

# Many sewer, water facilities dilapidated

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for the Tundra Times

Many of the needed improvements in the villages of rural Alaska are common throughout the region. An array of dilapidating structures and unworkable systems exist in most communities.

## OPINION Inupiat Paitot People's Heritage

Given the surge in rural population during the last decade, increasingly villages are becoming unsafe due to the proximity of hazardous substances and unsanitary conditions that facilitate the spread of infectious sicknesses.

Still, other equally serious problems are due to natural occurrences, exacerbated in the harsh environment.

Many communities are without or lack adequate waste disposal and piped water systems, which continues to contribute to sickness as a result of untreated water and unsanitary sewage and garbage disposal.

There is a need for the installation of reliable water and sewer systems adapted to the extreme winter temperatures and changes of soil conditions in the permafrost environment.

It is important that systems be installed that can be maintained by village residents and a concurrent educational program be developed to train system operators and service recipients about the importance of closely monitoring the system to keep it operational.

In addition, the cost of maintaining the system should be considered, whether the system is affordable or if subsidization is necessary. Such workable systems that prevent the spread of disease cannot be sacrificed for lack of funding or needed operational assistance.

Garbage dumps in most areas pose

a health risk and environmental devastation because these compounds are generally located in areas near water, where seepage occurs because the dump is not lined nor is the area around the water protected from garbage influx. Rather, garbage is discarded in partially fenced areas and burned only during winter months, due to the threat of initiating a tundra fire in other, drier times of the year.

Certain methods of fencing are unworkable in permafrost soils because a firm foundation upon which to construct the fencing material is needed. Inserting posts directly into the ground, a method frequently used isn't the best answer. Portions or all of the fence blow over when the soils soften in the spring and summer, allowing garbage to flow out over the tundra and into the rivers. This contaminates drinking water and vital food sources.

In some areas gravel is used to filter trash and soak up moisture during the rainy season. But often, gravel is not readily available and expensive to obtain, so garbage rots creating a hospitable breeding ground for a multitude of insects.

Gravel is particularly helpful in maintaining roads and when unavailable can preclude access to the dump because of inaccessible areas of the route.

Another area of concern that presents a potential danger to village residents is unsafe tank farms containing diesel and heating fuel as well as gasoline. Frequently, an array of huge tanks are located in the center of town near the village clinic and school.

Unlined tanks leaking hazardous substances are particularly volatile and risk contaminating the water supply of the village. Further, some tank farms are not enclosed in a secure area, allowing curious children access and illegal siphoning to occur.

There is a need for the imposition of standards on above-ground storage tanks to ensure that residents are pro-



ected and these substances are used safely.

Rapid river bank and coastal erosion is prevalent in many areas that are subjected to harsh storms and natural re-routing of rivers. This is an area in serious need of attention to save houses from toppling down embankments and pipelines that receive fuel from barges.

The Army Corps of Engineers has been very helpful in providing technical assistance on the appropriate methods of mitigation along with cost estimates of repair. Still, state money is needed to help villages keep their land intact.

Over the past two decades, the federal and state governments have invested millions of dollars in rural Alaska. Although important improvements have been made, many projects constructed were done so in a manner unsuitable to the environment and so have not fared well in Arctic conditions.

Now we are faced with trying to correct the damage and poor judgment of previous years. But in

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acknowledging that grim reality it is important to understand that rural Alaskans have an active involvement in efforts to improve life in their own communities.

Nonprofit Native regional corporations, village and borough governments and other Native institutions have been organized to provide technical assistance and other resources.

State government is a valuable partner in the effort to correct some of the problems, providing technical and financial assistance. In the past, government programs have brought needed services and improvements, which they have provided at a high cost: a loss of control over community that frequently aggravates the very problems the funding was intended to eliminate.

Government and rural Alaskans need to forge a new partnership where each contributes to seeking out innovative solutions to correcting these problems and improving the quality of life in communities of the Arctic.