

Editorial



Breaking the 'gridlock'

The title of a gathering sponsored last week by the Resource Development Council for Alaska was "Energy Gridlock: The Politics of the Environment."

While we could discuss the merits of specific development projects and how environmentalists could hold them up, it's more instructive to focus on what could cause the "gridlock" of the future.

We suggest that the people developers really ought to be considering are Alaska Natives.

Getting local people involved in any development could be the key to actually getting it off the ground. People who have lived in an area for literally centuries must not be ignored.

These are the people who could very effectively block plans for a project. In fact, we might just call it "developer gridlock" if developers insist on plowing ahead, little caring who is affected.

What sorts of things can local people be consulted about? The answers are obvious. Two of the most important are:

- What effect will the development have on subsistence resources?
- Can local people be hired?

Alaska Natives are going to be watching what happens in Alaska in the coming months and years very carefully. They have just taken an incredible kick in the teeth on subsistence, and they're not about to give up anything further.

Subsistence is the most important issue to the Alaska Native community. Subsistence is life itself.

Alaska Natives, in fact, have been so concerned about the way they have been treated on subsistence that they have resorted to actually closing their lands to non-shareholders for hunting. They're serious about these closures, and such action could be extended.

Alaska Native people could be forced to re-think who their allies are, depending on what takes place in this state in the coming years.

In the future, we may see the battle shift to the U.S. Congress, and it must be remembered that how a state treats its aboriginal people matters a lot to many of the people in Congress.

What this means is if developers are going to break any gridlock, they're going to do it by forming an alliance with Alaska Natives.

We're talking about a group with a lot of needs, but also it's a group with a lot of resources — 44 million acres of land and billions of dollars in investments.

Many Alaskans — even experts — said the Red Dog Mine couldn't be developed. Many people said Native hire could never hit 60 percent at the mine. Many said a road could never be built through a national monument. And many said local people would never be able to cooperate so fully — and have so much input — on development.

These same people are now taking a look at Red Dog, and they're finding out that Alaska can treat its indigenous people fairly and still come out ahead.