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## **My Turn: Cruise industry throws galley sink at tax initiative**

**By GERSHON COHEN**

The North West Cruise Ship Association's recent My Turn column (Empire, Jan. 24) regarding their legal challenge to the Cruise Ship Ballot Initiative misses the boat on every fundamental issue.

NWCA wants the public to believe that Responsible Cruising in Alaska may have gathered signatures from unregistered voters. There is simply no evidence that this occurred. NWCA wants the public to believe that since the final tally was only marginally above the minimally certifiable percentage of Alaska voters, the lawsuit is needed to ensure the legitimacy of the state's certification process. But their lawsuit isn't about scrutinizing the state's performance, it's about challenging long-standing Alaska procedures for conducting initiative certifications - rules rigorously applied by the Division of Elections and considered adequate by every past friend or foe of the process. Had the state not thrown out every signature that had any chance of being challenged, we would have been well over the minimum. For example, 1,400 signatures that could have been counted by the lieutenant governor given the discretionary power provided by state law were discarded because two signature gatherers forgot to stamp the name of the sponsoring organization on the bottom of every page of their booklets.

Once again the industry is threatening to pull out of Alaska; bullying tactics that have worked well against isolated ports of call. That's why we decided to make this a statewide issue. But let's examine their bluff: They claim passengers will cancel their Alaska vacations to avoid a \$50 tax to support cruise-related infrastructure expenses in Alaska communities. Let's see ...rather than pay \$50 on top of an average expenditure of about \$3,000 per person per trip (cruise tickets, airfare/hotel/food costs to and from Vancouver, alcohol, shopping, shore excursions, gambling, etc. ...) these people will cruise to ... Baltimore?

Even more ludicrous, John Hansen of NWCA recently repeated his threat that people may come but they won't shop as much while here - because six months earlier their ticket price had increased by \$50? I doubt Mr. Hansen has ever walked to Seattle from SeaTac Airport because of the local tax on his car rental. Cruise passengers pay taxes in many other ports around the world. We didn't make up the concept and numerous Democratic and Republican legislators, as well as Gov. Murkowski, have expressed similar intent in recent years.

Make no mistake - the cruise industry will throw the galley sink at this initiative. Why? Because they don't want to have to meet all of the Alaska Water Quality Standards like every other discharger into Alaska waters. They don't want to pay a percentage of their gambling profits to Alaska, like every other gaming operator in the state. They don't want to pay the corporate income taxes from which they were exempted by the Legislature in 1998. They don't want an independent marine engineer aboard every ship making sure they don't dump untreated wastes into our waters or falsify logbooks - actions that have repeatedly brought them felony convictions in the last decade. And they don't want people in other parts of the United States and the world watching Alaskans vote for a bigger say in how the industry conducts its business. We'll have better protection for our waters and fisheries and nearly \$50 million in tax revenue.

That's what this fight is really about. Will the cruise industry continue to sail under Alaska's regulatory and revenue radar while making billions of dollars in profits or will we require them to play by the same rules as everyone else? People come to Alaska because of the glaciers, bears, eagles, culture, rafting; are we really in competition with Baltimore? We think these questions should be answered by Alaskans in the November 2006 general election.

- Gershon Cohen of Haines is a co-sponsor and co-drafter of the Cruise Ship Ballot Initiative.