

Interior economic program needs money

Fairbanks Town & Village Association Executive Director Jerry Smetzer stated that the first part of a Rural Capital Improvements Program Survey was nearing completion. The program, aimed at assisting Interior Alaska communities in setting priorities for local capital construction projects, has been underway since November.

Smetzer said that the primary goal of the program is to decide on needed public works projects for each of forty-six rural communities.

As originally designed, decisions on which public works project or projects are most needed are to be made by the communities themselves after discussions of potential sources of financing and general discussions of community growth.

"Of course the success of this approach depends on our ability to travel to each community and join those discussions," Smetzer said. "Since our original budget request of \$75,000 was cut to \$37,500, we have been unable to visit all the communities."

The project, under the general supervision of the Association Project Coordinator Rynnieva Westcott, had to be geared down to fit budget restrictions. At present the project employs Allen Blume as a temporary consultant based in Fairbanks and four sub-regional consultants: Ted Charles-Tok, Ernest Holmberg-McGrath, Ava Walsh-Tanana, and Virginia Smoke-Stevens Village.

Information about the community is being acquired through a community development questionnaire, which has been distributed by the sub-regional consultants to village leaders in their sub-regions.

"Unfortunately, though we've been able to meet and talk with a lot of people about the Rural Capital Improvements Program, the money for travel and sub-regional consultants is about to run out," Smetzer said, "and we frankly don't feel we've had enough discussions about public works in these communities yet to draw any meaningful conclusions."

Smetzer said that he is not certain where the Rural

Capital Improvements Program will go after the initial phase is concluded. "We're convinced that there is a need for this program in the villages. The rate of growth because of the gas pipeline, and the possible loss in capital construction monies because of the capital move could really hurt these towns, especially if we don't have an idea of projects they need," Smetzer said.

He noted that the Town & Village Association is looking for additional funding to keep the project going, but said that there is no guarantee of monies. "Realistically, we'll probably have to move it into a holding pattern by mid-February or at least until we can get some additional money into the program."

"Finally," Smetzer said, "we hope these initial discussions will continue to trigger further discussions about community goals and community issues like subsistence, tourism, business development, pipeline impact, employment, etc."

"That is the long term goal of the program, and sooner or later, we expect to get the money to continue working on it."