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To: [Melissa Jacobsen](#)
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Subject: FW: Monday's Work session re: the HERC
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Attachments: [How Iceland Got Teens to Say No to Drugs - The Atlantic.pdf](#)

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Subject: Monday's Work session re: the HERC

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Mayor Castner and Members of the Homer City Council,

I don't envy your position as you go into Monday's work session discussing what to do about the HERC and responding to the many questions - should we tear it down? tear down just the smaller building? build something new? build something for our current needs or for the future? And above it all - what can we afford and how do we pay for it?

Homer needs a community center. It's an investment that should've been made years ago when state monies were plentiful. Yet here we are. I hope the way forward doesn't include an approach that tries to make the HERC last until more funding comes along because there are no guarantees more funding WILL come along. And if we don't move forward NOW, when will we?

The concept of a community center has been before us for a long time. Homer residents have continually voiced their support for a community recreation and multi-use facility specifically through the 2015 PARCAC needs assessment and the work of the HERC Task Force. Members of the public have attended meetings, Brown Bag lunches, focus groups, one-on-one meetings, and participated in telephone surveys. The future of the HERC has been the subject of several City Council presentations, site visits, and work sessions such as the one scheduled this coming

Monday.

Throughout the studies and surveys done in years past, the most significant priority rising to the top was space for indoor activities - a general-purpose gymnasium and a multi-purpose space for community events and multi-generational activities.

The 2015 PARCAC needs assessment included a telephone survey conducted to primarily assess the community's willingness to pay for identified recreation and culture needs. The message was clear in that 56% of the respondents were supportive of a multi-use recreational facility and paying a couple hundred dollars a year in some combination of taxes and user fees; 30% felt it's a priority in the next five years; and, 26% felt it's a priority but a little further out. Granted this survey was done in 2015 yet I believe the value Homer residents put on recreation has not declined over the past seven years.

The MAPP Resilience Coalition recently completed its 2022 Community Readiness Assessment and the issue that was identified through Focus Group Discussions is that: "There are not enough welcoming, no-cost, safe spaces in our community for young people to connect with safe and trusted adults, explore and engage in interests, and enjoy free time during after-school and evening hours."

Last month I happened to hear an NPR program that highlighted Fayetteville, West Virginia's efforts to address teen substance abuse and how they were looking into the Icelandic model, a model which has been mentioned here several times. As mentioned in this program, teens in Fayetteville were regularly surveyed about their substance use and related risk factors. Researchers at West Virginia University found three-quarters of kids were not part of organized clubs or sports and suggested that changing that could delay when kids start smoking or drinking.

Like other communities, we are also struggling with what to do with youth. Our young kids and teenagers are left with nowhere to go after school, especially if both their parents work. The Icelandic model emphasizes healthy lifestyles and a healthy community. Nothing is simple as communities and families are complex. The parents, schools, and policymakers in Iceland found by taking the time to listen to teens and engaging them in programs they want rather than implementing prevention programs that haven't offered long-term solutions, change did occur. Not overnight, but it did happen. The programs offered included a variety of options from traditional athletic programs to hip-hop dance classes. I realize all of this takes

changes in policy, community buy-in, and prioritization/reallocation of existing funds.

We all want to be heard and if given the chance, to be a part of the solution. If Fayetteville West Virginia is exploring this as an alternative to the traditional substance abuse prevention programs, why can't we in Homer?

My recent pickleball tournament partner Eric Tutt, and his twin brother Joel were born and raised here in Homer. They've been playing pickleball for the past two years at the HERC. Both Eric and Joel have young families. Eric has four young ones ages three through nine. Joel has two, ages two and four with one on the way. They both support a community center as a gathering place for their kids to learn how to play the sports THEY enjoyed while growing up here - basketball, volleyball, and now pickleball. As Eric says, there's currently not a good option for sports programs and our sports teams have suffered from the lack of opportunities to be in the gym playing sports year-round. A multipurpose community center will provide a place for ALL age groups to gather for both indoor and outdoor recreation and classes.

A multi-purpose center is a perfect place for youth to go after school because it ensures that they are safe and have a place to socialize. A community center would also offer Senior Citizens exercise classes, educational classrooms, and a gathering place where they could meet with residents of all ages.

Finally, let me turn to the topic of pickleball. Like other communities both here in Alaska and in the Lower 48, Homer is experiencing incredible growth in this sport because it's both fun and accessible. This past weekend, twenty-one players turned out on a sunny day to play on three courts at the high school. Kachemak City has recently renovated its tennis courts and playground and will soon be lining several pickleball courts. The SPARC is looking into ways it can convert its flooring to accommodate a USAP-approved ball vs. a foam ball.

The pickleball community currently plays four times a week on three courts at the HERC. This doesn't include individual reservations or the weekly introduction to pickleball classes being taught. Interest continues to grow. Pickleball is currently taught in high school, middle school, and elementary schools. As a result parents and children are coming out to play. We're outgrowing our three courts and can't meet the

existing demand. The threat to this sport is not the lack of interest, but rather the lack of places to play.

If we are to accommodate future growth in this sport, we need six pickleball courts to keep up with the demand. If all goes well and we're not adversely hit by an increase in Covid, plans are in the works to host a pickleball tournament over Labor Day at the HERC. Organizers of the recent successful Eagle River tournament were interested in helping us coordinate this tournament for free but they said they couldn't make it work with just three courts over two days. Rather than giving up, a number of us are volunteering to organize it and turn it into a three-day tournament. We're also thinking of fun tournaments for both beginning players and youth and are already planning next year's larger "End of the Road" tournament at the high school.

I know you have tough decisions before you and also realize these projects take time - obviously years of studies, surveys, and numerous proposals. Public processes can be messy, frustrating, and seemingly inefficient but thank you for giving us options no matter how tough they may be and an avenue to voice our support and/or concerns. If we as voters say "no" to whatever proposal is offered then, like the police station, it's back to the drawing board to seek out what other avenues there are to respond to the needs we've voiced vis-a-vis our willingness to pay. In the end, residents weigh in, a decision is made, and the community moves forward. Ah, the beauty of citizen participation.

As a community member, I urge you to invest in the future of our community. Yes, the pickleball community would love to have more space to meet our specific needs - yet for me, as a member of this community, this is more than providing more courts. The majority of Homer residents have asked for a multipurpose recreation center not just an additional building to house more space for basketball, pickleball, and volleyball. We want a center where our community can gather to exercise, learn, and develop and build relationships and friendships.

The Homer Chamber of Commerce includes a great description of our community when it states Homer has a *"quality of life rarely found in one location: endless opportunities for outdoor recreation, arts, culture - a great place to raise kids and a profound sense of community."* This is why my husband and I chose Homer. I'm also assuming this is the reason our population is increasing with more families and retirees opting to move here.

Thank you for your continued involvement in seeking a way forward. I look forward to hearing your deliberations this Monday.

Janie Leask
Homer Resident
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