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# Juneau Independent

The True Local Newspaper of Alaska's Capital City

May 9, 2026

## Glacial flood costs, risks rising

USACE says 26% chance of flood affecting 2,000 homes during next 15 years; funds for protection are lacking

By MARK SABBATINI and JASZ GARRETT  
Juneau Independent

Preventing potentially catastrophic glacial flooding in the Mendenhall Valley during the next 10 to 15 years may be more costly and difficult than previously thought, Juneau Assembly members were told Monday night.

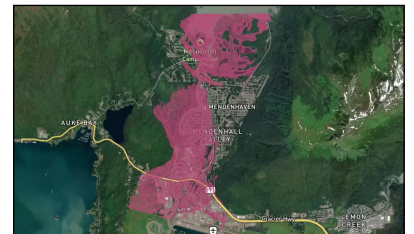
There's a 2% chance each year — and 26% chance during the next 15 years — of a flood with a crest of 20 feet that could affect more than 2,200 homes, schools and other buildings, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers officials

told the Assembly Committee of the Whole.

Record crests of 14.97, 15.99 and 16.65 feet occurred the past three years.

"There is a low chance of that happening, but over time those chances compound," Mike Records, USACE's lead technical engineer for the Mendenhall flooding project. He noted the estimates are subject to wide variability and uncertainties.

City Manager Katie Koester said Monday that level of protection is likely to cost about \$20 million.



JUNEAU GLACIAL FLOOD DASHBOARD

A projected 20-foot flood without HESCO barriers in the Mendenhall Valley.



LAURIE CRAIG / JUNEAU INDEPENDENT

New murals by local artists on a wall of the Marine View Parking Garage on Thursday, April 30, 2026.

## Marine views

Downtown parking garage gets facelift with murals from 12 local artists

By ELLIE RUEL  
Reporter



A collaborative 12-piece set of murals from a community project aiming to cover up a parking garage wall downtown were formally revealed

as part of May's First Friday festivities. The pieces are the result of a year-long workshop giving artists the ins and outs of mural creation.

Dezarae Arrowsun owns the Picture This framing shop downtown. The concrete wall nearly consumes her view from the front window.

## Goldbelt Tram closed until at least May 24

Accident that injured employees prompts multiweek shutdown

By MARK SABBATINI  
Editor

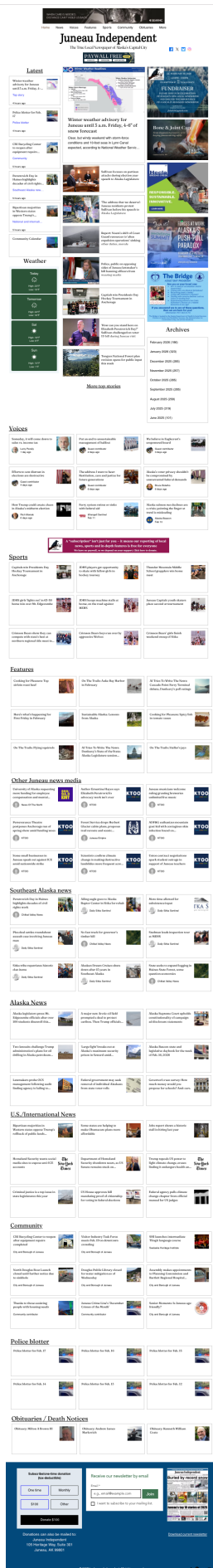
The Goldbelt Tram is scheduled to remain closed until May 24 following an accident last Thursday when one of the two passenger cars docked at the base station at an accelerated rate of speed, injuring employees in the car, Goldbelt Inc. announced Monday.



The closure is to "investigate the issue and take any necessary corrective measures to ensure the safety of our guests and employees," the Juneau-based Alaska Native corporation stated in a post on its Facebook page.

"The Tram is in the process of refunding all pre-paid tickets for visits scheduled during the closure period that were purchased through our website. If you purchased tickets through a third party, such as a cruise line, please contact that vendor directly for refund assistance."

This is what it's like to go fully independent at our website at www.juneau.independent.com



# Voices

## Let's quit fighting and work together

By DAVE HANNA

Juneau is facing some serious challenges and unfortunately it is bringing out the worst in some folks. While we should be worrying about our flooding in the valley, our seasonal economy, our housing shortage, and our outmigration of the younger generation, instead we are milling about and shouting that the sky is falling due to the perceived budget shortfall.

Unfortunately, the city manager, the mayor and Assembly have been quick to assign the blame to the passage of two ballot measures last year that capped the property assessments at the level they had been maintaining and eliminated sales tax on food and essentials for everyone instead of just senior citizens. Some ill-informed and misguided individuals have jumped on the bandwagon and unleashed extremely ill-spirited, untrue, and downright slanderous attacks on some of the folks who helped with the creation and deliverance of these measures.

I will not delve into these attacks except to say that everybody involved has the community's best interests at heart. We all know how difficult it is for younger folks to get ahead these days and did our best to see if we could move the needle. When folks resort to name-calling it generally means they do not have any valid arguments to back up their position. I certainly have not seen any. In the meantime, let me do my best to explain the rationale behind the initiatives.

The property tax initiative was basically a way to ensure that the city would not be able to accelerate its irrational expenditures. It simply capped the tax rate where it currently stood. Folks might say that it doesn't take inflation into account, but actually it does. As inflation takes place, all costs and values go up, and your assessment reflects that. If the assessors are doing their job, and they seem to have been, then your rising assessments will compensate for inflation...



## Why do we bother with local government?

By CLAYTON DALE

What is the point of local government? It's the government we see most in our day-to-day lives and the government we turn to first when things go wrong. The current estimated \$12 million shortfall, while not insignificant, does not warrant panicked reactions. Erratic changes in baseline city services are bad for everyone and should be the last, not the first option.

The idea that cutting the city pools — mothballing Augustus Brown would save \$600,000, and shuttering Dimond Park Aquatic Center would save about \$1 million — or closing the Juneau-Douglas City Museum entirely for a savings of less than \$500,000 is going to change the budget situation in any meaningful way is horse manure. Anyone who suggests such is pushing you to drink the Kool-Aid or is drunk on it themselves already.

The point of all this is to provide services to the public. Not to turn a city park into a gold mine with yet another Eaglecrest boondoggle, and not to have the fanciest City Hall. The point is to provide a solid foundation that you, your family, and your business can rely on.

I, for one, would be afraid to stand up in front of you, my neighbors and peers, and say that the only thing I can imagine as a response is a collective spanking. I suppose it's easier for the Assembly to punish friends, family, and neighbors than it is to actually look at options with the budget or, God forbid, stand up to Cruise Lines International Association in court. We see tens of millions of dollars coming into town every year, and we see the impacts of high-volume, Walmart-style tourism from one end of the road system to the other...



## Knowledge disappearing before our eyes

By BRUCE BOTELHO

Ray Bradbury's novel "Fahrenheit 451" is set in a near-future American city where mass entertainment, constant noise, and shallow media have replaced reading, reflection, and meaningful conversation, and where owning books is a serious crime. Rather than fighting fires, firefighters are charged with burning books and the places that house them. Written more than 75 years ago, "Fahrenheit 451's" message that knowledge survives only if people actively value, remember and teach it seems more relevant today than ever.

The Trump administration has unleashed its arsonists in every corner of American society and is waging a war on knowledge itself. By starving science of funds, disappearing public data, and policing how history can be told, it is at-

tempting to narrow what Americans are allowed to know, study, remember and imagine.

Trump's latest budget efforts have been driving federal science spending to its lowest levels in decades, with deep cuts across the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation, and climate-related programs. Thousands of grants have been canceled, delayed or rescoped to fit ideological priorities, and entire divisions focused on topics like climate, public health and diversity have been targeted for elimination. One tangible result has been a forced exodus of researchers and forfeiture of the kinds of discoveries that have made our nation pre-eminent in science and technology...



# Vigil at dusk for Alfred Willis Torres Sr. offers support and words full of light

*More than 100 people gather on cruise dock near garage where he was assaulted a month ago*

**By MARK SABBATINI**  
**Editor**

Alfred Willis Torres Sr. remained alive for a month after being assaulted in a downtown Juneau parking garage, but for many family members there still wasn't time to properly say goodbye before he died earlier this week at a Seattle hospital.

"I didn't get to go down to say goodbye to him, but I wanted to do this candle lighting to show that we loved him and that he'll never be forgotten," Karen Jim, one of his sisters, said during a candlelight vigil Thursday night on the cruise ship dock next to the Marine Parking Garage where the as-

sault occurred.

More than 100 people gathered for the vigil at dusk. Jim said most of them were extended family members.

"I asked my brother Sonny, he's the oldest of us, and he quit counting at 70," she said.

Torres, 53, was allegedly attacked in the garage at about 11 p.m. April 6 by his nephew Devon Rivera, 29, and niece Chelsea Willis, 37, resulting in facial fractures and other severe injuries, according to court records. Both are facing multiple assault-related charges, but prosecutors said Wednesday additional charges are possible due to Torres' death.

Most people gathering for Thursday's vigil spoke little about the assault.



**MARK SABBATINI / JUNEAU INDEPENDENT**

Family and friends of Alfred Willis Torres Sr. gather on the cruise ship dock near the Marine Parking Garage for a candlelight vigil on Thursday, May 7, 2026. Torres died earlier this week after being assaulted a month ago in the garage.

# UAS' close ties highlighted at commencement

*Traditional and Native graduation ceremonies lifted the spirits of graduates, educators and elders*

**By JASZ GARRETT**  
**Managing Editor**

It was a change of scenery for the University of Alaska Southeast's 55th commencement ceremony Sunday, but the 2026 graduating class felt the same atmosphere of a small campus with big opportunities.

Before joining 110 students at the Centennial Hall ceremony, Mikaela Levy and Taylor Sedillos chatted outside the ballroom. They both received an Associate of Applied Science degree in nursing from the University of Alaska Anchorage, taking classes online at UAS.

Sedillos said the program's Southeast cohort had only four students, providing an intimate learn-



**JASZ GARRETT / JUNEAU INDEPENDENT**

University of Alaska Southeast graduates enter Centennial Hall to an entrance song by the Mount Juneau Tlingit Dancers and Woosh.ji.Een dance group on Sunday, May 3, 2026.

ing experience. Both Levy and Sedillos said they plan to work at Bartlett Regional Hospital after graduation.

"It's a unique program, but it allows us to live

in Juneau," Levy said. "I have kids, and I love the community and how it supports families. It's very close-knit."

The three-hour commencement featured student and faculty speakers, the Woosh.ji.Een and Mount Juneau Tlingit Dancers, and honorary tributes.

Samuel Marquardt, the student speaker, received a Bachelor of Science in marine biology with a minor in chemistry. Marquardt is an active-duty U.S. Coast Guard member through the College Student Pre-Commissioning Initiative and plans to attend Officer Candidate School after graduation.

Throughout his time at UAS, Marquardt served as student government president and a member of The Coalition of Student Leaders.

"As you embark on the next adventure in your lives, take well-thought-out risks," Marquardt told the graduates.



# Selling Eaglecrest gondola gets initial Assembly OK

*Sale may net city \$1.6M after it spends well over \$10M on project nearing final stage of cancellation*

**By MARK SABBATINI**  
**Editor**

Selling a gondola intended for Eaglecrest Ski Area — at a heavy loss — rather than seeking one or more third-party investors for the project got an initial go-ahead from the Juneau Assembly on Monday.

The city may net about \$1.6 million in a sale process that takes two to three years, City Manager

Katie Koester said during a Committee of the Whole meeting. That's less than a third of what the city paid for the original gondola, a second one purchased for additional parts, and costs such as shipping and having cars refurbished.

It also doesn't include millions in other costs such as interest due on a refunded \$10 million investment by Goldbelt Inc. Assembly members on Monday gave preliminary approval to two ordinances that cancel a profit-sharing agreement with the Alaska Native Corporation and refund the money.

Both the sale of the gondola and canceling the

Goldbelt agreement need final approval by the Assembly at a regular meeting that includes public testimony. The next regular Assembly meeting is scheduled May 18.

The alternative to a sale is seeking an investor for the installation and operation of the gondola at Eaglecrest, Koester said. She said that process would likely take at least a year — possibly a few — with an uncertain outcome and the city continuing to pay for storage of gondola parts and other costs in the meantime.



## Sports

# The boys and girls of summer are back

By **KLAS STOLPE**  
Sports Editor

“I just like hitting and pitching,” Riley McNatt, 5, said as he stood among hundreds of his peers Saturday at Adair-Kennedy Memorial Park. “I like my bat. I am a home run hitter.”

America’s game was in full swing Saturday as the Gastineau Channel Little League’s 40 teams, 438 players and 124 volunteers swarmed the park’s field — in front of friends, family and fans — for opening day ceremonies and the beginning of their 74th season.

“Opening day is always a special day because we get all the kids into one place all together,” GCLL president Lexi Razor said. “And the families are there. It is the only time that happens. Throughout the season, kids are at different fields and not really together. So this puts some excitement in



KLAS STOLPE / JUNEAU INDEPENDENT

A Juneau Emeralds player enters the field looking for his team during the Gastineau Channel Little League's Opening Day Ceremonies at Adair-Kennedy Memorial Park on Saturday, May 2, 2026.

baseball and softball coming together like that.”

The love of the sport between the players and the community was evident as wide-eyed GCLL

youth were high-fived by members of the Juneau-Douglas High School: Yadaa.at Kalé Crimson Bears softball and baseball teams.

“Having the high school teams that the kids run through is a long-standing tradition,” said Razor, who is also the JDHS softball coach. “All those high school players on the field, 90% of them played Little League and ran through the high school pyramids. It is always a fun event.”

Razor grew up playing GCLL in the 1980s and was on one of the first girls’ All-Star softball teams for Juneau. At that time, team names were based on who the sponsors were.

“My first was a green and yellow team,” Razor said, trying to recall the name. “I just remember for All-Stars my first season we played in boys’ jerseys. So, now, to see girls get their own things and softball has become so huge in Juneau it just warms my heart. It is such a good experience to see how far it has come since I was a kid playing.”

## Features

# Picturing past, focusing on future at 20th Century theater

*Trio restoring 86-year-old building as Aurora Grand Theater for movie screenings and live stage shows*

By **LAURIE CRAIG**  
Special Correspondent

After several idle years, life is returning to the 20th Century Gross Theatre on Front Street in downtown Juneau. Plans included a “soft” opening in April with a charity event and live entertainment for summer visitors.

A trio of energized visionaries is renovating the 86-year-old concrete theater that brought live entertainment, motion pictures and the renowned Kimball theater organ to Juneau. Another

group of Juneauites is restoring the building’s apartments.

James McSweeney, Emelia Sween and Elise LaBronte have named their new venture Aurora Grand Theater. The art deco lettering on the theater’s entry doors announce “Stage and Screen Coming Soon.”

The group’s current preparations focus on the balcony where an upstairs performance portion of the theater is being readied for an April kickoff movie showing to benefit Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS). A stage platform is under construction while seating is still in unfinished form. Major renovations will be needed, however, and will continue through the summer on the main floor seating and stage area.



MARK SABBATINI / JUNEAU INDEPENDENT

Front Street’s 20th Century Gross Theatre, built in 1939-1940, and being reopened as the Aurora Grand Theater, seen here on Tuesday, April 7, 2026.

# On The Trails: Spring has sprung amidst winter’s remains

By **MARY F. WILLSON**

The snow is still thick on the ground in some places and my pond still has a lot of ice. The small alders that grow at the pond edge were bent double by those heavy snows and still have their tops locked in the pond ice. Pairs of mallard visit the pond every day, foraging around the edges and on the fallen seeds on the ice.

Black bears have been out and about for a

while, leaving signs of their passage. One was reported to awaken a neighborhood by prolonged bashing of a garbage can. After hibernating all winter, they are generally quite hungry, and there is not much food readily available. One fellow appeared in Lemon Creek on April 20, surprisingly looking quite rotund. Maybe he fed really well last fall and still had a nice load of fat. I’m guessing it was a male, because females have to burn up a lot of fat while they are lactating for new cubs in the den, so they are less likely to look roly-poly in spring.



PHOTO BY BOB ARMSTRONG

Golden-crowned sparrows stopped by on their way to nesting habitat by the high mountain meadows.