

# NATIVE UNITY CHALLENGED

## AFN's Native Housing Procedures Questioned By Reg. Corporations

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**FAIRBANKS** — The increasing solidarity of aboriginal Americans was very much in evidence at the National Council on Indian Opportunity meeting in Fairbanks, July 26-27. Representatives from Eskimo, Athabascan, Tlingit, Haida, Choctaw, Taos, Sioux, Blackfoot, and Apache tribes exchanged information and attitudes on nationwide Indian concerns.

However, the unity of Alaska's twelve Native regions was questioned as AFN's Don Wright and Harry Carter presented that organization's housing program for NCIO backing.

AFN asked for the board's support in Washington, D.C. in obtaining EDA funding for Native housing, supplanting the present ASHA programs, which have evidenced financial difficulties and which AFN feels does not have sufficient Native involvement.

AFN also asked the Council to expedite the transfer of the deactivated Wildwood Air Force Base to the Kenai native corporation for a vocational training center, a boarding facility for Native students now being sent out of the state, and a central office for AFN's embryo housing program which has already experienced difficulties getting started.

Early hopes for a 1972 start on the units have faded as the building season sped by. The AFN housing project began to be looked at with caution by some of the regions.

Tanana Chief's John Sackett raised the question of "who speaks for whom", indicating that the AFN had not laid the groundwork for the presentation within its own board.

Representatives from at least four regions revealed that they did not have direct knowledge of AFN's plans through participation on the AFN board.

Martin Seneca of New York explained the dilemma of the National Council. "We got these resolutions from the leadership of the AFN and we assumed it came with the approval of the board."

"I would caution NCIO against assuming that," warned Sackett. "The board," he explained to the lower '48 visitors, "has powers over the AFN. The very nature of those powers to the region are sovereign and have a tendency to be autonomous. Until they (the board of the AFN) decide in themselves, the

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NCIO should take into consideration this autonomy."

Sackett was supported by Bobby Schaeffer of the Northwest Native Association and Richard Stitt from the Tlingit-Haida region.

"Don't walk away with the assumption," said Stitt, "that there is a concurrence that all funds should be channeled through the AFN. We in the Tlingit-Haida area have an understanding. We get the EDA grant direct from EDA."

Schaeffer said he had never heard about the AFN-EDA proposal. However, he stated, "I think the AFN should continue to exist."

How it is to continue, what powers it is to be granted by the regions, and what is to be its role in the post-settlement era is the subject of a high-powered reorganization meeting taking place in Anchorage this week.

Surprisingly, NCIO passed all three of AFN's resolution, indicating that the question of authority was an internal matter between the AFN and the regions.

The eight-member Native NCIO board, jointly with eight members of the President's cabinet, act as an advisory group to the President.

Chaired by J. Rainier, board members Dr. B. Frank Melvin, Martin Seneca, Dale Wing, Harold Shunk, Earl Old Person, Joe Vasquez, Bob Robertson, and Fairbanks' own Laura Bergt listened attentively as Alaska Natives voiced their own special and unique problems and opportunities.

Recognizing tribal differences, the group nonetheless discovered areas of mutual concern and overlapping goals. Problems held in common by virtually every tribe in America: housing, education, health, and the all-pervasive BIA were discussed with emphasis on the Alaskan viewpoint.

The question of Indian self-determination in relationship to

BIA policies was brought up with news of the dissolution of the nation's only all-Native executive board which existed here in Fairbanks, combining input from North Slope Eskimos and the interior Indians.

Georgianna Lincoln, a member of that board told NCIO of the board's growing frustration with BIA foot-dragging techniques. Finally they resolved to walk out on the organization.

The group had backup and support from the Fairbanks BIA agency, notably director Wally Craig, but failed to receive funding and policy-making authority.

While federal sources ostensibly support self-determination and at least one federal agency, the Public Health Service, has begun to make headway in applying the concept, still the BIA remains "poured in concrete", said Tlingit-Haida's Richard Stitt.

"I think they've been wrong a long time," he told the NCIO members Thursday. "Unless they're willing to give some powers, power to stop money from flowing, to stop programs, then you don't really have Native involvement. I understand that Congress, EVEN Congress can't stop that organization."

NCIO board members responded with complaints about BIA actions in their own areas and Seneca, noting that the group's next meeting will be held in Washington, D.C., assured the Alaskan Natives that the board would make recommendations for changes.

NCIO resolved to establish better communication exchange nationally to guide its members on which issues to bring before the President's attention. It seems a sure bet that the BIA will be at the top of the list.

Tlingit-Haida's Richard Stitt told NCIO that although he had not heard of their work previously, he felt they could be an effective voice in Washington.

He related his region's experience with the BIA, where the Central Council had nothing but difficulties. "We removed the agency director," he said, only to find him put in another position in the beauracrat structure over their heads.

Stitt drew a parallel between the question of authority in both the BIA and the AFN.

"If somebody comes along with a title," he said, "it's assumed he's somebody."

This week a significant restructuring of the AFN will have to be thrashed out in Anchorage. It is clear what unity in the Alaska Federation of Natives meant in realization of the land claims settlement.

It is far from clear what unity means for the future.