

Gubernatorial candidate Steve Cowper

Interview conducted by Jim Benedetto

Tundra Times Editor

This is the first in a series of interviews with the many candidates for public office in Alaska this year. The Tundra Times is pleased to offer these interviews as a public service to our readers.

Democrat Steve Cowper (pronounced "Cooper") was one of the first to declare his candidacy for the governor's seat. Cowper came to Alaska in the late '60s and landed a job as a Fairbanks assistant district attorney, and his diverse experiences since then have included several terms in the Alaska House of Representatives, lobbying for the state of Alaska during the struggle to pass the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA), and serving as a trustee for the Alaska Permanent Fund Corporation.

TUNDRA TIMES: *Alaska's subsistence law has now been signed. Would you as governor actively support the right of rural Alaskans to a subsistence preference?*

COWPER: Yes; I thought it was a good bill.

TUNDRA TIMES: *As governor, will your appointments to bodies such as the Boards of Fish and Game, and the National Park Service Subsistence Resource Commission reflect your commitment to preserving that right?*

COWPER: Yes.

TUNDRA TIMES: *Will you take action, as necessary, to defend the rights of Native Alaskans to hunt marine mammals when outside interests threaten those rights and the federal government's commitment wanes?*

COWPER: Yes, but I have to say that the management of the resource would come into play as well. In other words, I think that the harvest has to be limited if the species is in danger. Of course, that's what the IWC (International Whaling

"There is an awful lot of flexibility that we ought to offer in terms of local self-government..."



Commission) is all about; and I think that when there is clear evidence that the IWC has set a quota that is not realistic, then it would certainly be in order for the governor to come forward and advocate for a larger take, and I would be glad to do that.

TUNDRA TIMES: *The issue of tribal governments in Alaska is certainly a controversial issue for this election campaign so far, and it shows no signs of going away. Do you believe that the state constitution should be amended*

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to allow the recognition of tribal government authority?

COWPER: Well, I don't think that the state constitution has to be amended to allow the tribal governments to assert authority in certain ways which, in fact, have been recognized in the past. I don't have, for instance, any problem with a tribal government or a tribal organization rendering services to the public through contractual means. I think that when federal money which is designated for Native people is concerned, of course those services would be rendered to the Native people. When state money is being administered, then the money has to be administered without regard to race or culture.

Now, in terms of the types of tribal governments which are envisioned by some groups, which would be roughly equivalent to reservations in other areas of the country, I don't think that that's in the best interest of the people of the state of Alaska. I think that we are basically all one people, and I don't think that it would be in anybody's best interest to set up independent jurisdictional units which are not answerable to anybody except the federal government. I realize that view is not held by many people in rural Alaska, but that's the view that I take.

One the other hand, I think that there is an awful lot of flexibility that we ought to offer in terms of local self-government. I have myself proposed that we legitimize the practice of having courts of limited jurisdiction in the villages. It's been done for years, we may as well legitimize it... The court system simply does not have the resources to bring all its machinery out to the villages for every single criminal offense or minor civil offense. And I would like to work with the court system and with Native leaders to put together some kind of machinery in the villages that would effectively function as a village court system. I'm open as to how it (would) operate.

TUNDRA TIMES: More specifically, with regard to jurisdictional issues, would you as governor actively oppose the efforts of tribal governments to assert independent authority over traditional lands or waters, or over marine mammal, fish or game management?

COWPER: Well, that is a question which would have to be determined by federal courts, which would be construing laws that were really not meant to apply to Alaska in my opinion. My views are not consistent with the people who would want to do that, and I suppose if it went into litigation, that I would have to take, on behalf of the state, I'd have to take the position that the present law ...does not provide for that kind of jurisdiction.

TUNDRA TIMES: Have you read the Governor's Task Force Report on State, Federal and Tribal Relations?

COWPER: Yes; I have read the initial draft. It was about 175 pages, as I recall, and I read it all.

TUNDRA TIMES: Are you concerned about the disparity in the amounts of revenue sharing monies available to unincorporated, as opposed to incorporated communities?

COWPER: Yes.

TUNDRA TIMES: What would you do to alleviate that situation? Or do you believe that the law already provides a mechanism for the provision of those funds, namely, incorporation?

COWPER: Well, the important thing about revenue sharing is to get money for services to the people out there where they can be used. Speaking for myself only, I'm not concerned with whether a town is incorporated or not.

TUNDRA TIMES: Do you believe it's possible to both develop our natural resources and preserve the quality of our air and water?

COWPER: I'm like most Alaskans; I think almost everybody who lives in Alaska is an environmentalist. I've seen examples of people who fulminate against environmental organizations scream loudly when somebody threatens to dump waste into their trout stream...

I think that it's absolutely essential that we establish some kind of balance

between development and the environment. In fact, we've done a fairly good job in doing that over the years. There have been a lot of mistakes made; we wouldn't want to repeat the example of the ice road to the North Slope, for instance — I don't want to call it the Hickel Highway; in fact, Mr. Hickel was ot responsible for it — but we learn from those kinds of mistakes. And I think that our experience has been over the last few years that the environmental rules that we have set are high and they have to be met.

TUNDRA TIMES: What about a more specific example: the Outer Continental Shelf. Considering the value of the renewable harvest of salmon in an area like Bristol Bay, what would your position be in encouraging or backing away from the oil exploration and development on the OCS?

COWPER: Well, in Bristol Bay you have a billion dollar resource in the form of the fish and other sea creatures which have a very high commercial value. I thought that there was not enough study done there, and that the state should have asked for more time to study the situation. For instance, most of the juvenile salmon which migrate out of the streams live in the Bristol Bay for their first year in the first three meters of the water column. It's not shown what a major hydrocarbon spill would do to those juvenile salmon.

Personally, I don't think that we ought to take a chance on that sort of thing. I think that Governor Sheffield did the right thing when he protested and asked for more time for more information on what the potential damage would be in the case of a spill.

TUNDRA TIMES: Are there any steps that a governor could take to ensure that development when it does take place, would not adversely affect the salmon or marine mammals there?

COWPER: Well that's the federal jurisdiction, but I believe that once you

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photo by Paul Helmar

get the appropriate amount of information, so that you can come to certain conclusions about whether there's any danger there, then there is an awful lot that the governor can do. Number one: if it's clearly shown that the drilling would be a danger to those resources, then all kinds of constituencies all over the country can be rallied to oppose that kind of drilling.

That's not to say that I believe that it would necessarily be harmful; I just don't know, and that's the whole point. Until we do know, I think drilling should be delayed. Then if the evidence shows that it may damage the resource or it may not, then I would resolve that doubt in favor of the marine resource.

TUNDRA TIMES: Placer miners say government regulations are solely designed to put them out of business; but people downriver complain of muddy water and demand stricter regulation. What is your position on placer mining?

COWPER: Well, the most important thing is to establish a clear set of rules that everybody can understand. I think on streams that are salmon spawning streams, certainly the major streams, at least; on recreational streams; and on streams and rivers that serve as a water supply to a village, then a high standard has to be applied. But many streams and rivers simply don't fall into that category. And I would think that we could reduce the requirements in terms of clean water if the miner in question is dumping the effluent into the Tanana or the Yukon, which is naturally muddy and silty anyhow.

I think that probably everybody involved in the placer mining dispute is overstating their case. I believe that reasonable compromises can be made...

I do think that the mining industry has been hurt by the state's insistence on what has to be called selective enforcement, and the state has admitted that

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that's what they do. I don't believe that that's in the best interest of the program. And I think that regulations ought to be more carefully drawn and they ought to be site-specific and they ought to be equally enforced. I don't think the responsible part of the mining industry wants to go wild all over the landscape, I think they just want a clear set of rules that they can rely on and some kind of standards that they can meet under existing technology. I think that's a fair request and I think that we can do it.

TUNDRA TIMES: The state Department of Environmental Conservation has to be one of the most underfunded, undermanned and undergunned in Alaska. Would you as governor increase the commitment to DEC, and to what extent?

COWPER: I'd like to put more people in the field.



Steve Cowper chats with a Dillingham fisherman before the recent day-long king salmon opening in Bristol Bay.

photo by David Ramseur

TUNDRA TIMES: Would you care to elaborate on your answer?

COWPER: Well, I think in areas like hazardous waste disposal, the placer mining question, all of those areas require more people, I think. One of the biggest problems with DEC over the last few years is that they just simply have too few people in the field. What that does if you happen to be involved in industry, is it delays your permit procedure.

DEC hasn't got the personnel to make the kind of decisions that they have to make in an expeditious manner. And for legitimate industries, that hurts them because they can't get their permits in time. And I think we've all seen the problems that have arisen down on the Kenai Peninsula and out in Prince Williams Sound with the dumping of waste material that should never have been allowed under the state's laws and regulations. The problem was we didn't have enough people out in the field to do the inspections and to provide the kind of enforcement that we really should be doing.

TUNDRA TIMES: What is your vision of a turn-of-the-century Bush community? To what extent do you see them modernized?

COWPER: I don't think I want to impose my vision of rural Alaska on the villagers. I think that's largely up to the people who live in rural Alaska. I would like to reduce the cost of living in the villages where it's possible to do so; I would like to make it easier for village people to participate in the cash economy to the extent that they want to do so. But I believe the future of the villages should be left in the hands of the villagers. And what that means is if I'm governor, I'm going to spend as much time listening to people in the villages as I possibly can. Incidentally, I just got back from an extensive trip into rural Alaska and it improved my perspective a great deal.

TUNDRA TIMES: In what ways would a Cowper Administration support — financially, as well as morally — the development and diversification of local economies in the Bush?

COWPER: Well, I think that economic diversification beyond subsistence is a matter that relates really to three factors: one of them is the extent of the resources of the area; secondly, the persuasion of people in the area; and thirdly, the realities of the market place. Now what the state can do is to help the villagers develop markets in selective ways. To give you an example, I was recently out at Nelson Island and went to the villages of Tununak and Tooksook Bay. There's a small herring fishery there that has just been converted into a commercial fishery in the last two or three years. They have a problem: there are people from outside coming in with large boats and taking a large percentage of the catch. It's a limited fishery. I think that fishery ought to be restricted to the people in the area. There are some ways of doing that; they are a little complicated, but I think we can get to here from there.

What I would like to see the state do, in that specific case, would be to shop around for buyers that would give the villagers a little bit better price. You would have to do that in a pretty selective way. But, basically, it involves providing people with information as to alternative buyers. I think the state can have a pretty good effect on village economics if it does that in a thoughtful way.

TUNDRA TIMES: What do you think the state can do to alleviate the high levels of unemployment in the villages?

COWPER: I think there are a number of things that we can do. I was impressed this past week with what the city of Aniak is doing with respect to construction. Instead of putting the jobs out to bid and having outside contractors come into town and bring their own help, they did most of their projects through a force account and hired and trained people within the town of Aniak to do the work. Now that the projects are over, we have a residue

of skills that can be used in other projects in the area. And when times get tough, those people can go into the urban areas, if they want to, and get work. Also, the maintenance of those projects will be in the hands of those local people. It was a smart thing to do, I think.

There are a number of other things, such as the search for markets for small resource-based industries like the herring fisheries on Nelson Island. I think that job training and education have to be pretty closely targeted for job skills that are actually useful in the rural areas. It may be that some people would want to come in to work in a cash economy for awhile and move back out in the village. That does happen in some villages. It depends on where you are of course and what resources are available, and that of course, is a way of saying that every village is different; and so, therefore, its economic potential is different.

TUNDRA TIMES: As you describe it, the Aniak project sounds like what Local Hire is really all about.

COWPER: It sure does.

TUNDRA TIMES: Are you a strong proponent of Local Hire?

COWPER: Yes.

TUNDRA TIMES: Would you support exempting small Bush communities from provisions of the Little Davis Bacon Act, as Rep. Dave Thompson of Kodiak proposed last year?

COWPER: I don't think I'd want to do that. I think the state has an interest not only in providing jobs, but also in making sure that the wage level within the state is at a reasonably high level. I know that that creates certain difficulties within the villages. Maybe the best way to handle that is to provide some kind of systematic way to bringing rural skills up to standards so that rural people can command the same kind of high wage level as the people that they import into the villages to do those construction projects. I know lots of Native people are making it with Davis Bacon wages because of their high level of skills, and I think that we can improve on our performance in that regard. But I'd prefer to keep the Little Davis Bacon requirements in Alaska. It creates some difficulties, but I think abolishing the concept, even in a selective way, would hurt more than it would help.

TUNDRA TIMES: What about improving the state's record on Native employment within state government?

COWPER: Well, I think it's absolutely essential. I think state government ought to reflect, as closely as possible, the makeup of the population as a whole. I don't believe in quotas, but I think the government ought to serve as an example to all other employers in the state. There has been a problem in the past, because so many capable Native people in the state were otherwise committed, either through the regional or village corporations, or in local government, or in the various non-profit areas or in private business. But I don't think that excuses the fact that very few Native people show up in high levels of government. That's kind of a roundabout way of saying that I support affirmative action, but that's the case, I do.

TUNDRA TIMES: The Alaska State Legislature passed a bill this session which authorizes the Department of Health and Social Services to enter into agreements with tribal organizations — in effect, to recognize their authority — in Indian Child Welfare cases. If the bill becomes law, and you become the next governor, would you push hard to see that this was implemented, and that there was close cooperation between DHSS and tribal organizations?

COWPER: Sure.

TUNDRA TIMES: What would your administration do to combat drug and



Steve Cowper meets a resident of Kasigluk near Bethel during a swing through several rural villages earlier this month.

photo by David Ramseur

alcohol abuse in the Bush?

COWPER: Well, I think it's necessary to make sure that we have a delivery system for those services that continues in the rural areas where it's most critical to do something about the increase in the problems along those lines.

Frankly, the way I look at it, maybe we ought to try to do what we can to educate young people about the real dangers of alcohol and drug abuse before the temptation arises... There was recently a film by Lenny Kammerling made on alcohol abuse in the villages, that to me was an impressive display of the kind of educational tool that might be used...

Maybe we might think more along those lines. I don't know; I know it's a terrible problem, and the state has a continuing obligation to try to do something about it. The non-profits in the past, I think, have done a pretty good job in exploring various ways of trying to treat drug and alcohol problems. They've exchanged information, and the best methods have surfaced, and other methods have been discarded.

But maybe that's just what the problem is: the emphasis has been on treatment and not on prevention. That would be something that I'd like to explore.

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TUNDRA TIMES: Statistics show that Native people in Alaska go to jail for longer terms and for more minor offenses than do whites convicted of the same crimes. What would your administration do to in order to reform those statistics?

COWPER: I remember some years back, the Judicial Council did a study of the sentencing practices, and the report revealed a wide disparity between the sentences given to Native people and the sentences given to non-Native people. When attention was drawn to that fact, then immediately the situation began to improve. Nobody — particularly no judge — wants to think of himself or herself as a racist. When attention is drawn to these disparities, the experience has been that the judges make some effort to rectify that. Maybe if there is still that kind of disparity, it ought to be publicized. Beyond that, I



Several residents of Nunapitchuk near Bethel meet with Steve Cowper during the Democratic candidate's recent visit to several tundra villages.

photo by David Ramseur

think that you can bring this to the attention of the trial court judges, through the Judicial Council, through the Alaska Supreme Court, which of course does not countenance any such difference based on racial lines. Then if it doesn't work, maybe we can think in terms of appointing judges, when the present judges retire, who are very sensitive to this kind of thing.

TUNDRA TIMES: Would you instruct your Commissioner of Health and Social Services to actively seek ways to turn over the responsibility for administration of social services and health programs to local or regional non-profit — that is Native — health providers?

COWPER: Yeah, we've had a good experience with that. I think the group has to have demonstrated sufficient expertise along those lines, but there are several groups around the state which have been doing contract work, in terms of health and social services, for years and years. And I think they've done a good job. So I would certainly continue that practice. I'm specifically thinking of Maniilaq; Tanana Chiefs has done some of it; and I think maybe AVCP

has gotten some contracts along those lines. I don't have any problem with that; some people do, but I don't.

TUNDRA TIMES: In the 1991 legislation now before the U.S. Congress, there is a provision that would allow undeveloped Native lands to remain tax-exempt. Do you support such a provision?

COWPER: Yes.

TUNDRA TIMES: What do you think about Mo Udall's bill which seeks to classify the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge as wilderness?

COWPER: I was there in Washington as a lobbyist for the state of Alaska when the ANILCA act was adopted. There was a fierce dispute at the time between the oil industry and the advocates of oil development on the Arctic National Wildlife Range, and people who wanted basically to leave it alone.

Now, experience has shown that you can drill on a wildlife range without disturbing the wildlife; we do it on the Kenai Moose Range, and it's been done throughout the country, without interfering with the main purpose of the wildlife refuge, which is, of course, to protect the wildlife.

Now, the questions at the end of 1980, when ANILCA was passed, were a) Where is the caribou calving ground? And what effect would drilling have on the calving? and, b) Is there any oil under the range anyhow? Because obviously, if there were exploratory activities there, and it indicated that the place was not very promising in terms of oil production, and that would be the end of the argument.

Now, personally, I think that we ought to find out what's under there. I don't think we ought to disturb the calving grounds, or the bird life, either, for that matter, but I'm opposed to Mr. Udall's amendment which classifies the entire coastal area as wilderness. I don't think he's got enough information to make that distinction. I'd like to find out what kind of reserves there are in the wildlife refuge. I'm not going to get many votes from some environmental organizations for that view, but I think it's right.

TUNDRA TIMES: Would you increase state support for programs designed to train village residents as teachers, so that they might return to teach in their own communities and cultures?

COWPER: I would support any kind of program which would encourage people from the villages to go and become qualified as teachers and then go back to the villages and teach there. It's a way of getting at the problem that John Sackett brought up in a speech some time ago, which had to do with the relevance of learning within the rural schools. In a way, the school system reflects the whole problem that I see within the villages; and that is that changes have taken place so quickly in such a short period of time, that a lot of people are beginning to wonder what's going to happen to their culture.

I know that Alfred Starr, who died recently in Nenana, once told me that when he was a child, nobody he knew had seen a white man. And in his lifetime, his world and culture had just changed beyond recognition. I believe that we have to be really thoughtful about the way we treat that, with a view towards letting Native cultures maintain themselves.

Probably, the school system is one of the most important areas where we can do that, and that means to me that teachers from the community or teachers from the same culture that the village represents are very important in terms of solving these kinds of problems.