

Tanacross Presents its Reasons Why Village Needs Relocation

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Tanacross. To get there in winter you take a deep breath, breathe a silent prayer that the village people are right when they say the already rotting river ice is thick enough and plunge your car down from the bank to drive across.

Actually, it is only a bit more than 10 miles from Tok, less than a mile from the Alaska Highway and off into another world.

The village has less than 80 inhabitants this winter. They fill about 18 cabins, crammed in 8 to 10 to many cabins. The water from the wells is contaminated and 5 people have been sent to the hospital with tuberculosis this winter. Children in Tanacross appear almost constantly ill, along with the aged who include most of the village adults.

The people of Tanacross want to move their village—abandon the rotting cabins cut off from land by changes in the Tanana River and live in new houses like the impressive modern cottages the BIA funded in Dot Lake, 40 miles down the highway.

Tanacross is dying. It is dying of poverty, of a tangled land title situation which may exclude its people from any land claims or native allotments,

from contaminated water and hopelessness which drives the young and able away to Fairbanks, Tok and other places.

Oscar Isaac, the village chief, went to school through third

grade in 1931 and wants a better and healthier life for his people.

Oscar is one of the few men in the village with a job. He works for the tiny 9 pupil school

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in the village. Otherwise, there is some money from summer firefighting but not much since a new BLM policy has cut out most of the recruitment in local villages.

So, the people in the village are almost invariably the old and the very young. Few of the families are headed by young men. Most of the village council speaks little English.

Alone, there is not much the people of Tanacross can do to rebuild the unspeakably bad housing. Yet, who would bother rebuilding a cabin on land which may be beneath the river level in not too long.

Who would bother rebuilding homes in an area where the wells are contaminated and which is cut off from the mainland as much as two months of the year by ice flows or high water. Each spring, at high water, the water level reaches to a foot below the street level—Highway department experts have reported a bridge to the village is prohibitively expensive.

So, the villagers of Tanacross are trying to move their village — as Minto moved and Dot Lake moved to new homes on dry land near the Alaska Highway.

Last Wednesday, more than 30 representatives of various state and federal agencies descended upon the village at the request of the village council to meet with them to discuss their proposed move to the other side of the river. The purpose of the meeting was to raise funds, and plan a new village for the people of Tanacross.

Oscar Isaac, the village chief, opened the two day meeting by explaining the reasons the village wants to move.

The village is on an island, Isaac explained, where erosion decreases its land constantly. During freeze up and breakup, the older children who go to school in Tok cannot get across the river to reach the school bus.

Then, there is tuberculosis, caused by the unspeakably bad housing and sanitation conditions in the village.

"We wish to change our life through a new village, better housing," Oscar Isaac told the agency representatives who came from such diverse federal and state agencies as ASHA, BIA, Rural CAP, State Schools, Development and Planning, the BLM, SBA and Public Health

Service.

Andrew Isaac, traditional Chief of the United Crow Bands of the Athabascan Indians of the Upper Tanana has pushed for a move for the village since the late 1950s.

At present, the aged Chief lives in Dot Lake, in one of the seven sparkling new homes completed in December.

"In my time, Tanacross used to be the number one native village in Alaska," the chief told the agency representatives. Back in 1912, the village people moved to Tanacross from Mansfield Lake - to be closer to the Mission and trading post.

At that time it was high land and there was no Tok, no Alaska Highway. Now, they must move again.

Before he dies, the old chief would like to see his people relocated and with renewed hope.

The land on which the village wishes to build is State Selected land which the State of Alaska has agreed to utilize to house the village.

In order for the villagers to obtain the land on tax exempt status, changes must be made in its title. One possibility is to return land title to BLM, which will arrange for trust status.

On April 9, representatives of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Alaska State Housing Authority and the Public Health Service return to Tanacross to discuss a move this summer. Tanacross wants to begin construction in 1971.

However, ASHA has already ordered materials for the more than 300 homes they plan this summer and the new fiscal year does not begin till July - a late date to begin planning construction in Alaska.

By the April meeting, representatives will know to what extent funding is available and will agree on some kind of organizational plan with the village council. Contracting to the village council, hiring a resource man such as Carl Charles of Dot Lake who supervised the building there or hiring an outside coordinator are all possibilities.

Unless funding can be found at this late date, the people of Tanacross will add another long, illness and hardship filled winter to the many they have waited through to move.