

Microwave Phone System Links Towns

A telephone system similar to that proposed for 142 villages in rural Alaska by RCA Alaska Communications has been completed in Southeast Alaska, RCA Alascom officials announced last week.

Providing a microwave link between Sitka and Juneau, the system was constructed by RCA Alascom under contract by the Alaska Communications System.

Most of the Southeastern villages affected have previously been served only by radio communications such as those available through ham operators.

RCA has proposed to bring similar changes to other rural Alaskan villages when it takes over the Alaska Communications System, now operated by the Air Force.

Sale of the system for \$28.4 million to RCA has been approved by President Nixon but is still subject to approval and certification by the Alaska Public Service Commission and the Federal Communications Commission.

The state commission began hearings on the transfer June 29 to decide whether to grant RCA basic certification to operate the current ACS system and to determine what improvements are to be allowed in the system.

Addressing the commission July 13, Gov. Keith Miller said that the public interest will best be served by early certification of RCA Alaska Communications as a long lines carrier.

But, he urged that the certification be limited at this time to the authorization of services heretofore furnished by the Alaska Communications System, primarily a long distance carrier. RCA has sought authorization to provide additional services such as direct distance dialing and eventually live TV.

Miller indicated that he believed "adequate service and rate improvements" must come before technical innovation.

Relief from the current long distance communications bottlenecks, he said, should be fur-

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nished, wherever possible, by existing routes.

Concerning RCA's proposal to install a very high frequency or microwave telephone system in 142 villages, Miller said that the carrier should carefully re-

view each village on a case by case basis with state officials and then be authorized to proceed rather than receiving approval for the entire package.

He suggested that some of the villages might better be served by satellite technology than by VHF radio and reiterated the State's support for an ultra modern telecommunications for all of Alaska, including the villages.

RCA has said that with its proposal it was responding to a state-imposed requirement to accomplish the system on a priority basis.

This priority basis in rural Alaska calls first for a telephone system to be expanded later to include other communication services such as live television.

The company has held that, in view of the questionable revenue return, it is not practical at the present time to consider installing the same communications system for a village of 25 that the city of Anchorage might have.

Satellite communications coupled with terrestrial microwave could eventually be the answer, RCA Alascom has said, but the technology necessary for a complete domestic satellite program is some time away.

At the hearing, Miller contended that the State should keep its options open until his office releases its comprehensive communications plan for Alaska in the near future.

At any rate, RCA Alascom has brought to a halt its preparations to install the bush system in nearly half of the 142 villages by the end of this year and further action will depend on when and what type of certification the company receives. Originally, RCA had planned to take over the ACS system July 1.

And following certification by the State, it will be at least three months before the Federal Communications Commission can grant certification.