

# Juneau Independent

The True Local Newspaper of Alaska's Capital City

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# Buried by record snow

*Governor declares emergency as Juneau struggles with roofs collapsing, boats sinking, streets flooding and avalanche warnings from storms*

By JASZ GARRETT  
Managing Editor

The Juneau Assembly agreed Wednesday to a disaster declaration announced by the city and Central Council of the Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska, meaning state aid is coming soon to help unbury the capital city from record snow.

Mayor Beth Weldon stated in a text message Wednesday morning Gov. Mike Dunleavy "has verbally granted our request and they are sending an emergency management specialist down tomorrow," he said.

row to assess our situation and figure out resources needed."

Deputy City Manager Robert Barr said circumstances changed rapidly, leading to the need to request state assistance on Tuesday.

"We reached the point where our resources that we were applying to this winter storm event were getting to be exhausted in targeting the remediation of caring for public and critical infrastructure," he said.



JASZ GARRETT / JUNEAU INDEPENDENT

The collapsed fuel canopy of Fred Meyer's gas station on Jan. 1, 2026.



MARK SABBATINI



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LAURIE CRAIG



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**Counting down the final four:** A city crew tears down a homeless encampment in November, lawmakers hug during a special session on education in August, water seeps through HESCO barriers along the Mendenhall River in August, and Elizabeth Kell announces voting is closed in October's municipal election.

# Juneau's top 10 stories of 2025

*Flood successes and election setbacks for local leaders; long-discussed projects move on land and at sea*

By JUNEAU INDEPENDENT STAFF

The primary criteria for the top 10 stories is: What had the greatest impact on the greatest number of people?

There are other considerations — hypothetically speaking, a plane crash that killed

20 people would clearly be a historically significant event. But as noted in our story about the Juneau Independent's 10 most-read articles, what's most newsworthy isn't necessarily the same as what gets the most web clicks.

Among those "other considerations" is

we published a list of "Juneau's 10 strangest stories of 2025" on Dec. 28 — and noted we didn't include stories there that would also appear in the list of the 10 biggest stories. However, that was the second day of what turned out to be a historically surreal storm.



## OUTDOORS



**On The Trails:** Local wildlife survival in extreme snow



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# Voices

## How not to write about Telephone Hill

By MICHELLE BONNET HALE

What drove me off the Juneau Assembly last year was the fever pitch of issues; the deep anger felt by my friends and constituents about, well, many things, including CBJ issues; and the speed at which a normal-seeming issue became a flashpoint. There are no normal issues these days.

It makes sense for me to come off the Assembly and write columns about local issues. I've written a few, but I've had writer's block, largely from my attempts to write about local issues without adding ugliness to already painful issues.

I am stymied.

I am stumped by the tall order I've given myself. At every turn, when I want to share my opinion about an issue, I struggle with doing so in a way that is not unkind, that treats all parties involved with respect, that does not add to conflict. I guard myself against name-calling and especially against its dangerous cousin, casting seemingly innocent aspersions. Tall order, indeed.

While on the Assembly, I supported development of Telephone Hill, but I knew that it would be one tough issue for the city to deal with. I still do support it. I'm saddened by

the intensity of the conflict that has developed and saddened at the difficulties experienced by people as they have had to move from their long-treasured homes. I have a lot of opinions about the issue and I'll mostly keep those to myself. Again, I don't want to add bruises.

I ask myself why it is so hard to contribute meaningfully to this conversation without deepening existing wounds or creating new ones. Issues these days seem to race to foregone conclusions, churned through the well-oiled machines of outrage. We are all so angry about so many things.

In his 2012 book, "The Righteous Mind: Why good people are divided by politics and religion," Jonathan Haidt proposes that we first form our opinions by following our intuition, and then apply reason to justify those opinions. Now I understand that the book itself generated controversy, which makes me laugh, but he proposes a good starting point for understanding our current situation. First we have the gut response and then we layer on justifications for our intuition.



## Watching a US coup in your homeland

*Editor's note: The following column about the U.S. attack on Venezuela and capture of its president early Saturday morning was written by "Isabella," a Venezuelan woman who moved with her family to Juneau in May of 2024. She is identified with a pseudonym because the family, while here legally via the asylum process, is a potential target for deportation by the Trump administration.*

The best night of our lives, we were enjoying a movie, and as usual, each of us had a phone in hand. We're the kind of people who turn on the TV while using our phones.

It was almost 8 o'clock at night, and I saw on my Facebook feed a post from a very prestigious local newspaper from our city in Venezuela reporting the attacks on Caracas

by the United States. We immediately called our family in Venezuela, who were asleep — it was past 1 a.m. there — and informed them of what we were seeing on social media. We immediately checked U.S. news outlets and confirmed that what was happening was real.

Family and friends near Caracas confirmed the loud explosions. I think by then we were very euphoric; we cried, we laughed. What we had been praying to God for years was actually happening: a major coup similar to the one Chávez carried out, a surprise attack that no one expected...an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth!



## Why Juneau needs an Independent voice

By BRUCE BOTELHO

When a community loses its local news, it loses more than headlines — it loses part of its identity. A vibrant, informed public depends on journalists who understand local people, local issues and local life. That used to be the role of our hometown newspaper, but as corporate ownership has shifted the focus away from Juneau something vital has gone missing.

The Juneau Independent arose to fill that gap. It is locally rooted and nonprofit, built on the principle that news should serve the public, not shareholders. For that reason it has erected no paywall. Its mission is straightforward: provide accurate, independent and fair reporting that helps Juneau's citizens understand what's happening in their government,

schools, neighborhoods and environment.

In an era of shrinking newsroom budgets and copy-paste coverage from afar, that is no small thing. Local reporters are the ones who attend city meetings, follow school board debates, ask hard questions and celebrate community milestones. Without them, public accountability falters and civic life withers. In our case, we're blessed with an experienced editor in Mark Sabbatini, talented writers Jasz Garrett, Ellie Ruel and Laurie Ferguson Craig, and the irreplaceable Klas Stolpe who covers our sports scene.

• Bruce Botelho is the president of the Juneau Independent's board of directors.



# Eaglecrest finances go downhill

*Ski area expects \$6M deficit over 3 years, double estimate of a year ago, as gondola decision looms*

By MARK SABBATINI

Editor

Eaglecrest Ski Area expects a deficit of at least \$2 million during the current fiscal year and the same amount for each of the following two years, twice as much as predicted a year ago, as the resort faces a monumental decision within a couple of months about proceeding with a gondola seen as the key to its financial future.

A report presented to Eaglecrest board's finance committee Monday night states the ski area will have a negative fund balance of between \$7 million and \$8 million as of June 30, 2028 — about two months after the gondola begins operating if it opens by its current deadline. An economic analysis published for the city in December 2024 projected deficits averaging about \$1 million during the three-year period, but also detailed alternative scenarios based on levels of infrastructure work



CITY AND BOROUGH OF JUNEAU

A dusting of snow covers the Ptarmigan chairlift at Eaglecrest Ski Area in December 2024.

and funding support from city leaders.

Jim Calvin, a board member presenting the most recent report, said revenue this year is down sharply during what's been a difficult season and Juneau Assembly members are likely to raise serious concerns about ski area budgets they're being asked to approve during the next two years.

"The long-term numbers still look good that

there could be significant gondola-related revenue surpluses, but it's not going to happen overnight," he told the committee and other Eaglecrest leaders.

However, a big "if" is whether the Assembly will give the go-ahead to complete installation of the 20-year-old gondola purchased from an Austrian ski resort once an estimate of that cost is provided by a general contractor. A joint meeting of Eaglecrest leaders and the Assembly Finance Committee is scheduled March 4, which matches with the timeline for when resort officials have said they expect a decision.

"What's most important for me for this is to understand the trajectory of our fund balance and ask that we will be making of the Assembly," Calvin said. "We need to be very transparent with them that we will need a lot of further support in terms of allowing further negative fund balance before we get to gondola revenues. And it just needs to inform our thinking about if there's no gondola — what is our path forward?"



## Negative job growth forecast for Southeast AK in 2026

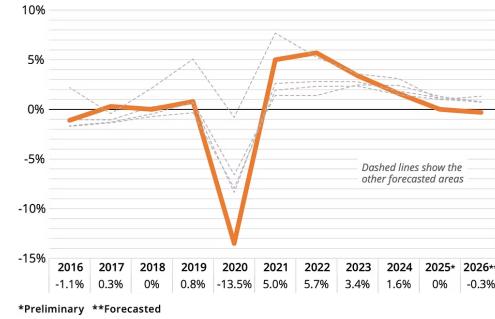
*Trump's federal worker and budget cuts, plus continuing outmigration and low birth rates are factors*

By MARK SABBATINI

Editor

Southeast Alaska gained no jobs in 2025 and is expected to see a drop in 2026, due to President Donald Trump's downsizing of the federal government as well as a long-term population decline that has resulted in mostly flat job numbers for many years, according to a new state report.

Strong growth in cruise tourism helped the region recover from a huge drop in jobs at the begin-



ning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, according to the January issue of Alaska Economic Trends, which is published by the Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development. How-

ever, the growth rate has tapered off as the growth in tourists has leveled out and other economic conditions have returned mostly to normal.

"A new development last year was the second Trump administration's push to shrink the federal workforce through the Department of Government Efficiency and various budget rescissions and cuts," the report notes.

"Longer term, powerful demographic forces — declining birth rates and a moderate but persistent trend of more people moving out than moving in — continue to influence the region's economy."



## Juneau's first baby of 2026 is Bjorn at hospital

*Bjorn Schroth welcomed Jan. 3 with a boat fit for a possible future captain*

By ELLIE RUEL  
Reporter

Juneau's newest arrival of 2026 made his debut at Bartlett Regional Hospital on Saturday. Bjorn Schroth, born to local parents Annie Ortega and Austin Schroth, weighed seven pounds 15 ounces and measured 20.5 inches long. He is the family's first child.

"The nurses are great and have been super helpful to us as new parents," said the baby's mother in a news release by the hospital.

Keeping with a years-long hospital tradition, the

parents received a handmade wooden rocking boat supplied with newborn essentials like diapers, hats, and toys. Bartlett Emergency Physician Dr. Lindy Jones and his wife Colleen Jones craft the cradles together, and this year's was made of Sitka spruce donated by Icy Straits lumber.

"Before Bjorn was born, a coworker commented that his name was fitting of a boat captain, so to receive this handmade boat is really special," Austin Schroth said.

According to Bartlett, Bjorn is the first of almost 300 babies born per year at the hospital.



BARTLETT REGIONAL HOSPITAL

Annie Ortega and Austin Scroth pose with their newborn son, Bjorn Scroth, with a gifted "baby boat" full of essentials.

# Jirdes Winther Baxter, last survivor of 1925 Nome serum run, dies at 101

Moved to Juneau w/ family in 1929; honored by the city as 'shadow member' of the municipal council

By MARK SABBATINI  
Editor

Jirdes Winther Baxter, the last living survivor of the 1925 serum run credited with inspiring the Iditarod Sled Dog Race, died Monday at Bartlett Regional Hospital at the age of 101.

"This is kind of an end of an era for that period of time," Fred Baxter, one of her sons, said Tuesday.



His mother, born Jirdes Winther on Feb. 25, 1924, to parents who had moved from Norway to Nome, was hospitalized with diphtheria on Jan. 31, 1925, in the midst of an epidemic of the disease that winter. Only a few days earlier, Nome's only doctor, Curtis Welch, sent an emergency telegraph to the U.S. Public Health Service requesting 1 million units of diphtheria antitoxin.

That resulted in the famous serum run by 20 mushers and about 150 sled dogs over 674 miles in five and a half days from Nenana to Nome. Jirdes Winther and her two brothers received the last of the existing serum, and their mother the first of the new serum when it arrived at the beginning of February, according to Fred Baxter.



MARK SABBATINI / JUNEAU INDEPENDENT

Jirdes Winther Baxter blows out the candles on her cake during her 100th birthday celebration Feb. 24, 2024, at the Juneau Yacht Club.

## Imperial Bar, host of last New Year's party before Prohibition

By LAURIE CRAIG  
Special Correspondent

New Year's Eve celebrations are normally lively and loud, but the last night of 1917 was an especially big event. That was the final day of legal drinking in Alaska for the next 15 years.

Jan. 1, 1918, ushered in Alaska's "Bone Dry Law," voted by Alaskans and approved by Congress. It was two years prior to national Prohibition enacted under the Volstead Act, the 18th Amendment.

The forerunner of today's Imperial Bar survived Prohibition after starting life in 1891 under

various names and owners. Its colorful background includes founders dashing off to the Klondike and Nome gold fields in the late 1890s, near-total destruction by fire in 1906 followed by reconstruction soon after, and the addition of a third floor in 1935. Today, Front Street's J.J. Stocker Building houses one of downtown's most popular bars and eateries.

ROOTED IN COMMUNITY  
Featuring unique and historic buildings in Juneau, and the present-day businesses and people occupying them.

The building's origins are noteworthy. Two brothers, Thomas and Oscar Ashby, arrived in Juneau in 1884 from Missouri. They joined with William Leak in 1891 to build a saloon on pilings on the beach. The pilings remain in place today, although fill material has been added beneath the building. The saloon's first name was Ashby and Leak.

The second name was The Missouri, after the Ashbys' home state. The third name — Louvre Theater and Bar — came in 1896, the same year gold was discovered in the Yukon Territory.



## Sports

### Fort Yukon warm about Juneau despite storm

Girls basketball team discusses life on the court, culture and resilience of village life at minus 60°F

By KLAS STOLPE  
Sports Editor

With their final game over at the George Houston Capital City Classic basketball tournament last week, the Fort Yukon Lady Eagles were asked what they felt about Juneau's weather, which at the time entailed unusually high snowfall amounts.

"It is minus 60 right now," Fort Yukon senior Kylee Carroll said of her hometown. "We feel pretty warm here. It is warm."

"I thought it was going to be really warm," senior Jane Ward added. "Because of how cold it is in Fort Yukon, but the school here is cold (she laughs), except in the gym."

The Lady Eagles arrived at the tournament ex-



KLAS STOLPE / JUNEAU INDEPENDENT

Fort Yukon's Nellie Ward, Kylee Carroll, Karli Thomas and Shandace Carroll defend a shot by Monroe's Leila Church last week in the George Houston Capital City Classic.

pecting to see the glacier, tour the Capitol and enjoy the sights, but the winter storm essentially kept them housed in their JDHS accommodations.

"We want to see the whale," Carroll said on their final day. "We are going to walk down to the whale. We want to see the whale sculpture at least."

Their means of travel to Juneau included a 9 a.m., nine-seat bush plane flight to Fairbanks — 145 air miles away — and taking Alaska Airlines from there to Anchorage and landing at Juneau International Airport at 9 p.m.

There are no roads out of Fort Yukon, population 411.

The Yukon River is only ice-free from late May to early September and travel to and from the village is by plane, or river in the summer.

"We are the only village in our area with a basketball team so we joined the Golden Heart Conference," Carroll said. "So we don't have roads out anyway and are too far away for snow-gos (snowmobiles) so we fly in small bush planes."

