

OPINION

Opinion: Homer Harbor plays critical role in community, economy

This gateway to Cook Inlet fuels everything from recreation and food security to commercial enterprises

By Jenny Carroll • September 5, 2024 2:30 am

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Jenny Carroll (Courtesy)

Nestled in Kachemak Bay, Homer Port and Harbor is the heart of a thriving coastal region. This gateway to Cook Inlet fuels everything from recreation and food security to commercial enterprises, deeply impacting the local economy and lifestyle.

Brad Anderson, Homer Chamber of Commerce & Visitor Center's CEO, highlights the harbor's connection to the town: "Homer Harbor is woven into the lifestyles of almost every Homer resident. Many had their first job with a business connected to the Harbor." One resident is Mako Haggerty, owner of Mako's Water Taxi, who arrived in Alaska in 1982 with plans to fish in Kodiak. A chance job on a boat in Homer Harbor kept him in the area. "Been here ever since," says Haggerty. "Homer is an easy place to work on a boat. All the necessary trades are close to the harbor."

The harbor's influence extends beyond local shores. A network of transportation and shipping routes nourish the broader Alaska economy, facilitating the flow of goods, services and people across the state. Home to pilot boats, Homer Harbor supports critical navigational services for 480 cargo vessel and tanker trips annually to the Port of Alaska, which handles half the freight shipped to the state.

Additionally, 130 remote communities — from Cook Inlet to the Bering Sea — receive deliveries from Homer-based supply chains. One example is Mako's Water Taxi, which in 2022 delivered 125 tons of freight monthly from April through June, and 80 tons monthly the rest of the year, ensuring essential supplies reach rural Alaska.

Homer Harbor is also a gateway to Bristol Bay — one of the world's most productive fisheries. With an annual economic impact exceeding \$2.2 billion and providing 57% of the global sockeye salmon catch, Bristol Bay is crucial to the region. More than 177 Homer-area commercial fishermen participate in the fishery, many calling Homer their homeport.

According to Frances Bursch, program manager for Bristol Bay Regional Seafood Development, "While seemingly far away, many Bristol Bay fishermen keep their boats in Homer for storage, maintenance and services." Bursch echoes that Homer Harbor has regional importance as a fishing and recreation port for Southcentral, Southern and Western Alaska due to its central location and exceptional maritime services.

Despite its significance, Homer Harbor faces challenges. Even as Alaska's largest single-basin harbor, it struggles to meet increasing demand. The facility annually provides 92,000 vessel-days of transient moorage, and reserved moorage for 727 vessels. It supports 92 freight shipping vessels, scientific research vessels and the U.S. Coast Guard, and its boat launch sees thousands of private vessel launches annually. The stall waitlist is over 400.

In response, the city partnered with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to study potential expansion of the harbor to accommodate larger vessels. The objectives are to alleviate overcrowding, enhance safety, and improve access for both commercial and recreational boaters. Supporters like Anderson, Haggerty and Bursch are excited about the study so Homer Harbor can remain a significant asset to the region's evolving economy and way of life.

Jenny Carroll is the special projects and communications coordinator for the City of Homer and works to keep the community informed about city initiatives. To learn more about the Homer Harbor Expansion study visit www.homerharboorexpan.com.

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