

AFN to investigate suit to keep Mt. Edgecumbe

By LINDA LORD-JENKINS
Tundra Times Editor

The possibility of filing a lawsuit against the federal government to keep Mt. Edgecumbe boarding school open will be investigated by the Alaska Federation of Natives attorneys.

The AFN full board of directors met last week in Anchorage and decided to research the advantages and disadvantages of filing suit to keep the school open after

hearing a report from AFN assistant to the AFN President, Sylvia Carlsson.

Carlsson told the board that she had talked to Bureau of Indian Affairs regional director Jake Lestenkof who told her that a last ditch effort to place funding for the school back into the federal budget had failed.

Under the current plan, the school which houses more

than 400 full-time students and provides classes for many others, will close at the end of this school year.

Lestenkof said this week that the cost of maintaining the huge facility was a prime factor in the closing but he also said that the federal government policy on the BIA-operated school was that as soon as the state had the systems available to provide edu-

cation to students in the Bush, the BIA schools would be phased out.

That phase-out begins in the spring when Mt. Edgecumbe and 22 BIA-operated day schools scattered throughout the state, will close.

Carlsson said the problem with placing some of the Mt. Edgecumbe students in other schools is not the education to be provided as much as it

is the reasons that many of the students are in Mt. Edgecumbe at all. She said that many of the students enrolled at Edgecumbe are there for social reasons ranging from a poor home environment to having no family to care for them.

She said the state Department of Education, which has supported closing Mt. Edgecumbe, (Continued on Page Five)



Spud Williams of the Tanana Chiefs Conference told the AFN Board that the cost of educating a student at Mt. Edgecumbe was "unreal".



John Hope of the Tlingit Haida Central Council warned the AFN board that if Mt. Edgecumbe school is lost, soon everything will be taken from Alaska Natives.

AFN board discusses possibility of suit to keep Edgumbe open

(Continued from Page One)
cumbe, is working on development of alternatives but "there will be problems to place many of the students . . . The alternative probably will be the boarding home program which many found unacceptable in the past."

In addition, according to one report on the effects of the closure of Edgumbe, the state is unwilling to place all the Edgumbe students in a boarding home.

Carlsson also told the board that an estimated \$75 million

would have to be spent by the state if it is to assume control of the 37 BIA day schools around the state because most of them are in substandard condition. That money would be spent in upgrading the facilities.

"Spud" Williams of the Tanana Chiefs Conference said the board should consider using the REAA school systems instead of the BIA schools because the REAA's "give total local control with total state funding."

Williams pointed out that

the "costs of running Mt. Edgumbe are unreal . . . you're talking about a planned \$4,000 to \$5,000 per head to educate in the state system per student as opposed to \$20,000 a head at Edgumbe."

The issue of state assumption of the educational responsibilities is further complicated by the Alaska constitution which mandates that the state must provide an education for all citizens up to the eighth grade or until they are 16 years old. Williams pointed out that that may exclude the high school students at Edgumbe.

Carlsson said "we should hold the state's feet to the fire to make sure they live up to their educational responsibilities."

One suggestion was made that, in addition to the possibility of litigation, the AFN should send a group of Edgumbe students to talk to state representatives in Washington D.C. to explain their needs and concerns about Edgumbe personally.

Ahtna's Douglas McArthur said that he was swayed last year when a Barrow girl who was president of the Mt. Edgumbe student body made a personal appeal to keep the school open.

The subject of changing the minds of Alaska Congressional delegation also was discussed and John Hope, president of the Tlingit Haida Central Council, said that if Edgumbe is phased out because of a budget cut, other vital services will be stopped. "We're giving up the government's commitment to maintain their trust responsibility in the name of budget frugality. It is almost impossible to restore those services. It goes much deeper than Mt. Edgumbe. This is a dissolution of the relationship with the federal government without us having anything to say about it."

"They are going to take away general assistance. Then the school. We will have nothing, absolutely nothing in five years."

Hope told the group that

Sen. Ted Stevens is a key to keeping the school. Stevens has gone on the record in his conviction that the school should be closed and Hope said that if he can be re-convinced that the school should be kept open, it might happen.

"When he changed his mind on general assistance, it got back in the budget."

The BIA general assistance program was due to be entirely cut in Alaska this year but at the last minute Stevens was able to save the program for six months. However, the final Department of Interior budget hasn't been approved and the fund still may be cut out.

The litigation committee was instructed to research the possible good and bad effects of a law suit to keep the school open.

Don Mitchell, AFN attorney, pointed out that such a fight should be carefully chosen and the bad consequences should be weighed.

The litigation group will report to the board in December.