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Alaskaâ??s Capital Move Efforts: O Ye, of Little Faith

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Once upon a time, the people of Alaska voted to move the state capital out of the backwater Southeast community of Juneau. By a vote of 46,659 to 35,683 a 1974 voter initiative Relocating and Constructing a New Capital called for the construction of the new capital at one of two or three sites nominated by a selection committee appointed by the Governorâ?/Construction must allow movement of offices to begin by October 1, 1980.

A follow-up 1976 public initiative Capital Site Selection resulted in selection of the Matanuska-Susitna Borough community of Willow as the chosen location of the new capital. Of 105,558 votes split three ways for choosing where the people of Alaska wanted the capital moved to, 56,219 (53%) wanted it on the road system in Willow.

[1]

Many Alaskans had believed their elected officials would do what they were directed to doâ??move the capital to Willow.

Like Juneau, Willow is a community built after miners discovered gold in the area in 1897. This area of Alaska has a long history as a rugged rural community. Supplies from Knik were initially transported over a 26-mile summer trail along Willow Creek, which became Hatcher Pass Road. In 1920, the Alaska Railroad built its Willow station house at mile 185.7 along the tracks leading from Seward to Fairbanks. By 1954, Willow Creek was Alaskaâ??s largest gold mining district, with a total production approaching 18 million dollars.

[2]

In 1970 Willow had a population of 78.

[3]

Land disposals, homestead subdivisions, and completion of the George Parks Highway in 1972 fueled growth in the area. The capital move initiative expanded Willowâ??s population and caused land speculation, but funding for moving the capital was ultimately defeated in the November 1982 election.

That is why the Capital never relocated, Southeast Alaska interests rallied and some elsewhere lost faith.

Today, Willow is a thriving community of a lot of regular Alaskans. Many know they were once set up by the whims of a public initiative, but have faith in our state government anyway. Annual distribution of the Permanent Fund Dividend reinforces that faith.

[4]

I know this because on November 17, 2019 in a Willow Thanksgiving tradition, I met many residents as I passed out turkeys at the Willow Methodist Church, to anyone who could prove they live in Willow.



A family takes home a Thanksgiving meal in Willow, Alaska

The Willow distribution was orderly, and organizers told me they passed out some 172 frozen turkeys with bags of potatoes and apples, cans of vegetables, biscuits, and other fixings. Families arrived in the kinds of automobiles you would expect to be driven at a place where a lot of Alaskans live off the grid. All of the cars were dirty, all of the people were happy and thankful.

Willow would be a very different place today if the 1974 Ballot initiative were honored. Instead, the November 1978 election initiative called for â?•Full Bondable Costs of Relocating Capital.â?• It too passed, requiring every penny imaginable relating to the cost of moving the capital to be identified, including â??social, economic and environmental impact to the present and relocation sites.â?• The margin between pro and con on this initiative was 14,161 votes of 124,667 cast.

[5]

Estimated median income of Juneau households today is \$87,436â??17% higher than the Alaska average.

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Willow, this past Thanksgiving, would have been a much different place had that vote to not invest in moving the Alaska capital nearly 40 years ago were different. Alaska would be different, too.

[1]http://www.elections.alaska.gov/doc/info/capmove.htm

- [2]State of Alaska Dept of Commerce, Division of Community & Regional Affairs Community Database Online at
 - https://dcced.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapJournal/index.html?appid=e8aa14c9c2ec485dbd19a387347c0f79#det
- [3]Dictionary of Alaska Place Names
- [4]http://www.city-data.com/city/Willow-Alaska.html

- [5]https://population.us/ak/juneau/
- [6]https://www.areavibes.com/juneau-ak/employment/

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