



Alaska City on the Move: WASILLA! (A Tribute to Mayor Bert Cottle on his passing)

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Wasilla Sonic restaurant

The new Wasilla Sonic restaurant is located in the Sun Mountain development. It did \$500,000 worth of business in its first three days.

*Note: This story was Published October 31, 2019 after an enthusiastic presentation by Wasilla Mayor **Bert Cottle** to the **Susitna Rotary** in the last months of his tenure in that position. He contributed greatly to the **State of Alaska** on many levels and this republication is a reflection on some of his accomplishments as mayor.*

Mayor Cottle was a lifelong Alaskan who was born and raised in Wasilla. He graduated from Wasilla High School and Trinidad State College in Trinidad, Colorado. Cottle served as a police officer in Valdez for 22 years, and for 10 years as Valdez mayor. He also worked for 13 years with the Alaska Gasline Port Authority.

After serving as mayor of Wasilla for two terms, he filed as a candidate for mayor of the Matanuska-Susitna Borough, but withdrew due to health reasons, citing the rigors of chemotherapy.

His career of service also includes three years on the Alaska Alcohol Beverage Control Board; three years on the Alaska Municipal League Board (past president); and three years on the Alaska State Homeland Security Task Force. Cottle's affiliations include: Pioneers of Alaska (past president); Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks #2537; Eagles Aerie #1971; longtime NRA member; Advocate for Victims of Violence; FBI Association; Youth Coalition Task Force; and, Wasilla Area Seniors.

Cottle was a candidate for then-District 12 for the Alaska House of Representatives in 2010, and he was a candidate for Alaska State Senate Seat R in 1998.

Wasilla Mayor **Glenda Ledford** issued a statement on Wednesday: "It's a sad day for not only for the city of Wasilla but the state of Alaska with the passing of Bert L. Cottle. He was a true Alaskan, always ready to promote the city and state. You will be missed my friend."



Bert Cottle

With 11 months before Mayor Bert Cottle is termed out of office, he is talking to groups throughout the Matanuska-Susitna area about what has been happening in Wasilla with emphasis on a “bucket list” of what he wants to accomplish before leaving city hall.

From road improvements and an expanded airport, a vital new library activity center, upgrades to the **Menard Center** including a park, collaboration with the **Alaska Railroad**, a new police department and a glorious veteran’s wall, Mayor Cottle presents a Power Point and entertaining commentary to describe his vision and what has happened.

Economic development is a highlight.

The Mat-Su Borough has an inventory tax; every year you have to do an inventory reporting of what is on your property if you are a commercial business, explained Cottle in a presentation to the Susitna Rotary on October 23. This last year that amounted to \$85 million. The City of Wasilla has 68% of all the inventory in the borough, which is up 2% of what it was last year. That's our niche. Our 14 square miles is commercial; this is where you are going to go shopping. We are not recreational, not tourism, not government services. We're the shopping district.

Whether located in the city of Wasilla, or just doing business in the city, a business license is required. It cost \$25. This year Wasilla issued over 2,500 licenses, of which 350 are new businesses.

So my goal, if you are doing business in Wasilla, is for you to make a lot of money, Cottle continued. If you don't make money I don't make money. When Sonic came in, they did over half a million dollars in the first three days. I get my three cents on the dollar and that's a good thing. I get my \$15,000 and you get half a million! I am fine with that.

Plenty more is coming. **McDonald's** just re-modeled and expanded, **Fred Meyer** is going to have a new gas station at Sun Mountain, **Matanuska Telephone Association** will also build there and two new apartment buildings are going up. A major hotel chain also has interest in the site.

Yeah, we're going to have lots of jobs, he added.

Riley and Roberts Streets have had substantial work during this construction season. Riley has been cut through from near the Senior Center to Endeavor Street. It will relieve traffic from six ballparks, coming out by the Iditarod Headquarters. Roberts is the road behind Home Depot that provides access for a new proposed development at the gravel pit across the Parks Highway from Wasilla Lake.

"Where the train depot is located now, (at the corner of KGB and Parks Highway) we have never owned that building until a couple of years ago," explained Cottle. "It hasn't been used as a train depot since the 1950s or 60s, and the Chamber of Commerce has rented it from the Alaska Railroad for a dollar. Now we do that with the Chamber."



Roberts Street

Wasilla owns 11 acres across from the *Wasilla Lake Park* next to the condos at the gravel pit. Next summer the train depot—it is historic and has value—will be moved down to a spot in what is now a gravel pit. Cottle says it's going to take a couple of years, but the plan is for a train platform. Some 2,000 people get on and off the train in Wasilla now. Alaska Railroad won't continue to stop in a place that blocks KGB, and he doesn't want to lose the train stop.

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1917 Historic Alaska Railroad Deport train depot

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1917 Alaska Railroad Depot

Someday we will have the right politics in place to hopefully establish a commuter train that will run from that terminal, Cottle continued. In November, when we had the earthquake, and when the truck damaged the Eagle River overpass, we had 800 school teachers in the valley who could not make it to Anchorage, so they had to shut down some schools. I told them: 'Now is the time to try it—run that train!'

The Mayor is critical of **Alaska Railroad** officials, who he admits *don't send me many Christmas cards.*

They said: 'No, we would have to pay overtime. We don't have the crew. They had excuses, continued Cottle. Then not too long after that I saw a train go by full of people—a passenger train—and I called them back and said: 'Hey, somebody hijacked your train and it is going through Wasilla full of people! They said 'No that's the ski train.' I told them we needed to make that train available to thousands of people as commuters, who need to get back and forth to Anchorage, and they still refused to consider it.

Read more about Alaska Railroad disdain for Alaskans here:

[Is this any way to run a Railroad?](#)

The 11 acre city site is going to be developed into an historic area with classic buildings, antique handcars, adequate parking and a road that comes out by the clothing store.

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Wasilla annual airshow

Improvements have also been made to the Airport: *We just finished up a \$3.9 million grant from the feds, said Cottle.. We added two future rental lots and now we have 26. All 26 are filled. We have 27 new tie downs and they will all be booked, but we have a wait list, so anybody in the old section got first chance in the new section and we now have a total of 155 tie downs. We were also able to purchase an additional 70 acres so we have a total of 504 acres there. We worked out an arrangement with the truck driving school NIT to let them practice there and we are going to turn it into a big new parking lot. When we host the **Wings Over Wasilla**, called WOW, we will have shuttles back and forth creating more room and more parking.*

About 3,000 people turn up for the WOW air show this year and next year the military has promised a fly-over, according to Cottle. As this event continues to grow it will require more parking.

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Wasilla Library and activity center.

Another success story, the Library: *It has been open a couple of years now, we have about 115,000 to 120,000 people going to that library each year, Cottle said. The library has developed into an activity center. There is the library part and there is the entryway which has two additional rental rooms. We charge \$25 for the small room and \$35 for the big room. We have learned that if we don't charge some kind of fee some people will abuse the system.*

The old library had 16 parking spots. *The borough provided four acres to build the library and an additional acre is being leased. We started developing it this year and discovered there is a sinkhole there, so next year we will put another 30 spots in there, he explained. The old library is going to be repurposed into a new museum with completion date set for June 1, 2020.*

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The **Menard Center** and nearby acreage owned by the city is also being enriched to encourage usage.

We took our portion of the recreational bonds passed a couple of years ago and built a one-mile ADA Accessible paved trail around the Menard Center and it is complete. I see people out there with walkers! Cottle enthused.

The historic theme will continue on city land owned near the *Menard Center*.

*Anybody who has been around here any time will remember the old **Tryck Nyman Hayes** engineering company; the Tryck family built a house here in the 1930s or 40s. They donated it to us and said ‘we like what you are doing to restore this area so we will give you the house so you can restore or move it.’ The number for restoring it came in at \$70,000 but eventually I would like to see an AlaskaLand or Pioneer Park-like place there, with 5-6 of the old houses. Other houses have been donated including the Territorial School. It is down there on the other side of the tracks and when MEA wants to put in some new power lines we want to go in and move that building) out.”*

Wasilla has nine city parks—more than anybody—but no playground on that end of town. So, on 60 acres owned on the second driveway by the Menard Center, Cottle intends to install a \$70,000 playground set which is on its way. It will be installed by next summer. Trailhead parking, bathrooms, picnic tables, will all be fenced in on one acre.

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One of two ARR flatbed cars to be refurbished for use by the City of Wasilla.

“If you have been out there recently you might have seen I got the Alaska Railroad to give us a couple of old beat up train flat cars,” said Cottle. If you went to the Mayor’s Picnic on July 4 you probably saw the one flat car, they were pretty beat up when we got it and we stripped the paint, repainted and redocked it. You can’t hurt them, and anyway they gave me two so we’re going to do the same thing to the second one, and we recently got the Clapp Street lighting for the Trailhead and two driveways done out there.

We also built a storage shed to replace a Conex. When we built these facilities—like the Menard Center—we agreed that leftover money should go into structures rather than wages or trips or anything like that. So we had enough money left over after we built that building some 12-13 years ago to build a storage shed. We needed a storage shed because if we can get the storage out of the Menard Center we can be rent that space.

In recent years a lot of Alaskans have become concerned about crime, wondering what our elected officials are doing about it. Cottle is a former policeman and his emphasis is clear.

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The Wasilla Police Department will become an Emergency Services Command Center.

“We are big believers in forward-funding the police department and we save nearly \$3 million in interest and bonds that don’t get passed on to the voters and our kids and grandkids. We’re going to cut that out early because we have raised the money by December 1st instead of December 31st of this year, and we’re going to have the opening in July. Now it is \$1-1/2 Million and the construction company is going to be out of there early so we should be able to move in there early,” he said.

The police department will move into a new new location at the site of the old *Iditarod School* but dispatch stays upstairs in the current building.

“I can’t afford to move all that communication equipment. Right now it’s about 10,000 square feet—5,000 upstairs and 5,000 down—and we have the second largest dispatch center in the state. We have 35 people working there, five people minimum on 24-hours per day. We answer the phone 800 times per day; dispatch for *Alaska State Troopers, Mat-Su Fire, Mat-Su EMS, Houston Fire, Chickaloon Police Department*, and some work for the feds.”

Downstairs is going to be Mat-Su Borough Emergency Services, run by Casey Cook. That will be their command center. In the next earthquake, fire or flood everybody will be in the same building.

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The new Wasilla Police station is under construction and expected to be completed ahead

of schedule.

Finally, Cottle explained what the City has been doing at the relocated **Veteran's Wall of Honor**.

I don't want to say what happened to get to this point but we stood up and said "We'll fix it," he said. By the time we are done fixing it we are going to have a million dollars into it.

*The **City of Wasilla** gave the Veteran organization nine-tenths of an acre for the wall in front of where the old Iditarod School was located. Phase I was done last year, including moving the original 7 panels from the old location to the new location. Phase 2, this year included putting up 6 new panels, providing space for an additional 2,000 names, explained Cottle. Concrete installation was set the third week of October providing room for an additional row or two of panels. Six large insignias, one for each of the branches of military, are in route. What the City of Wasilla agreed to was "we will pay for electricity, we will make sure it is maintained, through AMVETS or American Legion. We're working on a \$250,000 grant from the Rasmuson Foundation and I think there are 8 pillars up now. Next summer we hope to put up a pavilion. I guarantee it will look nice; I've got 10 family members on that wall.*

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An important part of Mayor Cottle's political philosophy is a belief in private/public partnerships. He demonstrated how he applied such a partnership to moderate impact of what has been called the "bag ban" on plastic bags.

For anybody who followed it, that wasn't about banning plastic bags, that was about taxing every commercial business ten cents per bag, he explained. Income came to about \$2.1-2.2 million in revenues the borough would collect. Wasilla businesses were about \$1.8 million of that. So, I went to the Borough and asked: 'how much of that do I get?' They said 'you don't get anything!' You're going to get \$1.8 million from Wasilla businesses? I'm not going to get any money back even for the 7-8 kids I hire every summer to go out and pick up garbage, or anything?

So we just banned plastic bags outright so they couldn't tax us.

I went to the schools that year—because we contribute to the schools—and I told them: 'I'm going to tell you how to triple the money I give you!' We partnered with the schools to come out with reusable plastic bags, with the city logo on one side and the Wasilla Warriors on the other side designed by the kids, said Cottle. They sold them for \$5 each and tripled their money. Since then other high schools have seen this and are doing it all across the state as a fundraiser.

With Cottle's passing we know we are all better for his service and what he accomplished in public office for Alaska.

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