

VILLAGES AND AIR-DEPENDENCE

Air Freight and Air Passenger Service Vital Lifeline to Villages

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Air-dependence is a term used to describe countless communities in Alaska which are totally dependent on air transportation. Air freight and air passenger service are a vital lifeline and often the ONLY lifeline to many remote villages.

Recent rulings of the Civil Aeronautics Board on the Unalakleet-Nome-Kotzebue routes are being challenged by Alaska Airlines, several of the major cities involved, including Nome and Fairbanks, and possibly by several of the Native regional corporations.

The CAB ruled last week to suspend Alaska Airlines service and grant Wien Consolidated sole rights to that portion of the routes.

Alaska Airlines, the largest single employer in the city of Nome (85 seasonal employees) and owning four facilities valued at nearly a million dollars has petitioned the court to remand last week's decision and to update the record to the traffic patterns that exist today.

Much of the data used as evidence in the case was gathered in hearings going back as much as three years, said an Alaska Airline spokesman.

At that time, Native regional

corporations were not in existence, and many communities were unaware of the impact the hearings would have on their economy.

Robert Giersdorf, senior vice-president of Alaska Airlines, said in Fairbanks that "It is essential that Native associations participate."

"I don't think," said Giersdorf said, "that some of the communities are going to be heard. Nome and Kotzebue need help in being heard. This community (Fairbanks) and all communities should get very involved in the bush hearings."

NANA and Bering Straits Native Association have both petitioned for permission to intervene in the case. At present, only original parties to the action are permitted to give testimony and present evidence.

Giersdorf did not ask the Fairbanks parties to support Alaska Airlines specifically but

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to "support the continuation of competitive service to these communities."

Giersdorf outlined his company's policy of tour promotion on a national basis with offices in New York to Tokyo. Of the 10,000 tourists on the Nome-Kotzebue route last year he cited that all but 1200 were through their airline.

"This business," he claims, "was produced through our brochures, our posters, our promotions. If there's a decline in the number of people who go to the Arctic," said Giersdorf, "it would be a disaster for those communities."

Wien Consolidated stated that it was "not their intention to lose service between Fairbanks, Nome-Kotzebue or Anchorage-Nome-Kotzebue.

"Wien Consolidated is very pleased with the new awards. We anticipate possibly even greater frequency of service."

Giersdorf reminded his listeners that the Alaska Airlines has historically "pressed for competitive service. We have pushed for bush service."

Noting that the stated intent of the CAB is to eliminate subsidy to air service in Alaska, Giersdorf said, "It doesn't make

sense that they should be allowed to withdraw their support in Alaska. Someone's going to have to pay for it. It's going to be the shipper and the user. With the exception of one or two ships per year, the Arctic is TOTALLY dependent on air transportation."

In southeast Alaska he pointed to the marine subsidies as a comparison.

The second phase of the hearings will revolve solely around bush routes. An important phase will be the handling of sub-contracts to air-taxi operators.

Field hearings similar to those held in June and July of 1970 will be scheduled for many communities. Curiously, some of the communities who participated previously no longer exist, while others were not sufficiently informed or funded at that time to have become parties to the suit.

Decisions that will affect air traffic patterns in Alaska for years to come will be decided. It is likely that other Native regional corporations will step forward and be heard in a matter which vitally affects their villages.