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Petersburg incorporates as Alaska's 19th borough

Election result certified Thursday afternoon

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Mark Miller -
After reviewing materials Thursday afternoon from the Petersburg Borough election, State Review Board member Stuart Sliter looks on as fellow member Sallie Regan signs off on the final results.

By **MARK D. MILLER**

JUNEAU EMPIRE

Alaska now has 19 organized boroughs, as the result of a vote last month to incorporate the home-rule Petersburg Borough was certified Thursday afternoon.

Steve Giesbrecht, who was city manager of Petersburg and is now borough manager of Petersburg Borough, said Thursday afternoon that the borough's incorporation is "now official."

Brent Williams of the Local Boundary Commission wrote in an email that the certification of the election result by the Alaska Division of Elections was the last step needed for the LBC's decision approving the borough's creation to take effect.

Williams added that the United States Department of Justice previously confirmed the incorporation complies with the Voting Rights Act of 1965, another necessary piece of the process.

In Petersburg, staff were preparing for the transition from city to borough Thursday. As part of the petition, the City of Petersburg dissolved Thursday as the borough incorporated.

"We'll start the process of transitioning," said Giesbrecht, shortly before the State Review Board met in Juneau to review election materials ahead of the vote's certification. "We've done some preliminary work and we have a published transition plan."

Giesbrecht added, "Probably the biggest thing is going to be getting everyone together and going through the process of which ordinances will need to be revised, getting notice out to people who might be affected by any of those changes, and getting everyone seated."

The Borough Assembly will take office next Monday, although only four assembly members were elected in the Dec. 18 election out of six seats on the incoming body. That vote was conducted by mail and administered by the Alaska Division of Elections.

Assembly Members-elect John R. Havrilek, John Hoag, Nancy Strand and Sue Flint, along with Mayor-elect Mark Jensen, will be sworn in. Jensen, then the city mayor, was overwhelmingly elected to serve as mayor of the borough.

All city staff are becoming borough staff, Giesbrecht said. As the City of Petersburg provided services as needed to formerly unincorporated areas now included within the borough, he added, staff do not

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anticipate needing to expand the government to cope with the larger borough population.

"Our three-year plan shows no added staff," Giesbrecht said.

Unlike the City of Petersburg, the City of Kupreanof did not dissolve in the transition. Kupreanof, the smallest city in Alaska at a mere 27 people, is included within the borough but maintains its own city government.

"That was done specifically to not infringe on Kupreanof and their lifestyle and the way they want things done in their city," said Giesbrecht. He reported that the sentiment in Petersburg is that "the new borough is not going to be jumping into the middle of the City of Kupreanof's issues."

The biggest change in the borough incorporation for residents of Kupreanof and the formerly unincorporated area of Mitkof Island, part of Kupreanof Island and North American mainland north to Endicott Arm the borough encompasses, Giesbrecht said, will be that they will be subject to local taxes.

"That's a change for them in the sense that they'll be interacting with our folks here a little more often," Giesbrecht said.

Sales tax and a hotel tax locally referred to as the "transient room tax," or TRT, will be assessed boroughwide starting this year.

In 2014, the sales tax and TRT will be joined by local property tax, which has previously been paid only by those living within the Petersburg city limits.

Taxes will help support Petersburg's school system, according to Giesbrecht.

The city limits of Petersburg remain on the map in the new borough as a service area.

"With the borough formation, we took the existing city limits of Petersburg and that became Service Area 1, and no other service areas were created," said Giesbrecht. "It was a big deal from the standpoint that any outside areas that want to be a service area can decide on that themselves and bring that to the Assembly."

Some residents from outside the former city are already expressing interest in serving in the borough government, according to Giesbrecht. He said he thinks that bodes well for bringing the borough together.

Said Giesbrecht, "We've had two or three people from outside the city limits put their names in to serve on boards ... which I view as a really good sign."

The 3,829-square-mile Petersburg Borough borders the City and Borough of Wrangell to the southeast and the Canadian province of British Columbia to the east. At its northwestern corner, it abuts the City and Borough of Juneau boundary, with Tracy Arm in between the two boroughs remaining unorganized.

The CBJ has filed a petition with the Local Boundary Commission to annex Tracy Arm, as well as a swath of the mainland now incorporated into the Petersburg Borough. Its appeal of the commission's decision to approve the Petersburg Borough boundaries is pending.

• Contact reporter Mark D. Miller at 523-2279 or at mark.d.miller@juneauempire.com.

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