

Sanitation issue needs fresh, flexible thinking

Through the efforts of Sen. Ted Stevens, the federal Office of Technology Assessment has joined the fight to raise the standard of sanitation in water supply and sewage disposal in rural Alaskan villages to levels befitting any American community. We feel this is a positive step, as the OTA has been charged to look at potential new angles for dealing with the problem. A crisis this grave, this complex and large in scope needs fresh thinking.

A meeting held in Anchorage last week to brief OTA staffers on sanitation issues was at once encouraging and disheartening. Encouraging because staff members spent more time listening than talking, asked thoughtful questions, sought to clarify but not control the discussion and its ultimate outcome.

The briefing also had a down side. Invited participants were widely representative of the viewpoints and perspectives that have been tussling with rural sanitation for a long time. Several Native health advocates were there, reiterating long-standing concerns that there needs to be more local involvement and ingenuity in designing sanitation solutions. And there were a number of government agencies not quite hearing them.

An interesting case in point was the suggestion that one way to address the problem is to allow and enable people to move apart from existing communities. In essence, this would disperse people and reduce and dilute demand for sewer and water services. Because such an approach would more closely resemble traditional lifestyles, it offers a degree of cultural viability lacking in other options developed in Juneau or Washington, D.C.

Unfortunately, engineers, politicians and grant administrators have trouble hearing ideas like this. This is not to belittle their Herculean efforts; they simply weren't taught to think in such terms. But whose problem is this, anyway?

The concept of community dispersal needs some further development before its implications, costs and benefits can be clearly understood. It might be just the thing for some community, or it might not fit any. No doubt there are a hundred other fresh ideas with merit just waiting some interested, objective scrutiny.

We hope the work of the Office of Technology Assessment will be the beginning of such scrutiny.