

AFN seeks answers to hard IRA questions

By Janie Leask

President AFN

Since the purchase of Alaska in 1867, the federal government has had an important relationship with Alaska Natives. The foundation of that relationship is federal recognition of, and more than a century of dealing with, Alaska Natives on a government-to-government basis. In 1936 the sovereignty of Native villages was recognized by Congress when it extended all applicable provisions of the Indian Reorganization Act to Alaska.

There has been increasing interest recently, both within the Native community and among the general public, about the political status of Alaska Natives and the sovereign governmental authority of traditional and IRA village councils. The issue is a complicated one which is as emotional as it is legally complex. Unfortunately, legitimate Native aspirations to self-determination and self-government have been lost all too often in the passion of misunderstanding.

But the issues which relate to the question of Native sovereignty are real, and they must be addressed by both the Native community itself and by the federal and state governments.

As a start in that direction, last week the Alaska Federation of Natives sponsored a statewide conference on the Indian Reorganization Act. The purpose of the conference was to bring together interested members of the Native community and knowledgeable experts to begin exploring the many issues and questions related to Native sovereignty.

Although many questions are still unanswered, considerable helpful information was presented. According to representatives of the Department of Interior, neither the Alaska Statehood Act nor the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act altered the sovereign political status of Alaska Natives.

However, that fact does not end the inquiry. What is the nature of that political status? What is the extent of govern-

mental authority of a traditional or IRA Native council? What are the geographical boundaries of that authority?

What is the political relationship between traditional and IRA councils and state and municipal government? And how does the sovereign status of a traditional or IRA council affect the protection of land and other property owned by the council?

Information presented at the conference indicates that many of the answers to these questions are not yet known. But what is important to the survival of Alaska Natives as a distinct people is that, for the first time since passage of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act 11 years ago, they now are being sought.

Why do Alaska Natives have to be distinct; why do they want to be distinct? That question is rife among non-Natives. The answer is a concept hard to grasp for many Americans accustomed to change and transience and raised to believe in the inherent good of a melting pot society.

Unlike most Americans, Alaska Natives have a living link to the culture and the land they live on, the values and the heritage fundamental to their people for centuries. From the smallest Native village to Alaska's urban centers, what Natives want is for their people and their history to survive.

In the weeks and months ahead, the Alaska Federation of Natives intends to work closely with traditional and IRA councils, and federal and state government to ensure that the issue of Native sovereignty — particularly the relationship between Native governments and state government — is considered by all parties in a fair and rational manner.

Alaska Senator Ted Stevens recently called for a statewide dialogue on the issue of Native sovereignty. The Alaska Federation of Natives wholeheartedly supports that proposal. But if such a dialogue is to achieve productive results, all parties must agree at the

outset that the relationship between legitimate interests of state government and the legitimate aspirations to self-deter-

mination by Alaska Natives, can be cooperative and complementary.

Above all, they must ack-

nowledge that the inherent authority of traditional and IRA councils is a fact of life which must be recognized.