

Bethel Association Opposes Governor

The Yukon-Kuskokwim Native Association last week voiced opposition to Gov. Walter J. Hickel's proposal to create a separate cabinet-level Department of Native Affairs within the State Government.

The reservations were expressed in a telegram to Gov. Hickey from Tony Lewis, Pres of the Association, following a meeting of village representatives in Bethel on December 18th.

Lewis said he felt Gov. Hickel was sincere in his proposal, but said they feared that any such department might now or in the future be-

come a political tool.

The wire to Hickel read: "It was the consensus of association members that such a department would result in self-segregation from, and discrimination against non-native members of our State, and thus may be contrary to the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

"We sincerely ask you to re-examine your proposal and also take our thoughts into consideration. We appreciate your interest in the problems of our people, but believe that a separate department is inappropriate," the telegram said.

Gov. Opposed . . .

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Lewis said he first began to form opposition to the idea of a separate department when Hickel advanced the proposal before the conference of chiefs in Anchorage in October.

Lewis is President of the state's largest native association, representing 42 villages and 14,000 persons in the Bethel area.

In his reply to Lewis, Hickel indicated that the proposal for a Department of Native Affairs would have many public hearings before the legislature.

The governor says he has a "sincere desire to solve the problems of the Arctic Northland," and he is "sincerely most interested in any thoughts the Kuskokwim Native Association may have."

Hickel said he thought the word discrimination had been abused, and indicated that, "we want to solve the problems for all people not just one class or group."

In Fairbanks, Flore Lekanof, Chairman of the Federation of Alaska Native Associations, expressed concern over the criticism of the new department.

Lekanof said he felt the question of changing the title might be well considered and pointed out the department might not be able to be exclusively native from a technical standpoint as the state may desire to place administration of federally funded programs dealing mainly with

the native areas under this department.

"I think what we are all talking about," Lekanof stated, "is a department that will address principally the problems of the state 99% occupied by our native citizens."

Lekanof pointed out such programs as Rural Development, VISTA, NYC, rural electrification, might be placed under and coordinated by this department.

The statewide leader of the federation of associations said criticism is helpful and should be well taken, but indicated that he hoped the associations around the state would address the question of creating the department from a constructive viewpoint.

"The governor expressed his desire to give special emphasis to native problems,"

Lekanof said, "just as labor or business gets special consideration at various times. I think we should shape this interest with ideas of how such a department might best be designed to help the poverty stricken," he said.

"I feel it is the responsibility of the federal government and the state government to take on the problems of the rural people or any destitute group," Lekanof said.

He said the proposal of the Native Affairs Department would probably be taken up by the forthcoming meeting of the Federation of Native Associations in January.