



TO: Members of the Assembly

FROM: Friends of the Juneau-Douglas City Museum

DATE: 19 May 2026

RE: Potential closure of the City Museum

On May 13, a majority of the CBJ Assembly voted to consider the full closure of the City Museum (JDCM) in an effort to pare down the city's budget. As evidenced by the abbreviated conversations in public meetings about the budget, members of the assembly may not be fully aware of the mission and work of the Juneau-Douglas City Museum, the number of people who visit and participate in programs and most importantly, the issues and costs associated with deaccessioning the collection. Consequently, we urge you to realize that you are on the verge of taking irreversible, long-term actions that will destroy an important local cultural, educational, and arts-rich institution and most probably actually *undermine* the short-term goal of reducing the budget. This document is intended to provide you with the necessary detail to understand the work of the JDCM and the issues associated with deaccessioning the collection.

The Work of the JDCM

As representatives of the Friends of the Juneau-Douglas City Museum, we want to address some omissions in the April 20 memo the City Manager sent to the Assembly ([link to memo](#)). The work of the Museum is not duplicated by any other local institution; we tell stories that no one else does. We reach over 35,000 visitors annually; perform outreach to local schools with educational kits and tailored programs about the histories and cultures of this area; provide opportunities for community artists to exhibit their work; provide grants and awards to local historians and artists; host arts, history, and educational programming (including walking tours of the Capitol, Evergreen Cemetery, and downtown Juneau) that reaches thousands of community members and visitors each year; and offer volunteer opportunities to dozens of local supporters who donate their time to helping the Museum fulfill its mission. Additionally for the past five years, we have awarded the Marie Darlin Prize to important local writers, playwrights, artists, and educators like Ernestine Saankaláxt Hayes, Maureen Longworth, Lily Hope, Scott Burton, and Guohua Xia.

Local museums, such as ours, provide invaluable points of connection between members of a community and those who came before them; they preserve the memories of those who are no longer here and let them speak directly to us. Often, those old voices were not heard in their own time. Through our museum they nevertheless endure as part of our history, and none of us would be here without them. They remain our silent constituents, and their stories are invaluable. It takes care to tell the stories of those that came here over the last few thousand years and demonstrate *why they remained*. These are our shared and intertwined histories and heritages, and their maintenance is our shared responsibility. The museum is tangible evidence that the City respects all the people that form our community. While the museum may not directly inspire people to reside here, its presence reassures the community that all the people that have lived here in the past and all those that live here now matter.

Issues Associated with Deaccessioning the Collection

We are dismayed by the notion that the work done by the museum is easily unwound. The materials held by the museum are held in public trust and the museum is housed in a historic landmark. We believe that the information provided below will aid the Assembly and CBJ by illustrating how divesting the property held in trust, or even the building itself, will likely prevent the Assembly from realizing any real fiscal savings. Dissolving a museum represents something far more complicated than a standard liquidation of assets; it is a multi-year professional undertaking governed by strict legal mandates and ethical standards intended to protect the public trust. The process will be arduous, expensive, complicated, and risky. Below we outline many of the issues and financial burdens the City will encounter should the Assembly decide to close the museum. The following points detailing these challenges should be given a thoughtful assessment before any irreversible actions are taken.

1. Scope and Scale of the Collection

The JDCM currently stewards approximately 100,000 items, including 9,305 3D objects, 24,277 photographs, and over 6,000 archival records. There is an existing backlog of 4,000 items (primarily archives) that have not yet been fully processed. **Professionally cataloging this backlog is a legal prerequisite for dispersion and is estimated to require 2.5 to 3 years of dedicated full-time work.**

Because each item must be individually researched, appraised, and legally cleared for transfer, professionals estimate that a full dispersion of the collection would take 5 to 10 years to complete. **Failure to do so properly will expose CBJ to legal action that would impose unpredictable financial and reputational costs upon the city.**

2. Increased Professional Staffing Requirements

While closure is often viewed as a cost-saving measure, the dispersion process requires specialized expertise in museum curation and collections management. **It would be incumbent upon the City to hire at least two additional full-time professionals with museum experience to manage this multi-year project.** Beyond the extensive administrative work involved with this process, staff must execute “condition reporting” and specialized packing for every item to be shipped. This is a highly technical process that cannot be handled by general laborers without risking the destruction of historical artifacts.

For a mid-sized museum such as JDCM, these labor costs — as well as the costs of packing, conserving, and shipping archival materials — routinely run into the hundreds of thousands of dollars per year for the duration of the deaccessioning process. These costs would devour most of the projected savings that Assembly has assumed the closure of the museum will offer. **Assembly deliberations have not inspired confidence that members appreciate the scope and consequences of this process.**

3. Legal and Federal Mandates

An April 29 memo submitted to the Assembly by the City Manager and CBJ Library Director does not adequately describe the logistical complications of a museum closure, and it only briefly hints at the legal liabilities entailed in the process. CBJ must first consult the State Attorney General to ensure compliance with state laws governing the dissolution of public entities and the distribution of assets. Moreover, the museum is legally bound by the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), specifically regarding sensitive items like the 700-year-old fish trap. This requires ongoing coordination with Indigenous partners and federal agencies. The museum currently houses items belonging to other entities that must be legally returned, including 29 items from the US Navy (the USS Juneau Silver set), items from the USDA Forest Service, and over 200 pieces of art from the Morris Collection.

These legal obligations would require substantial commitments on the part of CBJ staff and legal counsel, and the unpredictable costs tied to those efforts must be factored into any decision made by the assembly to close this facility.

4. Ethical and Financial Restrictions Regarding Museum collections

Museum collections are held for the benefit of the public and cannot be treated as realizable financial assets. The April 29 memo suggests that when museum collections are sold, the funds realized in the sale would “ideally [be] used solely for collections purposes.” **The use of funds to support additional acquisitions is not a matter of approaching an “ideal.” It is, rather, obligatory.** Ethical standards from the AAM,

AASLH, and ICOM dictate that any funds raised from the sale of deaccessioned items must be used solely for the benefit of the collection (such as future acquisitions or direct care) and cannot be used for general city operations, facility maintenance, or debt retirement. To maintain public trust, the museum must prioritize transferring items to other public institutions, such as the Alaska State Museum, rather than selling them to private collectors. This task would require professional staff efforts. **Museum collections absolutely cannot be divested through the city's surplus property provisions**

Standard municipal surplus property procedures are designed for equipment, vehicles, office furniture, and real estate — things the city owns outright with no encumbrances and no public trust obligations. Museum collections are a fundamentally different legal category. These collections are held in the public trust, which means that even when a governing authority holds legal title, they do so as stewards of a public benefit — not as owners who can simply declare items excess inventory and liquidate them, as they would a fleet of retired vehicles. The attempted use of this option will almost certainly result in legal action.

5. Facility and Preservation Risks

It is important to remember that the Veteran's Memorial Building, which houses the museum, was placed on the National Register for Historic Places in 2006, complicating its future use or sale. If the facility's strict climate controls are deactivated to save costs during the 5–10 year dispersion period, the collection will deteriorate at an accelerated rate. Objects require daily monitoring for water intrusion, pests, and mechanical failures.

In summary, closing the museum would create a protracted legal and financial obligation for the City, requiring more staff and specialized resources than are currently employed, and would claw away at any savings Assembly Members currently believe would be realized in the effort.

Again, however, we reiterate that these considerations speak only to the direct costs that closure will entail. The biggest realization is that we feel it is a moral error to regard the Juneau-Douglas City Museum as a mere "facility" whose elimination will save money. The closure of this museum would salvage little; it would be an act of destruction and will be failure of civic responsibility. We are the caretakers of a collective past that includes not merely the recent municipal histories of Juneau and Douglas, but of the Indigenous people of the Gastineau Channel who have resided here for countless generations. We owe our forebears — those who lived in Lingít Aaní, who established Juneau and founded Douglas — a debt that we continue to repay by preserving what they saw, what they created, how they lived, and what they knew. We value and learn their knowledge.

We urge you in the strongest possible terms to continue fully funding the Juneau-Douglas City Museum and abandon any consideration of its closure. We likewise urge members of the Assembly to seek additional information directly from qualified professional expertise — and to engage more directly with the staff and Board — when evaluating its future.

Sincerely,

Bonita Nelson

President, Board of the Friends of the Juneau-Douglas City Museum

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