

Board asks state to operate Mt. Edgecumbe

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Tundra Times

Less than six months away from the start of the 1983-84 school year, the Alaska State Board of Education has recommended to the governor that the state pay for the continued operation of Mt. Edgecumbe High School as a residential boarding school.

However, there seems to be no certainty that the governor and legislature will follow this resolution or that, if followed, there will be time enough to implement a pro-

gram for the coming school year.

"From the standpoint of the nongraduating students and staff who are there now, they are most certainly faced with some ambiguity in terms of whether they will be at the school next year," Ernie Polley, State Director of Educational Design and Delivery, concluded Friday. "Our most critical factor is time," Polley said.

Mt. Edgecumbe, on Japonski Island near Sitka, Alaska, is presently a boarding school

for 193 Alaskan Native students. It is operated by the U.S. Department of Interior's Juneau Area Office of the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs' appropriation for the present year funds the school only through June. Four boarding schools in Oklahoma and Nevada have already shut down.

A resolution for the state to provide "a comprehensive educational program for grades nine through twelve available

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Board of Education recommendations on Mt. Edgecumbe High School

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to all Alaskan students whose academic and personal futures require such a program," was passed unanimously by the seven voting members of the new State Board of Education last Wednesday after two days of public testimony.

Shortly after the Mt. Edgecumbe resolution was adopted, the State Board of Education orally presented its recommendation to the governor.

On Thursday, Governor Sheffield told delegates to RurAL CAP's Village Participation Conference in Juneau that he was still concerned about village educational programs.

"Do we make village programs better? Do we make alternative programs where we have only two teachers and less than 14 students?" the governor asked.

"We don't have an education policy in this state," the governor said, noting that this would be a matter for the new state board.

Sheffield said he would be talking to the Alaska Congressional delegation about whether, if the state made the commitment, it could get the federal government to continue to keep Mt. Edgecumbe open

for two more years while the state gets funds for upgrade.

The state has been discussing an appropriation of federal funds for improving the Mt. Edgecumbe facilities in advance of a state takeover this summer.

The Board of Education's resolution for the continued operation of Mt. Edgecumbe specifies four conditions:

- a comprehensive program for grades 9 through 12 available to all Alaskan students whose academic and personal future(s) require such a program.

- a recognizable commitment to academic excellence.

- making every effort to retain the current exceptionally-experienced staff.

- a one-time commitment from the federal government to rehabilitate, upgrade, or replace the existing facility with structures which meet relevant operational and instructional standards.

Polley said on Friday that "what needs to happen next is a decision by the governor

with legislative concurrence."

If the decision is to proceed, he said, there is a large amount of work on planning the governance and administration of the school, as well as the program offering to a student body yet to be determined.

Asked why the State Board of Education wasn't more specific in its recommendation on Mt. Edgecumbe, Polley said that they had given the governor the decision requested and that they had not had time to make further recommendations.

The State Board of Education's resolution requests the governor and the State Legislature to act promptly to appropriate funds for the operation of Mt. Edgecumbe in 1983-84 and the years thereafter.

The Board rejected the notion of keeping Mt. Edgecumbe open for a specific period of time pending further study, as was suggested during the public testimony.

The major facilities considered necessary to operate the Edgecumbe boarding school are in 19 separate buildings constructed by the U.S. Navy in 1942 as part of an air base used during World War II.

The school opened Feb. 22, 1947, and graduated its first class in 1948, according to the testimony of principal Gil Truitt. Approximately 3,900 Alaska Natives have graduated from Mt. Edgecumbe.

According to Dr. James Elliott, Special Assistant to the Commissioner of Education, program and maintenance costs for the operation of the facilities for next year would total \$7,257,325.

Of the total, only \$1.9 million is for teaching, boarding home, and administrative staff. Another \$1.5 million is for supplies. The balance of \$3.8 million is what is necessary to operate and maintain the facilities as they are.

Although costs are based on this year's capacity of approximately 225 students, costs would not increase significantly for a student body of 350, which is the dormitory capacity, Elliott said. The figures are also exclusive of the approximately \$4,500 per student for transportation and boarding costs each year, he said.

Costs of initially upgrading these facilities to meet state codes range from a "conservative" estimate of \$18 million by the BIA office in Juneau to

\$26.5 million by the state DOT, assuming the "worst case" for design and construction.

The preferred alternative of DOT is to spend up to \$48 million for new facilities construction — exclusive of land, equipment, maintenance, operations, programs, personnel costs, and demolition of the old facility — in order to cut annual maintenance and operation costs from over \$18.00 a square foot to \$9.00 a square foot.

In his testimony Tuesday, Elliott argued that the BIA's plan for upgrade was no longer feasible for this year's construction season. "There's no time to plan and replace this summer," he said.

Elliott said on Friday that the Department of Education does not have a figure on the minimum necessary to upgrade the facilities for state life/health/safety code requirements in order for the school to be open for the next school year.

A number of immediate improvements, such as sprinklers in classrooms, would need to be made this summer in order to keep the school open without interruption while major

repairs or replacements are undertaken, Elliott said.

The state fire marshal's report stemming from a survey of the school in mid-March of this year has five pages of conditions which do not meet the requirements of the Alaska Fire Safety Code.

The state sanitarian's report of a visit conducted at the same time in accordance with state eating and drinking establishment regulations contains a two-page narrative of deficiencies.

In a written statement to the State Board of Education, Alaska U.S. Senator Frank Murkowski said that he was proud to be counted among Mt. Edgecumbe's strongest supporters. "It would be truly unfortunate if an alternative high school program like Mt. Edgecumbe is lost to young Alaskans," he said.

"The federal government is fully committed to implementing its policy that the State of Alaska should be responsible for educating all Alaskans, Native and non-Native alike. The BIA will stop funding Mt. Edgecumbe school, and if the people of Alaska wish to operate an educational facility there, action must be taken

now or the opportunity — not to mention the land and buildings — may be lost," he said.

State Board of Education Chair Ernestine Griffin reported that while in Washington, D.C. recently, she and State Commissioner of Education Marshall Lind had met individually with members of Alaska's Congressional delegation. She said that each legislator individually said that they would seek one-shot funding for upgrade of the Edgecumbe facilities.

Emil Kowalczyk, BIA area administrator for education, also reported that the Mt. Edgecumbe teaching and administrative staff were being laid off as of June 10 and the facilities management staff as of July 2. These people are being notified of this presently, he said.

"Whether I like it or not, I've got to close the doors," Kowalczyk said.

Ernie Polley was observed as a key figure in helping the Board through its decision-making process. As the author of the resolution, introduced by board member and Alaska Federation of Natives Chairman Sam Kito, Polley said later that he felt fortunate to

have captured the sense of the Board that closely.

The Board also considered the issue of student eligibility, Polley said. Under the state Constitution, the state would have to discontinue Native preference in admitting students but it could establish priorities for admission.

Under present admittance policies, according to Mt. Edgecumbe Superintendent Leroy Demmert, students must be a quarter or more Native blood, have graduated from the ninth grade (this year there was no freshman class), and meet one of the following criteria: be from a community where there is no local high school or live a walking distance of more than 1½ miles from high school; if a local high school is available have a parent or guardian request specifically that the student attend Mt. Edgecumbe; or be a referral from a social agency.

The Board rejected options including limiting enrollments to students from communities of less than a certain size and considering an annual option for Rural Education Attendance Area (REAA) students.

Polley said the Board decided later that he felt fortunate to

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Fate of Mt. Edgecumbe HS is still up in the air

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ed the residential program should be open to all students "with a sense of who needed it."

Mary Schaeffer, the only state board member to attend and to graduate from Mt. Edgecumbe, is the mother of students attending school in the Northwest Arctic REAA School District. Arguing that the state needed to give REAA schools a chance, Schaeffer had said that she was only in favor of keeping Edgecumbe open as a state vocation-technical high school because of the facilities and equipment already there.

Reached at his office in the state House of Representatives on Friday, Bethel democrat Tony Vaska, whose district contributes many of the students now at Edgecumbe, said he had the closure of eight BIA elementary schools and an overcrowded junior high school in Bethel to worry about first.

He also said that the Lower Kuskokwim REAA School District which he represents was experiencing a financial drain because of competition with Mt. Edgecumbe.

Vaska said that if people are looking for alternatives, then regional district high schools should be looked at. He sug-

gested that Sitka would be a suitable location for a regional high school as would be Dillingham, Bethel, Nome, Kotzebue and Galena.

"I don't think anyone has looked closely enough at who Mt. Edgecumbe students will be now that it will be opened up to the whole state," he said.

"What's the plan for Edgecumbe? They don't have one," he commented.

Bob Greene, executive director of the Association of Alaska School Boards, said on Friday that there was no question that there should be viable options for high school students, especially a boarding home type of option. His organization remained opposed to state funding for Mt. Edgecumbe, however.

Green said the question was whether Mt. Edgecumbe was the most cost-effective way of providing this service. There was a further question, he said, of how a program at Mt. Edgecumbe would be coordinated with the existing school districts.

"I want to look at it from a philosophical point of view," he said. "In a new era, is money going to be available for Edgecumbe or do we need to find a more cost

effective way to do the same thing and coordinate it with the existing school districts?" he asked.

If a boarding home program is deemed desirable, he said that there are other options and other suitable facilities around the state.

Greene was also concerned about how the Board of Education's decision was changing the state mandate to school districts. In the sixties the state operated boarding programs in schools across the state but in the early seventies it began shutting these down. In the late seventies it built high schools in villages and now the pendulum appeared to be swinging back to the sixties.

"The state needs to take a definitive direction and stay there," Greene said. "Give one of these approaches sufficient time to make it work."

Greene said that since the Hootch consent decree in 1976 the state had built hundreds of high schools in rural Alaska and now had made its decision on Mt. Edgecumbe without consultation with the existing school districts.

Six communities opted out and three have subsequently closed high school programs, he said.

Over \$123 million of completed construction work at state expense is attributable to the Hootch decree and another \$8.8 million of work is under way or planned at three

sites, said Lee Clune, an administrator for the department of education. He said these figures were just compiled for a report which will be presented to the Court by May 1, 1983.

Clune said 77 new community high school complexes have been built at site expense as a result of the decree. He said that existing elementary school structures were added to or modified in 24 other communities, 15 of these without special construction grants.

What happens next with respect to the continuation of Mt. Edgecumbe depends on the governor and the State Legislature.