

•Editorial

# View Bering Straits in larger context

It was hard writing the Bering Straits story. Not because the story has tragic overtones, which it does. Not because Bering Straits is a member of the statewide Native community, and no matter how divided that community may be at any given time, what hurts one member hurts the others, which is true.

It was hard to write that Bering Straits Native Corporation has been taken to bankruptcy court because we fear that court action may be viewed as a symbol of Native corporate problems all out of proportion to reality by Natives and non-Natives alike.

To Native people, in and out of the region, it may provide a justification for apathy, an increased feeling that the destinies of the Native corporations, and hence the Native people themselves, are no longer in their hands. Non-Natives in economic and political circles may feel the time has come to push for greater control of Native resources or restrict Native self-determination, still somewhat unguarded in its infancy.

We would like to offer some thoughts that might allay the fears of Native shareholders and dash the hopes of those who see the Bering Straits case as a showcase of ineptness that will somehow lead to the disbursement of Native-owned resources into public hands.

There is no inherent embarrassment in being taken to bankruptcy court. What it means in this case is that a creditor is impatient and seeking to protect his interests. The creditor is under no obligation to take into account the fact that Bering Straits has spent the better part of a year cleaning corporate house, that new management is trying hard to pay off the debt of many errors it inherited without completely losing sight of planning for a better future.

Although the Bering Straits story may rightly be seen as a living symbol of some of the flaws in the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act itself, those not in tune with the various phases of implementing that act should not conclude that other corporations will soon follow Bering Straits into court. Many decisions that those corporations have made, many investments, many staff appointments and other business judgments have been good. Bering Straits has made several investments that are doing very well.

Onlookers may also see fit to find fault with Bering Straits shareholders, who seemed to have realized so late in the day that a change in management was necessary. They might suggest that if shareholders had put their foot down a year or two earlier, this dreary situation might not have caught up with the corporation so quickly, giving the new administration time to try a few of the options left open to it.

This suggestion is uninformed. Those of you who read this paper who live in the city and have a college education and are not married to an attorney, pick up the land claims act sometime and see if you can really understand it. Get an annual report from any corporation, not just a Native corporation, and see if you can really tell what the status of that corporation is. We will lay tremendous odds that you can't.

Furthermore, it is difficult for outsiders to comprehend the tremendous problems in communications between rural regional centers and more remote villages. If you've ever waited a week for a special delivery letter to come to Fairbanks from Anchorage, or tried to call Juneau from Anchorage and heard your echo after each word while you were trying to hear your parties response, you can imagine how the difficulties multiply in the bush.

These difficulties, combined with volatile transportation schedules and preoccupation with seasonal subsistence activities have placed extraordinary burdens on Native corporations trying to break into a fast-moving, highly competitive economy.

All of this is by way of saying that we advise caution to anyone who would see more meaning in the bankruptcy than is actually there. We would suggest it is another disheartening chapter in the land claims implementation story. But the story is far from finished.

It may sound too simple, but Bering Straits cannot be knocked out for good. Despite poor judgment by early management, Bering Straits has too many problems common to other Native corporations to be written off as a bad apple; it has obligations to too many shareholders to be allowed to fold because those problems became unmanageable.

It was not the intention of Congress when it passed the land claims act that novice shareholders lose control of their destinies simply because they were new to the game, nor that they would even assume full control over their lives and resources before the proper foundation had been laid. The intention of Congress, to provide a fair and just settlement of aboriginal Native claims, must be fulfilled. In large measure, Bering Straits is an indication of just how much needs to be done to make the settlement fair.

J.R.R.