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Private cruise ship destination means business for many

By Elizabeth Bluemink

Juneau Empire/Morris News Service-Alaska

HOONAH - When this village's inaugural cruise ship season ended Sept. 19, 32 ships filled with tourists had come and gone and Native Tlingit residents said their lives had changed forever.

Kathy Mills-Marvin, who works at a business incubator at the village's new, private cruise ship destination, Icy Strait Point, is one of many cashing in on the tourist trade.

"I never thought I would be able to run a business. Now, I can," Mills-Marvin said. She spent her final day of the season proudly showing Native handicrafts, including her own fur-lined booties, to ogling tourists.

Hoonah, with a population of about 850, has struggled from the decline of the region's timber and fishing industries.

"It is a very distressed community," said Brian Johnson, director of the Business Assistance Center at the Juneau Economic Development Council.

To date, the financial impact of Icy Strait Point is still unclear for shareholders in Hoonah Totem Corp., the Native corporation that owns the project and has as its membership half of the population of Hoonah.

The corporation invested approximately \$20 million in its venture. "The season has been pretty darn good," said Don Rosenberger, the corporation's vice president of tourism and development.

Rosenberger declined to give statistics on the venture's financial performance, saying they will be available to shareholders at the end of the calendar year.

"Financially, it was a good season. We wish it could have been better. It's not totally complete the way we want it yet, but we planned to start slowly and ramp up," Rosenberger said.

A fan of the project, Gov. Frank Murkowski commissioned a private cruise on the M/V Taku ferry to Hoonah on Sept. 19. More than 200 invited guests were on board, including a Taiwanese trade delegation.

The trip cost the Alaska Department of Transportation approximately \$3,000. It would have disrupted some routine ferry traffic if it had not been for the early arrival of the M/V Aurora into Juneau from Prince William Sound, transportation officials said.

The Taku has been filling in for the M/V LeConte - under repair after running aground in the spring - and the Aurora will now take over those runs, said John Manly, a spokesman for the transportation department.

Murkowski said Icy Strait Point is "clearly a success" in Hoonah.

The project was built by Point Sophia Development Co. and it is the first privately developed cruise destination in Alaska.

The exclusion of the public from Icy Strait Point has provoked some debate amongst Alaska residents. Some have asked that the project be open to the public.

"We're not set up to handle the general public," said Bob Wysocki, chief executive

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officer of Hoonah Totem Corp. "We need some time to grow ... add some capacity."

Wysocki said he didn't know long it would take before Icy Strait Point could be opened to the public.

"We have to balance that with our guests' needs. It's privately funded. People need to be cognizant of that," he said.



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