

Boroughs may not be the best answer

by Paul Swetzof
for the Tundra times

Rep. Ron Larson recently wrote to the *Tundra Times* his thoughts regarding the mandatory establishment of boroughs in Alaska.

I don't usually respond to those writing letters to the editor in my column, but this particular full-page letter demands a response due to its misleading content and the ramifications of borough government.

To hear Larson tell it, Native individuals and Native villages have everything to gain and nothing to lose if his bill mandating boroughs statewide should become reality. Let's attempt to gain some perspective on Larson and his idea of mandatory boroughs.

Larson is a member of the State House of Representatives. His district includes the Palmer-Wasilla area. Larson is a long-time foe of positive rural and Native issues. In the last few legislative sessions he has authored and introduced legislation, which if passed would have, among other things, ended the Rural Electrification subsidy and negated the Molly Hootch settlement in which the state agreed to provide schools for every village with eight or more children (thus keeping our kids in our villages).

Larson stated that boroughs would provide maximum local control and would likely benefit tribal governments since he assumed that Native village government leaders would likely end up in a borough assembly. He also touted local taxation and services to borough residents. All of this doesn't reflect the entire story.

People are elected to borough assemblies from each region of a borough. The communities within a borough with the largest population would get the most number of seats on the assembly. By example, if a

borough is formed in the Cordova area, the borough assembly would be dominated by the community of Cordova.

All of the combined villages in the region would not be able to have an equal number of representatives on the assembly, much less a majority, relative to Cordova. This is because the population of all of the villages combined is less than the population of Cordova. The end result would be that villages in the region would have less local control, not more.

The interests of the villages would not be met since the mostly non-Native population of Cordova would rule the borough. This example can easily apply to any region of the state. This is why some villages within regions where there is a push for boroughs are exploring legal ways to opt out of a borough should it be formed.

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Even in areas where the regional center has a Native majority, it is unlikely that the small village's needs would receive the same attention which the larger towns would get since

the interests of large towns do not always coincide with that of the villages.

It is obvious that village IRA and traditional governments would get the short end from the larger towns which are state-chartered municipalities. Thus, even in the unlikely event that village government leaders were to end up on a borough assembly they could be continuously outvoted and thus powerless.

Finally, it is important to keep in mind that virtually everywhere a borough is formed is a regional center with a large, and in many cases majority, non-Native population who don't have the cultural interests of the villages as a priority. In those regional centers which have a Native majority it is not unlikely that in the future they will have a non-Native majority. This is because Alaska's regional centers are municipalities which are prohibited under state law from exercising Native preference in hiring and other practices. Local hire is not Native hire.

The next point which wasn't entirely explored by Larson is funding. To begin with, under current state law, boroughs can withhold state revenue sharing funds from villages which are not organized as municipalities, as is currently the case with some villages in the Kenai Peninsula Borough. The borough can continue to count village residents for the purpose of obtaining revenue sharing funds, but can decide not to give any money to the villages unless they form a municipal government, which is a form of coercion unacceptable to many villages.

The end result of this is that villages with Native governments stand to lose, not gain, state funding.

Village people, at the borough's option, may find themselves owing property and sales taxes to the boroughs as well as seeing increased utility expenses as a result of taxes on fuel and

other basic services brought into the borough.

Villages that incorporate as municipalities in order to meet certain borough requirements for funding and other services are forced to give up, not obtain, many of their self-governing powers, such as restricted membership and Native jurisdiction, which is essential to the cultural viability of many villages.

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Because of space limitations these are only a portion of the negative factors which may occur to villages which find themselves a part of a borough. The idea that a borough is good for the villages, especially those with their own Native governments, has no basis in fact.

We must be skeptical of people who come to us with ideas which they claim will make our lives better before we have a chance to thoroughly explore their proposals. We should be especially skeptical when the people proposing these ideas are on the opposite side of our common interests over a period time. Knowledge is power.