

APPROVED MINUTES

Agenda

Planning Commission

Regular Meeting

CITY AND BOROUGH OF JUNEAU

Erik Pedersen, Chair

February 24, 2026

A. LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT – Read by Ms. Derr.

We would like to acknowledge that the City and Borough of Juneau is on Tlingit land, and wish to honor the indigenous people of this land. For more than ten thousand years, Alaska Native people have been and continue to be integral to the well-being of our community. We are grateful to be in this place, a part of this community, and to honor the culture, traditions, and resilience of the Tlingit people. Gunalchéesh!

B. ROLL CALL

Erik Pedersen, Chair, called the Regular Meeting of the City and Borough of Juneau (CBJ) Planning Commission (PC), held in Assembly Chambers of the Municipal Building, virtually via Zoom Webinar, and telephonically, to order at 6 p.m.

Commissioners present: Commissioners present in Chambers –Erik Pedersen, Chair; Lacey Derr, Vice Chair; Mandy Cole, Clerk; Jessalynn Rintala, Vice Clerk; Douglas Salik; Carlee Simon; Keith Koruna

Commissioners present via video conferencing – Karinne Wiebold

Commissioners absent: Larry Gamez

Staff present: Jill Lawhorne, CDD Director; Madeline Carse, CDD Administrative Assistant; Nicole Lynch, Attorney III; Justin Smith, Planner I

Assembly members: None

C. REQUEST FOR AGENDA CHANGES AND APPROVAL OF AGENDA - The agenda was approved.

D. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

1. January 13, 2026 Draft Minutes, Regular Planning Commission

2. January 27, 2026 Draft Minutes, Regular Planning Commission

MOTION: by Ms. Derr to approve the January 13, 2026, and January 27, 2026, Planning Commission Regular Meeting minutes.

E. **BRIEF REVIEW OF THE RULES FOR PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

F. **PUBLIC PARTICIPATION ON NON-AGENDA ITEMS**

G. **ITEMS FOR RECONSIDERATION**

H. **CONSENT AGENDA**

I. **UNFINISHED BUSINESS**

J. **REGULAR AGENDA**

1. **USE2025 0013:** Applicant requests a Conditional Use Permit to construct a 38,000-square foot entertainment and retail building at 356 South Franklin Street in a Waterfront Commercial zone.

Applicant: Reuben Willis

Location: 356 South Franklin Street

Ms. Cole voiced the presentation is going to be given by Corey Wall, who is on AWARE's Board of Directors, and she works for AWARE, but did not feel it would represent a conflict. She noted there was no financial interest in this project and felt she could remain impartial.

There were no objections by members of the Commission or the public.

Director's Report

The proposed building includes three theater attractions, a retail space, and associated office and support areas. The property is zoned Waterfront Commercial, with the first 40 feet located within the Juneau Downtown Historic District. The proposed use is permissible in the Waterfront Commercial zone through the conditional use permit process. The proposal is consistent with the 2013 Comprehensive Plan, the 2015 Economic Development Plan, and the Blueprint Downtown Area Plan. The applicant has also requested two variances for this project.

Staff Recommendation

Staff recommends the Planning Commission adopt the Director's analysis and findings and approve Conditional Use Permit USE2025 0013 with the requested conditions.

Reuben Willis, applicant and founder of AWE, Alaska Wonder Experience, LLC, stated this was a local and private project on private lands with private funds. He shared the lot has been vacant for 39 years and it is time for a world class project that will benefit visitors and locals. He explained the idea for this was born in 2017, after taking their family on a vacation where they experienced a flying theater. The project will be called Alaska Fly & Dive, which will include three immersive experiences, including a flying theater, 360 submersible simulators, and a 4d theater, and they are excited to share the experience of the wonders of Alaska in unique and immersive way. He said the premiere attraction is the state of the art flying theater, which will seat 72 people, soar over fantastic scenery, forests, mountains, and animal life, and will include smells, fog, and mist. He expressed that in order to deliver an impressive and stunning experience, they need the height variance so the seating platform can lift up and into the 55 foot high space that houses the 50 foot by 80 foot dome screen. The Ocean 360, which is the submersible simulator, consists of 20 seats and one ADA wheelchair accessible location, custom lighting, and immersive audio. The 4D theater will offer stadium seating with a 20 foot by 30 foot state of the art LED screen, where guests will experience things like bears catching salmon and feel the swipe of bear claws in the specialized seats. He voiced this will create 30 jobs and significant tax revenue and keep people downtown, not require busing or shuttles, and will be an amazing way to add an additional experience. He thanked the various organizations and people that are in support of the project, as well as the property the height variance would impact. He noted they visited with the school district superintendent, who was very excited for the learning opportunities this could provide to local students, as well as field trip opportunities.

Corey Wall, architect with Jensen Yorba Wall, displayed axial views of the building. He explained there are two lots, with Lot 1A containing the building, which and is landlocked by Lot 2A, which is the CBJ owned parcel all along the Seawalk that extends to bus parking; therefore, the building is not a waterfront parcel. He said they are meeting the Historic District standards, it is an appropriate use for the area, and felt the project was easily grantable for a conditional use permit.

Erin Willis outlined how the venue is intentionally designed to operate in two complimentary seasons. She explained that from May through September, they will serve the visitor economy with structured time entry experiences, with controlled, predictable, and professionally managed attendance. From October through April, the building shifts focus and becomes a civic and educational venue for Juneau residents. She stated they are excited to develop a partnership with the Juneau School District through the curriculum aligned with the Alaska State Science standards. She noted they will offer deeply discounted local admissions, sponsored school visits, locals appreciation weekends, and provide their large foyer space for nonprofit fundraisers, legislative receptions, youth celebrations, and community gatherings in the off season. She added the 4D theater space can host lectures, movies, and musical events.

Ms. Derr asked if Docks and Harbors had commented on the project.

Mr. Willis responded the senior planner told him they reviewed it and did not have any concerns.

Mr. Pedersen asked for public testimony.

Tom Kawakami (ph) voiced that there is not a lot for older folks to do in the wintertime in Juneau, so he felt this was an excellent idea. He said something like this would have been so beneficial for his children when they were in school. He added that this scale of investment in this size of town is unheard of and he gave his support.

Mr. Pedersen called the applicant back up to add any additional information.

Ms. Willis stated their community calendar aligns with Juneau's cultural rhythm. She said the project is not meant to be a facility that services cruise visitors and then go dark; it is meant to activate downtown in the quieter months and become embedded in the civic and educational life of Juneau. She asked for their approval to build something that services visitors in the summer and Juneau residents year-round.

Mr. Wall added they put the building on the west side of the site to pull it away from the Docks and Harbors deck over project so it will be an open plaza on the east side. He said they do have a couple of loading zones they put off of the level parking and they have an easement between the library and their parcel on the west side of the project where they also have loading zones. He stated they are trying to be good neighbors and people will be able to walk around the project.

Ms. Cole asked if the project would be non-viable if the variance granted is not granted.

Mr. Willis answered yes, as they need a venue that supports the 50 feet tall and 80 feet wide screen ,and the platform where participants sit, as it rotates and heaves up and down to give the simulation of flight and not give a sick feeling, which cannot be done at 38 feet. He noted the Historic Review Committee loved the design, as they went back to the original photographs of the Juneau Cold Storage and borrowed design features from that and placed it on the building.

Ms. Willis added when they originally went to have a pre-application meeting with the city, they thought about doing two of these theaters, which put them in a position of having a 55 foot height on Franklin Street, but they did not feel great about that so they eliminated it. She said it was intentional to ask for the variance in the back corner close to the existing parking garage to be pleasant looking and honor what Downtown Juneau likes it to look like.

Ms. Cole asked for clarification that the street front piece is the shorter piece and the 55 foot piece is behind the street front.

Mr. Wall answered yes.

Ms. Derr inquired if the applicant currently owned the property, as it still has a for sale sign on it.

Mr. Willis responded he has a purchase agreement and is in the due diligence period. He said they have earnest money down, but did not want to purchase the lot until they knew they could

move forward. He added they asked if they could continue to market during the due diligence period, which is why the sign is still there.

MOTION: *by Ms. Derr to accept staff's findings, analysis, and recommendations, and approve USE2025 0013.*

The motion passed 8-0.

2. **VAR2025 0008:** Applicant requests a Non-Administrative Variance to reduce the west side yard setback from 10 feet to 0 feet for a length of 60 feet in a Waterfront Commercial zone.

Applicant: Reuben Willis
Location: 356 South Franklin Street

Director's Report

The proposed building includes three theater attractions, a retail space, and associated office and support areas. The Waterfront Commercial zone requires 10-foot setbacks on all sides. The first 40 feet of the site lies within the Juneau Downtown Historic District, which encourages construction at the front and side property lines. The conflict between these guidelines creates a site-specific hardship if zoning setback requirements are applied. The requested Variance meets the criteria of CBJ Section 49.20.250(b)(1).

Staff Recommendation

Staff recommends the Planning Commission adopt the Director's analysis and findings and grant Variance VAR2025 0008.

Mr. Wall stated the main floor contains the 4D theater and the riders exit through retail. To get to the other attractions, people must take the stairs or elevator up past the mezzanine level, which is mostly offices and support, to the upper floor, where there is a large, double height lobby, and the other two attractions. He explained the submarine rides are stacked on top of the 4D ride and the flying theater starts on the ground level but it is entered 21 feet up. He noted they are keeping the portion along South Franklin at the 38 foot level. He displayed perspective views from South Franklin Street, where the big theater space is obscured by the allowable 38 foot tall building. He then showed a view from around the corner that is on the other side of the Docks and Harbos parking lot, where a tiny peak of the theater space can be seen. He asked for a variance to be allowed to go to a zero foot setback for the entire west side of the building so they can square it up with what is allowed in the Historic District.

Mr. Wall noted they tried to replicate some of what was on the Juneau Cold Storage, including the tile details of the pilasters.

MOTION: *by Ms. Derr to accept staff's findings, analysis, and recommendations, and approve VAR2025 0008.*

The motion passed 8-0.

3. **VAR2025 0009:** Applicant requests a Non-Administrative Variance to extend the Waterfront Commercial height limit from 35 feet to 38 feet, and from 35 feet to 54 feet for an area of 5,800 square-feet to accommodate a flying theater.

Applicant: Reuben Willis

Location: 356 South Franklin Street

Director's Report

The proposed building includes three theater attractions, a retail space, and associated office and support areas. The property is immediately adjacent to a CBJ-owned parking garage that exceeds the surrounding height limit. When Historic District boundaries were adopted in 2013, the parking garage parcel was intentionally excluded from the district. As a result, adjacent properties that function together visually and physically are subject to different height standards. The requested Variance with conditions meets the criteria of CBJ Section 49.20.250(b)(1).

Staff Recommendation

Staff recommends the Planning Commission adopt the Director's analysis and findings and grant Variance VAR2025 0009 with the requested conditions.

Mr. Wall requested a variance to extend the Waterfront Commercial height limit from 35 feet to 38 feet, and from 35 feet to 54 feet to accommodate the flying theater. He pointed out the library is at 66 feet and they would not be blocking the staff windows or the any public windows. He pointed out the big mural will be on the building as well. He explained the 38 foot variance would help fit the submarine rides for the whole way back and make the building coherent.

He stated this project has already been downsized from the two theaters they originally wanted and the screens are going to be LED, meaning they do not have to have projectors on the top, which allows them to shrink the building down. He said they tried to tailor their variances to be the absolute minimum that would allow them to do the building.

Ms. Cole asked why they are not asking for a variance of 39 or 400 feet if they are getting a variance anyway and the design is barely fitting.

Mr. Wall responded they are not opposed to that, but they were trying really hard to meet the Historic District standards of 38 feet and the minimum they would need for the 54 foot theater.

Ms. Cole inquired if they intend to build the entire storefront section and theaters all at the same time or if any part will be open before the other.

Mr. Willis answered their intent is to open all three venues at the same time.

Mr. Koruna asked how much space the dimension of the emergency stairwell requesting the variance is taking up. He also asked about the north-south dimension of the stairwell.

Mr. Wall responded it was not so much the width of the stairs, but the side of the building also sticking into it. He said the whole stair tower outside wall to outside wall is about 10 feet. He added the north-south dimension was probably close to 30 feet.

Ms. Cole asked for details on how provide separation in case of fire in regard to the setbacks.

Mr. Wall said the building would have to be rated because of its location, as they are within 10 feet of the property line. He added the whole façade will not have any windows on it.

Chair Pedersen asked for public testimony on either of the variances.

Ben Gilbert, Juneau resident and downtown business owner, was excited for the project. He said that lot has been an eye sore and this building would be an asset to that area of downtown, and the variance would have minimal impact. He stated having that facility there could do a lot for both employment and tourism downtown.

Mr. Pedersen invited the applicant back up to add anything additional.

Ms. Willis described some of the difference between the 4D theater on the main floor and the flying theater, including 4D theater offering multiple different movies, where the flying theater requires a custom made movie. She added the goal of the first floor, beyond the other attractions, is to tailor it for the holiday, Folk Festival, and different people from the community being able to use it. She expressed classrooms will be on the mezzanine level and areas where people could have office training. They also approached Juneau Animal Rescue about a partnership where some of the proceeds of the retail area go to helping them.

Mr. Willis voiced one of the things they have themed is a couple of king crab pots in the plaza and a place for picture taking opportunities, and Mark Ridgeway, brother of Michelle Ridgeway, who passed away in a car accident, offered to provide the yellow submarine she would use while going around the Juneau schools to engage the students to get excited about marine sciences as part of the venue. He shared that several years ago, a young lady from Juneau participated in America's Got Talent and has gone on to become a famous songwriter, and she offered to do a custom song for them about Juneau.

Mr. Koruna asked about the mechanical aspect of the building when it comes to injecting things like scents, mist, and fog.

Cindy Emerick, Ride Development Engineer, answered that each seat has a canopy, which contains a special unit that has a mist, scent, and air flow system. She said the mist is made to feel like going through a fog, the air is used for wind and enhances the scents, and they only use positive scents that mimic things like evergreen, ocean, and flowers. She noted that was for the flying theater only.

Ms. Derr stated her concern with bringing up Docks and Harbors is the parking lot directly next to it. She was on that board and that is one of the only lots with entry on the left side instead of the right. Therefore, she wanted to know if there was any traffic concerns about pedestrians coming out and walking across the street there.

Director Lawhorne's understanding was that Docks and Harbor's Board discussed this project twice and provided no comments. She stated they do not have any concerns with pedestrian traffic, and she appreciated the applicant lining up the building so they have a direct site line and trying to encourage people to go the way they want them to.

Ms. Cole stated the staff report notes the Historic District Design standards are good with a small gap rather than a 10 foot setback. She wondered if many of the properties on Franklin Street were built within their setbacks.

Director Lawhorne answered yes, the majority are built up to the sidewalk.

Ms. Simon was excited about the project and felt they were making an enormous investment in the community. She said it clearly will stimulate the economy and have workforce implications from construction to employment, which is important for the community.

MOTION: *by Ms. Derr to accept staff's findings, analysis, and recommendations, and approve VAR2025 0009.*

K. OTHER BUSINESS

1. Discussion of Regular Meeting Times

Mr. Pedersen shared that historically the Planning Commission started meetings at 7 p.m., but for meetings where there is a lot on the agenda or a lot of public input, the meetings can go quite late, so they made an adjustment to hold the meetings at 6 p.m. in the wintertime and adjust it to 7 p.m. in the summer months. He asked the Commission if

they like the 6 p.m. start time or if there was a compelling reason to keep the split schedule for winter and summer.

Chair Pedersen, Ms. Cole, and Ms. Simon voiced they did not have a preference.

Ms. Wiebold, Ms. Rintala, Mr. Koruna, and Ms. Derr shared a slight preference for 6 p.m.

Mr. Salik commented he preferred 6 p.m. in the winter and 7 p.m. in the summer.

MOTION: *by Ms. Cole to begin the Regular Planning Commission Meetings at 6 p.m. regardless of the summer or winter months.*

The motion passed.

L. STAFF REPORTS

Director Lawhorne noted for the record that Deputy Mayor Smith, Assembly liaison, could not join this evening, as he had a conflict, and sent his apologies.

Director Lawhorne shared the March 10th meeting was cancelled, as they are not seeing as many cases as normal. She stated it seems they are busy on permits, but that is partly due to the permit system migration, which has gone live. She said Civic Access is out there and people and applicants are using it, and the response is positive and it is going well for the most part, with a few expected hiccups. She noted they are only having one meeting in April due to the lack of cases coming in, but there are two variances coming up.

M. COMMITTEE REPORTS

Ms. Derr reported the Lands, Housing & Economic Development Committee met last night and heard items, including a request to extend the footprint of a communications tower up at Eaglecrest, which was approved. She stated there was a land swap between DOT and CBJ. She explained the North Douglas boat ramp has a good portion on DOT land and uses the right-of-way and DOT has been interested in a parcel CBJ owns by the Whale Park for access to the bridge. The motion was approved to work with DOT and CBJ on that land swap so that CBJ would get the North Douglas land and DOT would have the access under the bridge. She added there was a bigger discussion regarding the building they are currently in, which is up for bid. They discussed getting an appraisal for the building before going to bid, but that was voted down and they approved doing competitive sealed bids. She said there was discussion of providing bitter preference to those willing to turn it into housing and a discussion on peer to peer vehicle sharing, and it was approved to add a 10% additional fee to anyone leaving the car within a half mile of the cruise ship area, with the hopes of reducing cars being left in the parking garages or on the street for long

periods of time. She reported that Mr. Ciambor also did a quick update on the Affordable Housing Fund. Ms. Derr shared it was an interesting meeting.

N. LIAISON REPORTS

O. CONTINUATION OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION ON NON-AGENDA ITEMS

P. PLANNING COMMISSION COMMENTS AND QUESTIONS

Chair Pedersen commented the second meeting in March is over a school holiday, and staff wanted to confirm if there will be a quorum for that meeting. He asked the Commission to let him or the director know if they would not be able to attend.

Q. EXECUTIVE SESSION

R. SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS

1. Additional Materials

S. ADJOURNMENT

The February 24, 2025 Planning Commission Meeting was adjourned at 7:29 p.m.