

Taking modern technology seriously

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JUNEAU — The recent legislative battle over subsistence has accentuated a growing sense of distance between urban and rural Alaska.

Many Alaskans seem to be developing an "us-versus-them" attitude when it comes to the differences between rural and urban Alaska.

The traditional Alaskan eagerness to work together to solve problems appears to be retreating behind locked cabin doors.

Part of the problem is the lack of meaningful communication between urban and rural Alaska. We simply must improve the level of communication between our communities if we want to build a stronger sense of Alaska unity.

The technological advances of years should play a major role in increasing communications between our people.

It wasn't too long ago that reliable phone connections to many parts of Alaska simply did not exist. Now FAX machines, computer modems, teleconference equipment and other communication systems can provide people in the most remote corners of the state with instantaneous access to the world.

When I ran a business consulting company from the tiny Yukon River village of Ruby, I was able to use computer technology to provide top-quality service to clients throughout the state and country.

Despite the tremendous promise that technology has offered to rural Alaska, very little improvement in day-to-day rural life has been delivered. In the early days of the 1980s it was very popular in state government to talk about how technology could eliminate the remoteness and problems of rural Alaska.

The personal computer in the log cabin village office was seen as the solution to all municipal management problems. Instructional television would be the salvation for rural education. Telecommunications would solve the rural health problems.

Today, we see unprecedented municipal management problems as dusty computers sit unused in the corners of small city offices. The plug was pulled on the LearnAlaska T.V. network because it was irrelevant to rural Alaskans, and not much new has

happened in rural health technology in the past decade.

What happened?

It's one thing to talk about technological advances and a completely different thing to put them to use. Human nature, a fear of something new, often prevents us from taking full advantage of these tools.

The key to their effectiveness is making everyday use of them. This is not as easy as it sounds, as I learned in the Department of Community and Regional Affairs.

One of the first assignments that I gave to my staff shortly after starting work nearly four years ago was that management information would be communicated between our eight statewide offices primarily through a computerized electronic mail system and FAX machines.

Most of the equipment was present to do this, but it wasn't being used. Many people felt the old system of communication based on telephones and the Post Office was just fine.

People in the department were in-

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itially dragged into a new technological era kicking and screaming, but within a few months the strongest proponents of the old system were complaining that their office did not have enough computer terminals.

Today, hundreds of notes, messages, documents and forms are transmitted daily between Anchorage, Juneau, Fairbanks and field offices without ever lifting the phone, or licking a stamp.

Today, staff cannot imagine how we were able to get along without our present technology.

The key to our transition was that we treated technology seriously, not as a curious "extra" or as a fun toy.

One Monday morning, after a two-week training period, I had managers start running the department by electronic mail. If the staff did not check

their electronic mail messages and failed to perform a task, they were held fully accountable.

Why not adopt this same approach to the adoption of technology? Why not begin to send official correspondence about state grants by electronic mail only? Why not require official financial reports to be submitted via modem? Why not require all high school students to adopt an electronic pen pal in a distant Alaskan community?

I believe that people will not do something new unless they truly have to. I also believe that Alaska cannot afford to continue to ignore communications technology.

The huge promise that technology holds out for Alaska won't be realized unless we treat technology seriously and make the advantages of its use clear and the disadvantages of its neglect just as clear.

In light of the threats to Alaskan unity that face today, we simply cannot afford to squander the opportunity that technology affords us.