

# TV task force sees bush needs

By LAURY ROBERTS

A telecommunications task force has recommended to Gov. Jay Hammond that the three-year-old TV demonstration project continue to be funded by the State at the same level for the next few years until commercial broadcasters can distribute the programming instead.

The state will have to stay in the telecommunications business if bush communities are to receive television programming in the future.

"The recommendations make common sense," said Lt. Governor Terry Miller, head of the task force. "We recognize the unique circumstances of bush Alaska.

Expansion of TV service to rural communities is complicated by several factors: determining a criteria for deciding what villages and towns should be in line for service; whether the State should offer programs in competition with existing cable companies; and who will pick up the cost.

The Governor's office of Telecommunications (GOT) was disbanded July 1 and the project is now split between three state entities. The task force of State officials and private broadcasters was formed to shape the future of TV in Alaska.

The Department of

# •State should fund TV at same level

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Transportation is responsible for managing the installing equipment, and buying time on the satellite which relays TV signals to the villages.

Non-broadcast expenses are picked up by the Department of Education which prepares instructional programming for schools. DOE is the largest single user of the demonstration project.

The Alaska Public Broadcasting Commission (APBC) does the actual broadcasting through operation of its tape delay center in Anchorage. Until July a

private California Company managed the TV project.

Commercial broadcasters help the State by taping entertainment programs sent to the bush on the satellite in the evening hours. The State cannot directly tie-in with national network entertainment shows because of copyright laws and because the programs are not sent to Alaska via satellite.

While the ultimate goal is to turn over rural television service to private enterprise when the big networks hook up with the Satellite, it may not be completely feasible.

"I don't think we want it all placed in private industry," says Dennis Eagan, president of the Alaska Broadcasters Association. "The state will still have to pay for feeding programs to the bush."

The State proposed that commercial broadcasters contribute \$300,000 to the project this year, but that attempt failed when the broadcasters argued they were already providing extensive "in-kind" services.

"The request was unjustified," says Eagan. "The State had never put a dollar value on what the telecasters were already providing."

Now the State will have to increase its nearly \$3 million appropriation for operating the demonstration project.

"When the state entered the TV business in 1976 it seemed that a state subsidy was needed or otherwise rural Alaska would not get TV," says Jennifer Wilke, head of the state's instructed television program.

"The project was only supposed to be for one year, they'd have to continue it. It would become a motherhood issue."

Mike Porcoro, director of the APBC, has suggested that viewers in bush communities pay a fee for TV service. "I don't think that would work because the cost of collection would be astronomical," warns Egan.

The state has not yet figured out who should next receive service. Until now, larger Alaskan communities have received service. "If they decide to base it on population, then I'm afraid the small places that need TV most won't get it," says Sen. Frank Ferguson, a Kotzebue Native who got the TV project rolling in the first place.

"Terry stuck up for Fergie," says Don Kubley, special assistant to Miller.

"We want to establish a population criteria," adds Egan, "but give it first to those communities that don't have it."

When the state initially provided TV service it looked at the number of people who would be served, not if other programming was available.

Consequently, the state, while trying to place TV service in the hands of private industry, is competing with it in some towns where cable is already available. North Star Cable, which provides TV service to Barrow, has filed suit to stop open state broadcasting in selected communities that have cable.

The situation is made even more confusing by Congressional deliberations on the 1934 Communications Act. When the law is changed, it is possible that Alaska will not receive a rate break for expensive phone service to sparsely populated areas.

Presently telephone and television signals are picked up by the same earth station in each community.