

Last Ditch Effort To Save Bush Housing Program

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Housing in bush Alaska is very likely to get much worse before it gets any better. At

present it is a huge can of worms, tied in with difficult and high-cost water and sewer treatment problems.

The death of the President's Indian Housing Program, of the HUD projects for Alaska, of the

AFN Housing Authority, and of various hopeful starts on housing on the part of Native regional corporations, all combine to foreshadow nothing less than a disaster in Alaska housing.

In this harsh climate shelter

means survival. Unsanitary, poorly heated houses mean high infant mortality rates (25 per cent as compared to 6 per cent for the rest of the U.S.), disease, illness, and loss of work.

A study made in 1968 es-

timated that Alaska needed no fewer than 8000 units of housing to alleviate critical shortage in remote areas and Native villages. There have been only about 1000 built.

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By U.S. standards 600 cubic feet of space per person is considered overcrowded. The average in Alaska's villages is 360 cubic feet.

In light of these statistics it is difficult to see how the administration could sink all ongoing programs and offer no immediate alternatives.

To throw the burden onto the state of Alaska or, as some suggest, onto the Native regional corporations themselves (who are assumed to have limitless supplies of monies) is to abrogate a pledge and a responsibility.

"They made us many promises" . . . and it would seem the United States government is as agile as ever at ducking promises.

The United States Congress failed first of all to continue funding of a housing program originated by the late Senator Bob Bartlett and enacted as the Bartlett Act of 1966.

More recently, the federal government reneged on promises made in an announcement April 1971. Republican Senator Ted Stevens and AFN President Don Wright jointly announced the administration's broad new housing program. It was to be a replacement for and an improvement over the Bartlett plan. 1200 units of housing per year for five years were scheduled to be built. Not one house was ever built under this plan, although hundreds of thousands of dollars of planning money went "down the tube."

Not only did AFN lose valuable planning money but in many cases the Public Health Service drew up tentative plans for accompanying water and sewer. No one knows the exact amount of dollars lost in this fiasco.

Many of the new Native regional corporations set up housing offices to work with either ASHA or AFN Housing Authority and also expended money which has not been, nor is likely to be reimbursed.

ASHA is now attempting to utilize money available through the sale of state bonds which originated when the state picked up the program the US Congress had abandoned.

Senator John Sackett (R-Galena) has forwarded to the Tundra Times the complete text of ASHA's proposal which can only be viewed as a stop-gap measure and not a complete answer to Alaska's critical needs by any means.

The ASHA proposal is founded on the concept of mutual help, which "has one serious flaw." This flaw, says ASHA, is "that the best time for the participant to donate his labor on the house is also the season when he has the only opportunity of the year to earn what little cash he can to survive in the winter."

ASHA suggests a new approach, one that will use local labor but on a paid basis. It also recommends the use of the financial resources of the Native regional and village corporations.

ASHA would provide the grant portion and construction funds. The regional corporation would match this with a minimum of 25 per cent. This would provide the loan portion of the housing costs. The regional corporation would set the the interest rate and handle all collections and it is even suggested that the village corporations could eventually assume the funding and management.

ASHA feels that if the "home owner is making his payments directly to his own village council rather than to a far off government agency, his sense of responsibility will be greater."

At this point in time, the village corporate entities are only beginning the process of formal organization. They have ahead of them the enormous responsibilities of the Land Claims Settlement, and the massive job of land selection. Add to this the fact that much of the top village leadership has been pulled off to the regional corporations, and it would seem unrealistic to expect that this transition to management of a housing program at which the federal government failed can succeed at the village level.

Nearly every housing program initiated since 1966 has failed to meet the quotas so desperately needed in rural Alaska. ASHA's current proposal will answer only one small segment of that need.