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Tundra Times

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BIA plan could mean more money for tribes

by **Jim Benedetto**
Tundra Times Editor

Plans for reorganizing the Alaska Area Office of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) have been approved in concept by Assistant Secretary Ross Swimmer. The plan would scale down the size of the bureau's operation in the state, with savings in the form of drastically reduced overhead costs going directly to the tribes.

"Our operating environment up here has changed significantly over the past five or six years," said Jake Lestenkof, Area Director for the BIA and architect of the reorganization plan. Lestenkof attributes those changes to the Indian Self-Determination Act (Public Law 92-638), which gave non-profit organizations and tribes the ability to contract directly for services formerly provided by the BIA.

Because of these changes, Lestenkof says that a good part of the monies and resources that come to the bureau and are passed down to the agencies are now contracted out to tribal organizations. This puts the BIA in more of a "contract management" role, according to Lestenkof.

"It's kind of forced us to take a look at our organization and say, 'Hey, we need something that works better!'"

What Lestenkof and others with the BIA are convinced will work better, after much study and review, is a centrally located service center where

tribal contractors who provide direct services would have the ability to come to that "one-stop" center for any administrative or contractual needs.

Lestenkof summed up his plan for the BIA's Alaska Area Office for the *Tundra Times*: "In a nutshell, (the plan involves) the creation of a service center; a role change for agencies where they become small agency outposts that will interface with tribal organizations; and an area office that will be smaller and concentrate more on policy development and budget management."

Unfortunately, the plan's main asset — reduced overhead — is also its primary liability; the prospect of scaling down the size and presence of the BIA is an uncomfortable one for some who presently work for the bureau, many of whom are Native Americans.

Presently, the BIA has approximately 245 employees, and operates with a budget of around \$35 million. The proposed plan would maintain the current budget level for the future, while reducing staff by about one-third. Whatever savings accrue as a result of the plan's implementation would be turned over to tribal programs administered by tribal organizations, thus eliminating an unnecessary level of administration and increasing the net amount of funds available for contracting.

Hurdles that the proposed plan has yet to face are impact-bargaining agreements to be worked out between

the BIA and its employees who ultimately may face reassignment, and the reaction of Alaska Natives to the plan.

Lestenkof says the bureau would like to minimize the impact that the plan will have on employees by stretching its implementation over several years. And he is hopeful that when the proposed changes are presented to Alaska Natives this summer, that it will get a warm response. The details of how and when the plan will be presented to Alaska Native organizations has yet to be decided.

"The whole thing is designed to improve services to Alaska Natives...

and to allow Alaska Native organizations to do things for themselves, as opposed to a federal workforce," Lestenkof said.

And what's to prevent budget-cutters at the federal level from trimming those surplus 'savings' from a smaller Area Office once the plan is adopted?

"What the budgeteers at the national level have to realize is that the need for bucks up here in Alaska really hasn't diminished," regardless of what the state of Alaska and Native corporations may be doing. Says Lestenkof, "we're only shifting who's doing the work."



SUBSISTENCE BILL SIGNED — Gov. Sheffield poses with notable legislators just after he signed HB 288 into law. The new law preserves the subsistence preference for rural Alaskans. photo by Jim Benedetto

Shee Atika/Sealaska land exchange bill introduced



Roger Snippen, President & CEO, Shee Atika, Inc.; Robert LeResche, Consultant, Sealaska Corporation; Gary Eddy, Chairman, Shee Atika, Inc.; Robert W. Loescher, Senior Vice President Resource Management, Sealaska Corp.

JUNEAU — Congressman Don Young of Alaska joined by Congressman Morris Udall and Congressman John Seiberling have introduced the Admiralty Island Land Exchange Act of 1986. It is a bill that is of significant importance to the Southeastern community and could bring to an end a chapter of many years of litigation over the use and ownership of some 23-thousand acres of private land inholdings in the Admiralty Island Wilderness Monument. This Act provides for the exchange of this critical piece of real estate for lands that are non-controversial to the public interest.

Byron I. Mallott, Chief Executive Officer at Sealaska Corporation, said, "this bill, if passed by Congress, will complete a major piece of unfinished business in the implementation of Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act

(ANCSA) in Southeastern Alaska. Shee Atika, Inc. and the Native people of Sitka will finally be able to fully participate in the ANCSA settlement and after long years of debilitating litigation and acrimony, the various interests concerned with the future of Admiralty Island will have achieved a reasonable and responsible accord."

Shee Atika, Inc. is the owner of a 23,073-acre private inholding within the Admiralty Island Wilderness Monument and has had its title and rights to develop it reaffirmed by congress. Nonetheless, past and continuing litigation has effectively precluded the Corporation from free development and access to the land and has driven the company to severe financial hardship.

After more than a decade of fighting

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