

A Canadian Northerner's view of Alaska

From the Northern News
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Alaskans are immensely cheered by opposition to a Mackenzie Valley pipeline—because they want the pipeline themselves.

So says Territorial councillor Dave Nickerson of Yellowknife after visiting Anchorage, Fairbanks, Prudhoe Bay, Kotzebue and Point Barrow last week. He was one of 11 N.W.T. councillors who made the trip, accompanied by Deputy Commissioner John Parker and other administrative officials, to familiarize themselves with the Alaskan experience in land claims and pipeline construction.

The N.W.T. visitors were closely questioned everywhere on the Berger hearings and on efforts by groups and individuals to prevent construction of a Canadian line—all of which, the Alaskans felt, made brighter their own chances of getting the line.

Happy over deal

Aside from being pipeline enthusiasts, native born Alaskans seem generally happy with the land claims settlement they negotiated with the government—close to \$1 billion in cash and 40 million acres of land Nickerson says.

The land comes under the jurisdiction of 12 regional development corporations and smaller village corporations, he said, and the process of selecting the land to be acquired is still going on, with about five per cent of the area still to be claimed.

The people we talked to take the position they bargained

as hard as they could and that they're satisfied with what they got,' he says. 'Now they're trying to make the most of what they have.'

Learned fast

And the development corporations are working. 'At Kotzebue, they did \$50 million in business last year. The people running the corporation are a real cross-section of the community; there aren't many, if any, university graduates among them, but they've learned fast how to handle money.'

There's still a fair amount of litigation on the land settlement, he adds. It was such an immense job that many loose ends were left when the agreement was signed, and there are questions of interpretation to be sorted out.

One thing the Alaskans have discovered, he says is that many of the fears they'd had about the social and environmental impact of pipeline construction were groundless or greatly exaggerated.

'There's very limited opposition to a pipeline there,' Nickerson says. 'People are really pushing for it.'

Financed regions

'If it hadn't been for the oil pipeline, the people wouldn't have been able to get their regional development corporations going in the first place.'

'That pipeline meant a big housing boom in Anchorage and other centres. It has provided jobs not only for oilfield service crews but in pipeline security, catering services, construction and power plants, to name a few.'

'Environmental controls are something. Every piece of gar-

bage is picked up in the oilfield, and vehicles don't cross the tundra at all; five feet of gravel is built up atop the tundra for roads. And every camp has its own sewerage plant.'

'We didn't see environmental damage anywhere...and from 10,000 feet up you can hardly see the pipeline.'

Little violence

As for fears of increased

crime and violence with an influx of construction workers: 'Fairbanks, compared to Yellowknife of a normal weeknight, is fairly tame.'

Alaska had its share of outside interference over the land claims issue, Nickerson adds. 'They got all the radicals, all the people using Alaskans as vehicles for their own ends, but they (the Alaskans) got

them out. The people we met were extremely businesslike.'

One thing the visitors did learn from the Alaskans, though, was that ideally there should be two or three years' lead time between the decision to go ahead with a pipeline and the start of actual construction.

Gearing-up time

'That gives the municipalities time to gear up to meet the demand for expanded services, housing and so on. Otherwise, they told us, we'd get in to the same sort of crunch in which Alaskan communities found themselves.'