

## •Editorial Rate hike not supreme

It is not prudent for a newspaper to take an editorial stance squarely in opposition of a regular advertiser, but then neither is it prudent to remain silent when your readers are disenchanted with your advertisers.

The Alaska Supreme Court last week granted a long-standing request by RCA Alascom for an interim 87 per cent rate increase for long distance services provided within the state.

That's unfortunate.

According to our best information, the high court was following precedents set in other similar cases. In other words, the request made by RCA was perfectly legal, and the judges ruled in perfect conformity with previous court treatment of such issues.

Rural Alaskans have steadfastly opposed RCA's rate increase request, not only because it is exorbitantly high, but because the high expectations for improved communications services in the bush have not entirely been met.

Good and bad have come of RCA's ambitious program to expand satellite links to Alaskan villages. After fire destroyed the sophisticated compact system that made the single telephone in one village work, an RCA crew was dispatched immediately to restore the system to working order. By contrast, in a Yukon River village, the single community phone is kept off the hook because the residence where the phone is hooked up is constantly plagued by Bristol Bay area callers trying to reach Anchorage.

Certainly RCA has made a general good faith effort to modernize bush communications, and spent a lot of money doing it. But the rate hike they have sought, and temporarily won, is simply too high. It would nearly double the phone bills of Alaskans calling other Alaskans, and for bush businesses who don't call New York their corporate home, that can make a difference when the cash flows slowly or seasonally.

The Alaska Public Utilities Commission has fought RCA's interim rate increase request tooth and nail. Although they have lost the battle, the war is still on. RCA will have to come back to the Commission to obtain approval for a permanent rate hike. If the Supreme Court's rejection of the Commission's position followed legal precedent, then clearly what is needed is some unprecedented legal homework by the Commission to ready for the next battle.

Someone casually mentioned the other day that Alaskans should refuse payment of their long-distance bills to protest the hike should the courts let them down again; maybe the cost of calling our neighbors has become a luxury we can't afford.