

AFN TERMINATES PR OFFICE

Public Relations Chief Jim Thomas Asked to Resign by October 15

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Staff Writer

The public relations effort of the Alaska Federation of Natives stands to take on a different tone after March 15.

By that date, the department of public relations will be terminated and the office in the Kaloa Building in Anchorage once occupied by Public Relations Director Jim Thomas will bear some other label.

Thomas told the Tundra Times that he was notified of the decision the first week of March and shortly thereafter submitted his resignation as director of public relations effective March 15.

According to Al Ketzler, executive director of AFN, "The whole department was abolished because of money problems."

There was nothing personal in the action, Ketzler added, "We are running way behind on our payroll and just had to make a decision."

"We've been leaping from crises to crises, and I'm just determined to stop it. We've got to have our house in shape financially or we are going to collapse."

Other AFN leaders agreed with Ketzler in saying that they had to close due to financial reasons.

However, they all noted that the public relations effort will continue, though, in what form they were not certain.

Emil Notti, president of the AFN, said that there has been some talk about using consultants for certain concentrated efforts.

Similarly, Ketzler suggested that the organization might contract the service. Such an arrangement will cost a lot less, than a full-time department, he explained.

"We are now regrouping so



JIM THOMAS

we can pursue the Senate bill when it is reported to the floor and the house bill."

Thomas and his staff have spent most of thier time trying to raise support for the AFN

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land claims position.

He and other AFN leaders recently completed a whirlwind tour of Washington state where they spoke with numerous church groups, civic clubs, and representatives of the news media.

The energetic PR director disagreed with the elimination of the office at this time.

He termed the upcoming months as crucial ones for the AFN in terms of pursuing the native land claims effort.

"I believe," he said, "the most important office to the AFN in its stake of over a billion dollars is being eliminated. I am sorry that better vision and proper goals are not a reality in our current efforts."

The Senate Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs is now drafting a land claims proposal and chairman of the committee Sen. Henry Jackson has said that he would like to have the bill out of the committee and passed by the Senate by the first of April.

To date, the committee meetings have been secret and thus the shaping of the committee bill uncertain, but the fight for AFN position does not appear to be an easy one. The Secretary of the Interior has come out against the 2 per cent overriding royalty and against 40 million acres of land for the natives as the AFN has requested. Rather it has called for \$500 million cash settlement plus 15 million acres. The AFN has requested 40 million acres.

When asked how he thought the elimination of the PR office might affect the AFN effort in Washington, D.C., Thomas said that he did not know.

"It all depends on how well our leaders hang in there and do what they can."

The AFN, he added, needs three or four people there full-time to talk with the aids of Congressmen on committees that are or will be concerned with the land claims legislation.

And, he added, the AFN needs a 70 to 90 per cent effort on the national, rather than the state level in order to reach Congressmen from other states.

Once a bill is adopted by the Senate Interior Committee and passed by the Senate, it must then go through similar channels in the House and finally the Senate-House compromise committee.

Willie Hensley, executive director of the AFN before going to Juneau to serve as a State representative from Kotzebue, said that he did not think the elimination of the public relations office would have a major effect on the land claims effort in Washington.

"I think the elimination is merely a matter of priorities. We've never really been on a sound financial footing," he said, "and we have other programs that cannot be jeopardized because we have contracted for them and need to be fiscally responsible."

The AFN, he continued, has always been a shoestring operation and created the public relations office on a temporary basis in an effort to get information on the land claims to the public.

Set up about 5 months ago,

the office was funded for the first three months by the Association on American Indian Affairs through a \$30,000 grant.

Thomas said that the office has spent a total of from \$40,000 to \$45,000 during the five months with the additional money coming from church grants.

Contrary to other AFN leaders, he seemed to feel that money was available to continue the full time public relations effort.

Several churches in Washington state, he said, have expressed an interest, and there is the possibility that they will give the AFN some funds.

It also appears, he said, that the AFN could obtain a \$250,000 loan guaranteed by the Presbyterian church but the AFN board has not acted on the matter.

The organization recently received \$2,875 of a \$11,500 grant from the Inter-religious Foundation for Community Organization. Both the Presbyterian and Episcopal church each recently granted the AFN \$10,000. According to Thomas, the Episcopal grant has been used to pay bills and according to Ketzler, when the Presbyterian grant comes in, it will be used for the same purpose.

Ketzler did not seem as optimistic as Thomas about the AFN's chances of securing more funds or loans.

The deputy executive director said that in Washington and New York he went to many of the same places that Thomas did and that, "of course, they all say submit something and maybe you'll get some money."

He added that he had sent out grant applications for about \$50,000.

All of the AFN leaders asserted that the action was a matter of finances and was no personal reflection upon Thomas.

Emil Notti, president of the AFN, stressed that Thomas, a Tlingit Indian, has done a tremendous job.

Similarly, the vice president John Borbridge said that the public relations director had performed very ably and was to be complimented for taking the position knowing that it was a temporary one.

In the past there have been indications that some of the AFN leaders thought that the PR office was running too independently of the AFN leadership.

According to Hensley, the office has been a sore spot in the organization.

"To me," he said, "the public relations effort can't be totally independent effort. What that office does, the director or president has to answer for."

He added that he thought at times the AFN leaders did not know what the public relations office was doing or how it was spending money.

The main problem, according to Thomas, was not one of lack of finances, but that "my priority has been land claims and I have neglected satisfying certain egos by not reporting activities of some leaders in the press."

Thomas said that he has had several good job offers in Anchorage but that he has made no decision. His dedication, he said, lies with the native cause.