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HAINES BOROUGH  
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November 5, 2023

Haines Borough Mayor and Planning Commission  
Box 1209  
Haines, AK 99827

**RE: Comprehensive Planning for Health and Food**

Dear Mayor Morphet and Haines Borough Planning Commissioners:

*Unprecedented Illness: Backdrop for Planning*

About three-fourths of all money spent on healthcare in the U.S. goes towards treating chronic illness, mostly metabolic diseases—avoidable, non-communicable sickness acquired mostly through habitual choices or poverty. The *National Institutes of Health* report that 45% of U.S. citizens have at least one chronic disease condition. Elderly and minorities experience higher rates, but all ethnic groups are impacted. Direct spending on chronic disease now creeps towards \$2 trillion, annually. Add the indirect costs—the lost productivity, broken families, bankruptcy—and the total is around \$3.5 trillion. The Alaska Legislature anticipates over \$13,000 in health care spending this year *for each resident*; in total over \$9-billion. As troubling, some portion of our partisan gridlock is caused by the anxiety and depression that science now shows frequently result from unprecedented levels of physical disease and malnutrition.

Haines Borough provides several direct, **reactive** health-related care services: the HVFD ably responds with our sizable EMS infrastructure, stabilizing and delivering the sick to providers (*more call-outs than ever before, the numbers growing each year*); some HPD responses certainly deal with behavioral health.

There are also planned, **proactive** steps that communities can take to change the conditions that diminish wellbeing and life expectancy. For example, we now know nutritional ways to lower rates of disease and the related impoverishment. But because of our political gridlocked and a host of complex, interconnected factors, the USA, and Haines Borough, can anticipate a future of growing sickness.

Does the Haines Borough Comprehensive Plan anticipate a future of greater health, or greater sickness? My sincere hope is for the former. Unless we do something very intentional, national trends show how we can expect more EMS call-outs and a progressively sicker populace. Indeed, our medi-pharma conglomerates, care facilities, and providers are planning to treat more sickness. It's complex, tragic and very real. If Haines expects to lessen the damage of the ongoing trainwreck, we'll have to lead our own self-rescue. I implore you to not accept the "default"—that growing rates of illness will be unavoidable.

*A competent, modern Comprehensive Plan must identify this ominous and unprecedented trend and propose fact-based strategies to improve health and wellbeing. Because a great deal of our disease begins and ends in the mouth, policies that increase regenerative farming and local, whole-food accessibility are functional strategies that can directly improve community health and lessen disease, over time.*

### Comprehensive Planning to Incentivize Regenerative Agriculture and Health

There are no undiscovered places like Kansas, California's Central Valley, or Oregon's Willamette Valley, and most of humanity's impact on topsoil over thousands of years has been negative. In the San Joaquin Valley of California, over 90,000 once-fertile acres can no longer produce crops, and is now a solar farm. Our high-power, industrial "farming" in the past 75 years has mostly accelerated this damage.

Humans are terrible at responding proactively to long-range trends. We quickly fall prey to political and commercial "speech," meaning we're gullible, and we're simply comfortable in our little muddle. Despite rising food prices and our pandemic of preventable food-related illness, most municipal codes—Haines Borough included—have failed to recognize and appreciate soil fertility and soil-building agriculture as a necessary public good. Change is needed, and the first step is the Comprehensive Plan.

**What if**—owners of land suitable for regenerative agriculture could receive an incentive—at the very least a targeted, preferential tax rate—for putting some land into regenerative agricultural use, or for designating property as *future* "ag-land." The latter designation might allow a tax preference for actively improving the stability, tilth and overall health of the soil. Thus, over time, as owners plant cover crops and enlighten themselves on what options are possible, the community would gradually accrue more regenerative food production and the related economic activity. Moreover, those able-bodies seeking to farm could connect with owners very easily. *Parcels and owners of agricultural land would be searchable on the parcel viewer.*

Looking forward, we shouldn't assume that only fertile soils are suitable for agriculture. Here at latitude 59N, an excellent solar site is the one essential ingredient. For the rest, there are work-arounds. Cover-cropping immediately begins carbon sequestration, decontamination, and soil renewal. Alternatively, one dump truck filled with topsoil removed from a development site can create a raised bed about 90ft long.

Hypothetically speaking, a few townsite properties come to mind. In the downtown between 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenues, is a sizable parcel owned by a prominent merchant. It's a bit wet and currently covered in successional, deciduous trees. Another example property is directly behind FNBA—half a city block of commercial property: vacant for my three decades here; the topsoil and fertility, long ago nurtured by a spruce forest, has simply washed away. There are dozens more examples.

*We must not accept the default—the increasing rates of illness, family bankruptcy, and early infirmity and death caused by our slow-rolling pandemic of chronic illness. Rather, we must push against it! Plan for—and incentivize—a sustainable future, home-town-and-proud food, and soil-building agriculture. That kind of forward leaning action is vastly more cost effective than is the default culture of sickness. Slowly, by diversifying this sector, focusing on education, healthier lifestyles, and whole food, localities can address our unsustainable rates of chronic disease—much of which is food related. **The cheapest thing to do—by far—is planning and investing in a culture of health and that begins with healthy, whole food.***

What might a truly healthy community look like? What are useful incentives—and disincentives? Can we boost soil fertility, the ag. sector, and increase whole food availability through our land-use policies? Might there be a better, more central site for our Farmer's Market? Can we connect willing owners with farmers through our parcel-viewer? How can agricultural land uses contribute to community relevance, health, and even downtown vitality?

Sincerely,  
Burl Sheldon