

Governor's sanitation council launches drive

Burden, Naneng head effort to end health crisis, October looms deadline for first report to Knowles

by Jeff Richardson
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With a pep talk from the governor, the Council on Rural Sanitation met July 20-21 to formulate plans to defeat Alaska's most formidable health crisis.

Co-chaired by Myron Naneng, president of the Association of Village Council Presidents and Gene Burden, commissioner of environmental conservation, the council was joined via teleconference by Gov. Tony Knowles.

"What we need to have is a solid plan with measurable objectives and concrete actions," said Knowles. "We need to have the will to see the job through."

Reiterating his determination to banish hand-hauled honey buckets from scores of villages that currently lack even minimal water and sewage disposal systems, Knowles

also said he expected the council to draft a plan and then "help gather public support."

Knowles suggested two avenues of persuasion to achieve that support: First, to convince urban residents that investment in resolving the rural sanitation crisis would benefit even them, and second, to press the case that putting an end to disease and death caused by poor water and sanitation facilities was the only conscionable course of action.

"Alaskans do act as a family. It's the morally right thing to do," said Knowles. He directed the council to use a 10-year timeframe in their deliberations.

"This is a bold plan that I'm asking to be put together. The population of rural Alaska is expected to double over the next 20 years. That makes the urgency of the situation even more apparent. We're all going to be held accountable," said

Knowles. He added that he's seeking the best solution for the least price and noted there's no room remaining for mistakes.

After hearing a brief history and technical overview of the rural sanitation issue, council members got down to the sometimes tedious chore of deciding how to approach it. A number of working groups were formed to deal with different aspects of the problem: financing, technology, public perception. The group, which consists of state commissioners, legislators, and representatives of such groups as the Alaska Native Health Board and Rural Alaska Community Action Program, decided to meet only quarterly. Its next meeting is currently slated for November. However, its first report to Knowles is due in October, to help inform the process of preparing bills and budgets for the next legislative session.