

T&H seeks regional, village control of BIA in Southeast

by Jeff Richardson
for the Tundra Times

JUNEAU — The Tlingit and Haida Central Council aims to have regional and village tribal entities assume all responsibilities of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Southeast Alaska by the end of the year.

This is the thrust of a proposal submitted to the BIA Area Office in Juneau and agency headquarters in Washington, D.C., said Ed Thomas, council president.

"We're trying to get it by the end of the calendar year. That may be a little ambitious. They (BIA) have a committee that was set up to deal with it," Thomas said.

For years, tribes have contracted to manage increasing numbers of BIA programs under authority of the Indian Self-Determination Act and other statutes. But, Thomas said, "tremendous fraud and rip-off in Indian Country" came to light.

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Congressional hearings produced horror stories of mismanagement; in some cases, up to 60 percent of federal Indian monies were being held by the bureau for administrative purpose.

"We know we're losing the sentiment of the public because so much is being appropriated and so little is getting done," Thomas said.

He noted it has been commonplace for funds intended for tribal programs to be kept within the agency on the pretense it was needed for "oversight." This deprived the tribes of funds badly needed for leadership training and other organizational development, he said.

"The BIA just hired new guys to tell the tribes what was wrong with them."

The Tlingit and Haida proposal to BIA calls for nearly 21 percent of the Juneau Area Office to be made available directly "to tribes in

Southeast Alaska to increase program dollars to better meet the needs of tribal members within the region," according to a statement released by Thomas' office.

The area office budget is about \$9.1 million. Under the proposal, a little more than \$5 million would go to Tlingit and Haida. The rest would be distributed to local tribal organizations in Angoon, Kake, Ketchikan, Sitka and Yakutat to directly administer their own programs.

The statement continues: "It is our strong belief that most of the funds used by (the area office) are unnecessary and duplicative. The Single-Audit Act provides necessary oversight, and because of our experience in managing grants and contracts with the federal government it is a waste to pay administrative money at the federal level for more unnecessary monitoring."

The proposal stems from the congressional response to its own in-

vestigation of BIA fraud, basically authorizing development of unique service delivery systems by the tribes themselves, including the assumption of all BIA functions.

Thomas said Tlingit and Haida's decision to pursue such a course arose out of the council's frustration in dealing with the area office over program contracts.

"The origin of our concern was that no matter what we did, the BIA would not make information available on the budget."

When it came time to develop figures for the proposal currently before the agency, the problem got worse. Thomas feels it was partly business as usual, partly a matter of entrenched agency bureaucrats fearing for their jobs should the proposal be approved.

Ironically, Congress provided for grants of up to \$200,000 for tribes to carry out necessary planning to assume greater fiscal responsibility. A lot of that money, Thomas said, never got

to planning.

"(It was) like pulling teeth to get budgetary information that was accurate and complete. They were agitated with us, basically turning a cold shoulder on all of our needs. Much of (the planning grant) was spent prying information out of the bureau about our own programs," Thomas said.

Thomas is keenly aware that many agency personnel in the area office are on the Tlingit and Haida tribal rolls. He understands and sympathizes with fears of job loss. But in the process of generating consensus in the region — Tlingit and Haida is seeking supportive resolutions from the IRA councils in Southeast — he stresses a long-term perspective.

Only by assuming all BIA functions, he says, can Tlingit and Haida people really enjoy self-determination.

Despite difficulties with the Bureau, Thomas has hope for the future.

"I'd like them to go all the way. This is a new decade, a new era."