

Representing the citizens of Cook Inlet in promoting environmentally safe marine transportation and oil facility operations.

August 2016

Meet Walt Sonen, representing Seldovia

Walt Sonen has represented the City of Seldovia on CIRCAC's Board of Directors since 2012. Born and raised in Arlington, VA, he made his way to Seldovia in 1976. By then, he had already served four years in the U.S. Marines, deploying to Okinawa and Vietnam; attended college at the University of Washington, majoring in Japanese language and literature, and studied a year in Tokyo. In between, Walt returned to Arlington to finish restoring a Model "A" Ford, headed back to Japan to teach English, and spent his summers fishing in Alaska. Fishing, and his Model A Ford, would become mainstays in his life. Walt set net in Upper Cook Inlet and trolled for 24 years in Southeast Alaska. The Model A Ford is still Walt's vehicle of choice and he's covered a lot of distance with his "newest" Model A, having driven it all the way to Deadhorse, Alaska, and to St. John's, Newfoundland.



When the CIRCAC Board of Directors holds its next meeting in September in Seldovia, Walt will serve as our resident guide. When Walt first moved to Seldovia in 1976, it was a thriving fishing town, particularly for crab. Crab would later be replaced by cod and the fishing fleet would gradually drop off. Today, Seldovia is largely a destination for tourists and retirees from throughout Alaska and the Lower 48. For Walt, Seldovia is in many ways a wonderful place to be. "Once you get here, you're here," is how he describes it. He admits living in Seldovia isn't for everybody and, being an easy weekend flight from so many Alaska communities, it helps to have an airplane.

Although small, Seldovia has a rich and long history. It was an important meeting point and fishing grounds for the Koniaqs, Aleuts, Chugach, and Tanaina Kenaitze. Russian fur traders arrived in the late-1800s, around the time of the Little Ice Age, drawn to the region along with others for its abundant resources. Seldovia is "herring" in Russian; it was named for the abundant fish. It was also abundant in sea otters and the Russian traders pressed Alaska Natives into service hunting fur. Missionaries would convert many to the Orthodox faith, some learning the Aleut language and helping them develop a written record of their language. Today, the Russian Orthodox Church, built in 1891, is Seldovia's oldest building.

Other Seldovia buildings date to the early 1900s. Walt's house was built in 1920, during the heydays of the herring fisheries and when Seldovia was central to shipping goods throughout the Cook Inlet region. A large freighter would offload its cargo there. Smaller ships would load the cargo and deliver it to Homer, Ninilchik, Kenai, and Anchorage. According to Walt, a 1923 Model T Ford offloaded in Seldovia and then was shipped to Homer in this way.

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Today Seldovia, which is a First Class City, is an active year-round community with a public library, school, and City Council and, based on the 2010 census, home to about 255 people.

After the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill, its citizens organized the Seldovia Oil Spill (SOS) Response Team to protect their community in the event of future catastrophic spills. Seldovia's SOS team is the only existing organization like it in Alaska. It has a contractual affiliation with Cook Inlet Spill Prevention and Response Inc. (CISPRI), Cook Inlet's oil spill response organization. The SOS works somewhat along the lines of a fire hall. If there is a residential spill into the water, or if a boat sinks, or a mystery slick appears, residents can call the SOS team for assistance to help boom it off or sop it up. CISPRI provides manpower and equipment, particularly in the event of a catastrophic spill in the Inlet. Walt Sonen is President of the SOS Team Board of Directors and one of his priorities is to make sure everyone participating in a drill or spill is HAZWOPER trained and that training remains current.

Walt's participation in the SOS Team and intimate knowledge of Seldovia are what brought him to the attention of the City of Seldovia to be its representative on CIRCAC's Board of Directors. Now on the Board for four years, Walt serves as a member of the Prevention, Response, Operations and Safety (PROPS) Committee.

Since joining CIRCAC, Walt's goals have been seeing that Cook Inlet's oil operations go forward in a clean manner and that oil stays out of the water.

"CIRCAC exists for that reason. We do a lot of other things," he said, "but when it comes right down to it, our primary concern is keeping oil out of the water." (*Source for History of Seldovia: Seldovia Village Tribe Website*)