

Candidate name

Forrest Dunbar

1. Describe your previous experience with Alaska tourism. Do you have any prior employment in the industry?

I'm a lifelong Alaskan and was fortunate to live in several parts of the state before making my home here in Anchorage, all of which were regular tourist destinations. When my family lived in Cordova I helped my mom take groups of visitors out to the Childs Glacier (back when the bridges were still intact), when she drove a bus for a small tour company. After I finished high school my parents moved to Fairbanks, and my mother again drove tour buses part time in the summer for Princess. Those summers I worked for Fred Meyer--where visitors certainly stopped in to shop--and then the Northstar Fire Crew out of Fort Wainwright. I have seen parts of the visitor industry from the periphery, but I have not spent the long, dedicated hours within it like your members.

During my time on the Assembly and as a board member of the Anchorage Park Foundation I've worked to make Anchorage both a desirable place for our city's residents to live and for visitors to explore. I have been to many Visit Anchorage events, and have sought opportunities to learn from your leadership.

Anchorage is blessed with a scenic background few other cities can boast of, including a world-class parks and trails system, and the visitor industry will be crucial to our economic future. As Mayor I will do everything I can to promote Anchorage as a destination and look forward to working hand-in-hand with Visit Anchorage.

2. Visit Anchorage ensures our community remains top-of-mind with visitors, meeting planners, and travel trade professionals. The work distinguishes our destination in a crowded, competitive landscape. Do you support Visit Anchorage's mission? Please explain your position.

Yes, I absolutely support Visit Anchorage's mission. I know we have your organization to thank for the recent growth in the tourism sector of our economy, and I look forward to working with you to regain the momentum lost due to the pandemic. A strong tourism business coalition is key to creating new visitor experiences and highlighting Anchorage's natural attractions. Visit Anchorage and its network will be a vital part of revitalizing our economy, communicating the best travel precautions for COVID-19 safety over this summer, and enticing visitors to explore the diverse range of tourism experiences Anchorage has to offer once the pandemic has passed. I am particularly interested in promoting cultural tourism and building partnerships with organizations like the Alaska Native Heritage Center, the Native Village of Eklutna, and the Anchorage Museum to regain a greater sense of Indigenous place here in Anchorage. I believe that work will help attract even more visitors to our community.

3. Anchorage's 12% room tax supports municipal services in three ways: one-third goes to the Municipality of Anchorage (MOA) general fund; one-third goes to support operations and pay the bond debt for the Anchorage Convention Centers; and one-third goes to the MOA's destination marketing contract (currently held by Visit Anchorage). Do you support the current three-way allocation of Anchorage room tax revenues? Please explain your position.

Yes, I support the current allocation. I believe that the current three-way division appropriately supports the Municipality's budget and Visit Anchorage's marketing initiatives. I know that Visit Anchorage works hard to maximize every dollar it receives from the bed tax and I would not support a rebalancing of this tax that reduces your allotment.

4. In Anchorage, the visitor economy is already a significant contributor. Prior to COVID, the industry generated \$297 million in visitor-related spending and \$38 million in municipal hotel and rental car taxes. In addition to the taxes paid by visitors, tourism created one in nine jobs locally. Do you support additional taxes levied on the tourism industry and/or customers? If yes, please explain the type of taxes you believe would be most appropriate, and also how you believe those funds would be spent. If no, please explain your position.

I do not support additional taxes that specifically target the tourism industry, and I opposed the Administration's last proposed increase to the bed tax. Tourism is one of the top industries expected to rebound post-COVID and our community must be able to capitalize on the anticipated increase in visitors once we are able to safely welcome that traffic. We already saw our tourism dollars grow in 2019, even into the winter season, which was in large part due to the hard work of those in the industry successfully bringing new visitors into our city. I am not in favor of implementing a tax that would hamper the ability of our tourism businesses to quickly recover. That being said, I did co-sponsor the alcohol tax, which raised additional revenues from both residents and visitors. I do not believe it disproportionately impacted the tourism industry, and the initiatives it supports, like drug and alcohol treatment, public safety officers, and homelessness services, will contribute to making Anchorage an even more attractive destination.

5. COVID has fundamentally affected leisure and convention travel, and a complete recovery may be several years away. How would you work to aid local businesses and individuals – particularly those reliant on tourism and travel – so that they can survive and flourish?

Our local economy, especially tourism and hospitality workers, have been hit hard by the pandemic. My Administration will partner with existing Anchorage community business coalitions to ensure information about federal and local relief programs is accessible. I wish the Municipality had been able to distribute the CARES Act funds faster this past year, and I know that the current Administration is still working to ensure the entirety of grant funds are dispersed. My Administration will work to simplify processes and get the next rounds of federal aid out faster, and continue to target funds towards the visitor industry if permitted by the federal rules. We will also advocate on behalf of our small business community to State level authorities who have not responded quickly enough to this crisis. Finally, I plan to create an Office of Outdoor Recreation within the Municipality, a small office at first, which will partner with Visit Anchorage and others in the industry to attract new guests, particularly independent travelers.

6. Do you have priorities that would make the municipality a more travel-friendly destination? If yes, please provide details.

Visit Anchorage laid significant groundwork over the last 5 years, which returned greater dividends such as more visitors and a longer season. My administration will support additional opportunities to make Anchorage even more appealing to those in the Lower 48. Indigenous placemaking is an area we know visitors want to see more of -- incorporating Alaska Native culture through language and art into our

streets honors the original stewards of these lands while providing visitors with the opportunity to learn about our history. My administration will also prioritize creating new travel opportunities for the “missing middle” of tourism-- independent travelers who make up an increasing share of visitor industry revenue in other locales. As mentioned above, I intend to create an Office of Outdoor Recreation to promote this goal.

Reactivating our community spaces will also highlight what makes Anchorage so special. My Administration will work to adjust permit fees to allow for the development of grassroots events such as street fairs, live music opportunities, and park and trail-based activities. I also support creating a pedestrian promenade downtown to attract more foot traffic to local shops and restaurants. Investing in a more vibrant visitor experience will also improve quality of life for our residents while producing a major return on investment for our city’s economy.

7. What do you see as the mayor’s role in Anchorage’s visitor industry, destination marketing, and community development?

I see the Mayor’s role as amplifying the work of our local organizations and community leaders who make Anchorage such an incredible place to live and visit. Our administration can do our part to support the visitor industry by making sure our city is safe, thriving and accessible for all who wish to enjoy it. While on the Assembly I helped get an additional one hundred police officers on the street and supported the creation of a new Mental Health First Responders team. As Mayor I will continue to invest in public safety initiatives, support the work of groups like Visit Anchorage to advertise our city’s assets, and be a champion for our community development organizations. Also, insofar as Visit Anchorage or the visitor industry wants me to participate and promote Anchorage directly, I would be eager to use the Mayor’s platform to do so--to “sell” Anchorage wherever we can.

8. What are your overall priorities for the municipality?

Anchorage should be a safe, healthy, thriving city. We can be a place where young people move to find the jobs of the future, where students and families find a high-quality public education system, and where seniors can retire with confidence and dignity.

My top priorities are getting our city past this immediate public health crisis and getting our economy back to work. In the short term, that means effectively deploying the variety of federal funds coming our way. As I did last year, I will prioritize directing these funds towards rental and mortgage relief, small business grants, particularly to the hospitality and tourism industries, and subsidies for childcare providers.

In the medium to long term I see tremendous opportunities to revitalize downtown, partner with Visit Anchorage and others to grow the visitor industry, promote a sense of indigenous place, make real progress on the challenges of homelessness and crime, and continue to improve the quality of life that defines our town.

9. What do you see as the greatest threat to Anchorage’s future success? What about the greatest opportunity for the community?

The greatest threat is fumbling the end of this pandemic and the recovery--we cannot risk allowing the virus to have a resurgence, or returning to a “normal” that was not working for so many of our

residents. We have to set our recovery targets higher than they were before, and listen to the feedback we've received as a Municipality to fill the gaps in opportunity. No visitors will want to come to Alaska if they believe doing so puts them or their families in harm's way. That fear will prevent our community from healing and our economy from recovering for years if it is encouraged by those who deny the reality of this pandemic. Along with the pandemic, the co-occurring threat facing Anchorage is the rise of "fact-free," conspiratorial politics, disconnected from public health, reasonable dialogue, and the realities of governing, along with a lack of vision for reaching our city's full potential.

Our greatest opportunity lies in our residents, in our small business owners, and in our community. We are an amazing place -- I would argue the best place -- and promoting Alaskan ideas, Alaskan resilience, and Alaskan ingenuity are the best ways to both diversify our economy and attract more visitors.

10. Would you be interested in a follow-up meeting with Visit Anchorage?

Yes, I would welcome the opportunity to meet further with Visit Anchorage.