

Knowles hopes to justify Native confidence, support

By Bill Hess

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When candidate Tony Knowles sought the office of mayor of the Municipality of Anchorage, a group of Native Alaskans threw a well attended and profitable fund raising dinner for him. When mayor-elect Tony Knowles addressed the Alaska Federation of Natives in the Anchorage Westward Hilton last December he was greeted with enthusiastic applause.

Now, Mayor Tony Knowles sits at a long table inside his spacious, red carpeted office where large windows provide an eighth floor view of the city which he now leads. He speaks of what he hopes to do to justify the confidence a good many Native Alaskans have apparently placed in him.

There is the matter of Native employment within the city government. Knowles does not know exactly how many Native Alaskans are numbered among the approximately 3,000 employees, but readily admits that the figure "is

very low. Far below the goal that I'm going to set. I don't have an exact percentage figure, but I believe it should be reflective of the Native population as it exists within the community."

Mayor Knowles describes Anchorage as the largest Native village in the state, with an Indian, Eskimo and Aleut population of between 15 and 17 thousand and close to 10 percent of the municipality.

"I believe members of the Native community should be brought in at all levels of city government, from the eighth floor of the Hill Building on down," Knowles claims. He has made three governmental appointments so far. One, that of special assistant and legislative office with an annual salary of \$45,000, went to Native attorney Patrick Anderson.

That appointment has generated some controversy around town, as Knowles fired the former legislative lobbyist who had just signed a contract with former Mayor George Sul-
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Knowles recognizes Native contribution, concerns in Anchorage

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livan. Yet Knowles expresses confidence in his new special assistant, and vows that it marks the beginning of greater Native involvement within municipality government.

Knowles also expresses an intent to work closely with Native corporations and business interests within Anchorage. "Just by taking a roll call of the Native investments in Anchorage," Knowles notes the giant hotels, shopping areas and other Native projects, "You come up with a very impressive list in terms of an economic base. Any people with such an economic base wield considerable influence; as property taxpayers and employers, they're at the forefront of growth."

Knowles notes that in the past, Native influence within Anchorage government has not been as strong as the potential indicated by such economic investments. This, he says, is because the Natives have either not put their positions forward forcefully enough, or perhaps simply because they were not listened to when they did speak.

During the AFN convention, Knowles told Natives that they had the power to make government listen to them. "I guarantee that as far as this office is concerned," he says now, "there will be a listening ear. In fact, I can include the as-



Tony Knowles

sembly in this. The assembly is anxious to be involved in the listening process."

Knowles looks forward to dealing with land issues, in which Natives and their corporations will have vital roles. "I intend to promote private development, he says, "and programs for the public good."

During his years on the assembly, Knowles notes that he has both supported and battled against different development projects. He expects this to extend to Native issues. "There will be some issues that we agree on, some we battle on. The only promise I'll make is that I'll fight fair. I'll be honest and upfront."

One potential project which has aroused Knowles' interest as being "corporate with a conscience," is an elderly housing plan being formulated by Cook

Inlet Region, Incorporated, and Cook Inlet Native Association. Housing units would be developed in east Anchorage, primarily for Native elderly, and would be equipped with facilities for potlatches and other traditional activities.

The Native community in Anchorage is in need of the same services as the rest of the population. One commodity in short supply in Anchorage is housing. The vacancy rate in rental units for families is down to one percent. This creates substantial hardships for many families moving into the city from rural Alaska in search of employment, as well as for those already here who find resultant high rent rates extremely difficult to pay.

"It is a complex situation," Knowles claims. "Anchorage has long had a boom/bust cycle. A couple of years ago, we were on a bust, and the vacancy rate was up to thirty and forty percent. Now we are against the wall! The money market is tilted toward homeowner units rather than rental."

Knowles says his administration intends to keep emergency funds available. "The bottom line is that no one will freeze to death," he stresses. The municipality has requested 50 and 100 thousand dollar grants from the state legislature which would be used to

help organizations like the Salvation Army provide emergency housing at low group rates in motels and hotels.

Knowles will also be calling for owners of rental units to use restraint, and not take advantage of the tight market to gouge their customers. Admittedly, Knowles has few options to enforce such restraint.

As a possible long term solution, Knowles refers to a tax-free bond plan which will help finance rental units should it become reality. Twenty percent of the units will be set aside as low income rentals. There could be up to \$50 million in bonds financed. Knowles hopes 1,000 new rental units will be constructed within the year.

Fourth Avenue, which has developed an unpleasant reputation with its bars, alcohol, drugs, panhandling and other associated problems, also concerns the new mayor. "It is important that people understand that Fourth Avenue is a complex situation," Knowles explains. "It is more than three bars, a gas station, and a hotel. There are good things on Fourth Avenue. Good contacts; things of good social value.

"On the other hand, there is tragedy. Crimes are often perpetrated on many coming in from rural Alaska to visit. There is alcoholism, and drug

abuse.

"We need to address Fourth Avenue with sensitivity, to continue the good parts and the positive social values which take place where people of many different cultural backgrounds get together. I believe these can take place in a non-alcohol, drug inflicted environment.

"One thing we can do is break up the concentration of bars in the area, where they are gathered together one, two, three, four! This attracts a physical presence which is undesirable. It also gives an unfortunate, stereotyped vision of rural Alaskans, when the fact of the matter is, there is much more alcoholism elsewhere in Anchorage!"

Knowles speaks in favor of an urban social and recreation center where rural visitors coming into Anchorage for hospital or other appointments can gather together. "They need a place to locate, to meet friends and relatives."