIL SPILL

(Continued from page 1)

entire area of the Lutak dock, and a rainbow sheen on the water."

Assistant Harbormaster Joe Parnell went aboard the tug and checked the engine room and bilge areas, and noted mostly reddish-colored water in the bilge.

Attempts to pick up oil in the area with absorbents were not productive. "It was just a rainbow sheen, with just a few clumps of wood chips and stuff that may have been cleaned off the deck of the barge," said Barrett, "In my experience, a thin rainbow sheen is not a form of oil that we can clean up with absorbents. The pads just wouldn't pick it up."

When the Coast Guard arrived they flew over the area and took pictures, then spoke with people on the ground. By the time they were on the ground the tug boat had departed. Oil sam-

ples were taken, and the Coast Guard will be making contact with the tug when it arrives in Wrangell to determine if it was the source of the oil.

Alaska DEC representatives are also investigating; they were in Haines on Tuesday, September 15th and spoke with several people in town.

Barrett and Parnell cautioned that other sources of oil have not been ruled out, but the Southeast Marine Transportation vessels were the only ones in the area immediately before and at the time the oil spill was reported. The tug and barge were working with Southeast Roadbuilders, transporting gravel to Wrangell for a road job there. Southeast Marine Transportation, Inc. is based in Wrangell.

As of this writing a small amount of oil sheen is visible immediately next to the seawall and there is no longer any associated odor.

# VOTE

The Haines Alaska News is a grassroots community newspaper project sponsored by the Alaska Alliance for Commerce, Inc. If you would like to comment or contribute, please contact the Haines Alaska News editor by email: [editor@hainesnews.net](mailto:editor@hainesnews.net)

## Haines Tourism Director Stepansky Moves On

*Accomplishments include National Scenic Byway designation and more*

by Roger Maynard

Haines Tourism Director Lori Stepansky will be leaving her job at the end of this month, after 6 1/2 years in Haines. She will be relocating to Anchorage, and hopes her experience in Haines will help her move into the tourism field there. When asked what her favorite accomplishment was during her tenure, she said, "The National Scenic Byways designation for the Haines Highway. That was one of the first things I started working on when I came, and we finally got it last year."

The designation comes with several benefits for Haines including marketing advantages and access to grant funding for things like informational signs, turnouts and rest areas.

When asked if, for example, the proposed Picture Point land purchase and improvement would find possible funding under the NSB program, she said "I don't think the money can be used for land purchase, but improvements — yes, that is just the type of project that could qualify."

Another high point was Stepansky's travel to Australia and New Zealand to represent Haines at travel conventions there. Whereas some travel conventions offer only limited opportunities to make presentations about Haines, this trip allowed her pitch Haines to over 170 industry representatives. During the following season she received significant positive feedback from B&B owners and other Haines busi-

nesses indicating more than the usual number of visitors from "down under."

Most of the return on tourism marketing, however, is indirect and difficult to measure. The Haines Highway border station, for instance, provides a tally of border crossings but does not classify whether they are commercial trucks, automobiles or motor homes. And a significant part of the advertising budget is spent on promoting the Southeast Alaska State Fair, but it's hard to correlate advertising efforts with the number of visitors.

"We keep statistics and can see that we're having an impact, but it's hard to get specific, meaningful results without commissioning a study by someone



like the McDowell Group," she opined, "And that costs money."

Stepansky was asked about the future of the tourism position and she said, "As far as I know, they're getting ready to advertise for a new tourism director."

Regarding her future plans, Stepansky is looking forward to new opportunities. "I have some applications in, and I've made some contacts. And I have some time to look around."

## Haines Struts Her Stuff for Visitors

*Last cruise ship of the season finds perfect weather, warm days*

by Roger Maynard

Visitors to Haines (and all of southeast Alaska) enjoyed a picture-perfect day as the Statendam visited Haines for the last time this season.

The Haines Visitor's center does not yet have hard numbers for the season, but confirmed that the number of passengers visiting Haines was down during 2010 from previous years.

*(right) The Haines-Skagway fast ferry, Fairweather Express, and the Statendam in Haines. Roger Maynard photo*



### CRUISE WEST

(Continued from page 1)

West. By mid-season when Cruise West's obligation to River Adventures exceeded the amount of the deposit, Hess told the company they would no longer serve Cruise West passengers until the company squared up. Cruise West made things right, and River Adventures continued serving Cruise West passengers. But by the time of the September 8 announcement, Cruise West still owed money.

#### Cruise West History

West Tours was formed by Alaska businessman Chuck West in 1973 as an Alaska tour. In 1990 the company bought its first overnight tour boat, and expanded throughout the 1990's with more boats and more destinations including several non-Alaskan destinations such as the Sea of Cortez, the Columbia and Snake Rivers, and British Columbia.

Chuck West passed away at his cabin near Haines in October, 2005, leaving the company in the hands of his son, Richard West.

The company had a spotty marine safety record in 2007 and 2008, with 4 groundings — 3 of which were in Alaskan waters. After the 4th grounding, the U.S. Coast Guard released a statement revealing that Cruise West was in a special program designed to review the company's safety procedures and maintenance records due to their recent string of incidents at sea.

#### The Restructuring

Perhaps the biggest blow to their reputation was the September 9, 2010 news story that Cruise West terminated the voyage of their largest vessel, the 120-passenger Spirit of Oceanus, stranding passengers in Newfoundland, Canada mid-voyage. The company called it the "first move in restructuring." The company is no longer accepting bookings and has laid off most of its Seattle employees.

Cruise West is not speaking to news outlets at this time, but the latest information available indicates the company may be under new ownership.

"They still owe us a few

thousand dollars," says Hess, "But we're probably in better shape than some other tour operators." She added, "Chuck loved Haines. He would have never treated local vendors

like this." The Cruise West website currently has only a notice to customers with recommended steps to take if they need to recover funds from a cancelled booking.

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