

# Federal cuts are a fact we'll have to live with: BIA

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Budget cuts and changes are facts of life and the Bureau of Indian Affairs — and everybody else — is going to have to live with them. This was the message of a speech given by BIA area director Jacob Lestenkof to members of the Central Council of the Tlingit and Haida tribes at the recent THCC meeting in Hoonah. Lestenkof emphasized his belief that one thing which will not change would be the special relationship between Alaska Natives and the federal government.

While declaring that he was not a spokesman for President Ronald Reagan, Lestenkof did seem to defend administration programs which have been decried by many leaders as being disastrous to Native Alaskans. "I have not found anyone who disagrees that we are in economic trouble," said Lestenkof, who is a past director of the Cook Inlet Native Association and who has served on the board of the Alaska Federation of Natives. "This country is in economic trouble. Everyone agrees on this. What everyone disagrees on is, 'I know what they're doing is right, but, damnit, don't cut my program!'"

Lestenkof likened the future of Alaska Natives to the past. There were men who were considered heroes in those days, he claimed. "Everyone needs heroes," Lestenkof went on, "it strikes me that these people of old became heroes without a lot of grants. Who will our heroes be now? Those who come back with a lot of grants? No! The Indian people and the Alaska Natives don't need federal monies, damnit, to be great. . . They don't! And they won't!"

Lestenkof noted that while the BIA received a nationwide funding cut of seven percent, Alaskan programs actually were cut by a much greater percentage. He did not give a figure, but others attending the meeting pointed out that \$25 million of the \$100 million being cut from the BIA's national budget is coming out of Alaska. Most agreed that that amount seems a bit disproportionate.

Yet Lestenkof promised there would be more reductions to come. "These cuts are not the end. The President is seeking additional belt tightening. We know that in 1983, 1984, and 1985 there will be additional . . . cuts." Yet, it is not necessarily as bad as it might seem, Lestenkof implied.

There is much concern about the cut off of the general assistance fund, totaling more than \$5 million. Lestenkof took his audience back to the years before 1959 . . . "Because of the absence of a tax base in the territory of Alaska," he told them, "the territory was unable to meet welfare responsibilities. . . The BIA was then required to pick up welfare and general assistance payments with the understanding that when Alaska was able to take up this responsibility, the relationship with the BIA would disappear. That is the condition now."

Lestenkof did say that he felt

that rather than having an abrupt cutoff, these monies should be phased out gradually with an intelligent program being implemented to fill the gaps. He noted that largely because of the efforts of Senator Ted Stevens, the general assistance fund would continue at least into November. As far as its existence much beyond that: "It's nice to dream, but we must deal with reality."

Lestenkof also took a look at the roll of the BIA in education. Not only is the BIA-operated school at Sitka's Mt. Edgecumbe being closed, at least 20 BIA day schools in rural Alaska also are terminating services. Lestenkof, who attended Mt. Edgecumbe as a youth, stated that the responsibility for education lies with the state. In response to an angry question from a woman in the audience regarding the closure of Edgecumbe and the end to what was described as a positive alternative for Native education, Lestenkof promised that the changeover would be done in such a way that no one will get hurt. "The bureau is committed that no one shall fall through the crack," he stated. "We've looked at an idea of creating a private Native school," which, he implied, would fill the gap left with the closure of Mt. Edgecumbe.

Lestenkof also stressed his philosophy that the bureau, tribes and Alaska natives are partners. "It is not the bureau here, and the tribes there," he contended. If anything is to be accomplished, then "it must

be done in partnership."

"If both tribes and the BIA have rights, both also have responsibilities," Lestenkof stated further. "This idea is sometimes lacking in tribal governments."

There is an attitude, Lestenkof claimed, of "I have my rights, forget my responsibilities!" He promised to work to see that everyone shared equally in both.

Lestenkof charged that many tribal operations "are not

good."

There are cases, where money is continually funneled into tribal organizations, but never seeps down to the people. Lestenkof stressed that the bureau is having to collect a million dollars from tribes who can't show what they did with money received. "I will not let this happen again," he promised. When money is contracted to the tribal organizations through the BIA, Lestenkof stated that his office

will know how that money is to be used, or else he will pull the contract.

Lestenkof also decried the image the BIA has of wearing "a black hat" . . . Everyone badmouths the BIA," he complained. "We can't run around with a black hat and still get the things we need!"

There is no change when it comes to the special trust relationship between the federal government and Alaska Natives, Lestenkof added,