

Villagers set their own agenda for the Village Participation Conference

by Vernita Cassidy
Rural Alaska Community Action Program

From Feb. 21 to 24, villagers from across Alaska gathered at Centennial Hall in Juneau for the 16th annual Village Participation Conference.

The "VPC," as it has come to be known, is sponsored by the Rural Alaska Community Action Program and supported by Community Services Block Grant funding by the Alaska Department of Community and Regional Affairs. Attending this year's VPC were participants from more than 60 villages, representing every region of the state.

The conference opened with the "Issues Forum," an exercise in talking and listening, designed by RurAL CAP to enable villagers to talk about problems unique to rural Alaska communities. Participants were encouraged to speak up about issues of current concern in their villages and regions. As they spoke, the various problems were recorded by staff. By the following morning, each participant had a full list of issues compiled into general categories.

In this way, people from the villages can set their own agenda for the VPC.

Community and Regional Affairs Commissioner David Hoffman and his wife Dee Olin Hoffman opened the Issues Forum with a call for a positive attitude in solving village problems. There followed almost four hours of discussion. Participants went one by one to a floor microphone, introduced themselves and then told others what issue they were worried about.

Topics ranged from the perennial — subsistence, alcohol and drug abuse, education — to the specific — the lack of runway lights in some villages, erosion of airstrips, the need for a new breakwater in Ouzinkie. RurAL CAP staff members stood at five separate easels, summarizing the issues which would form the foundation for the rest of the conference.

Over the next two days, the participants worked together in much smaller groups, six in all, to set priorities, discuss issues in more detail and exchange ideas for solution. In their discussion, they kept in mind the theme for the 1989 VPC: "Accountability: It Begins With You."

Seven villagers are elected at each conference to assist RurAL CAP staff in planning and preparing for the following year's meeting. For 1989, they included Chester Ballot of Kotzebue, who has chaired the VPC for the past five years; Walter Charley, a respected elder and Native leader from the Copper River area; Barbara Lewis of Yakutat; Mary Beth Solomon of Fort Yukon; Virginia Ward of Port Lions; Tim Sergie of Alakanuk; and Patrick Norman of Port Graham. Sam Gosuk of Togiak served as an alternate planner.

When the planners met for the first time last August, they set a framework in which participants could work together effectively. They chose which speakers would be invited and selected the theme for the 1989 VPC.

Before choosing the theme, they talked about their own villages and problems. After some time, they decided that in the current economic decline, it has become increasingly important for villagers to find local approaches to solving village problems. Every solution, they said, began with one person's decision to make a difference.

The working groups comprise about a dozen people, with representatives from various state and federal agencies invited to sit in as "resource people."

Rather than organizing the working groups into topical or geographical groups, the planners decided on random selection.

The consensus is that in "real" life, people cannot choose whom they will work with — and it is good training to learn to work with others, regardless of personalities or philosophies.

This makes for some strange "bedfellows" at the VPC. You will often see Athabascans working side by side with Aleuts, Tlingits or Eskimos. In many cases, lasting friendships are formed, and people find that they are able to work together long after the VPC is over.

This year's keynote speaker was Byron Mallott, chief executive officer for Sealaska Corp. in Juneau. He saw in "accountability" an opportunity for Native people to advance themselves as separate and distinct cultures within the larger Western society.

"We must make a connection with the present society in terms of the institutions that we must influence and change in order to advance our own interests, and we must make a connection with their children so that they know that the decision they make will be judged also in a standard of another time."

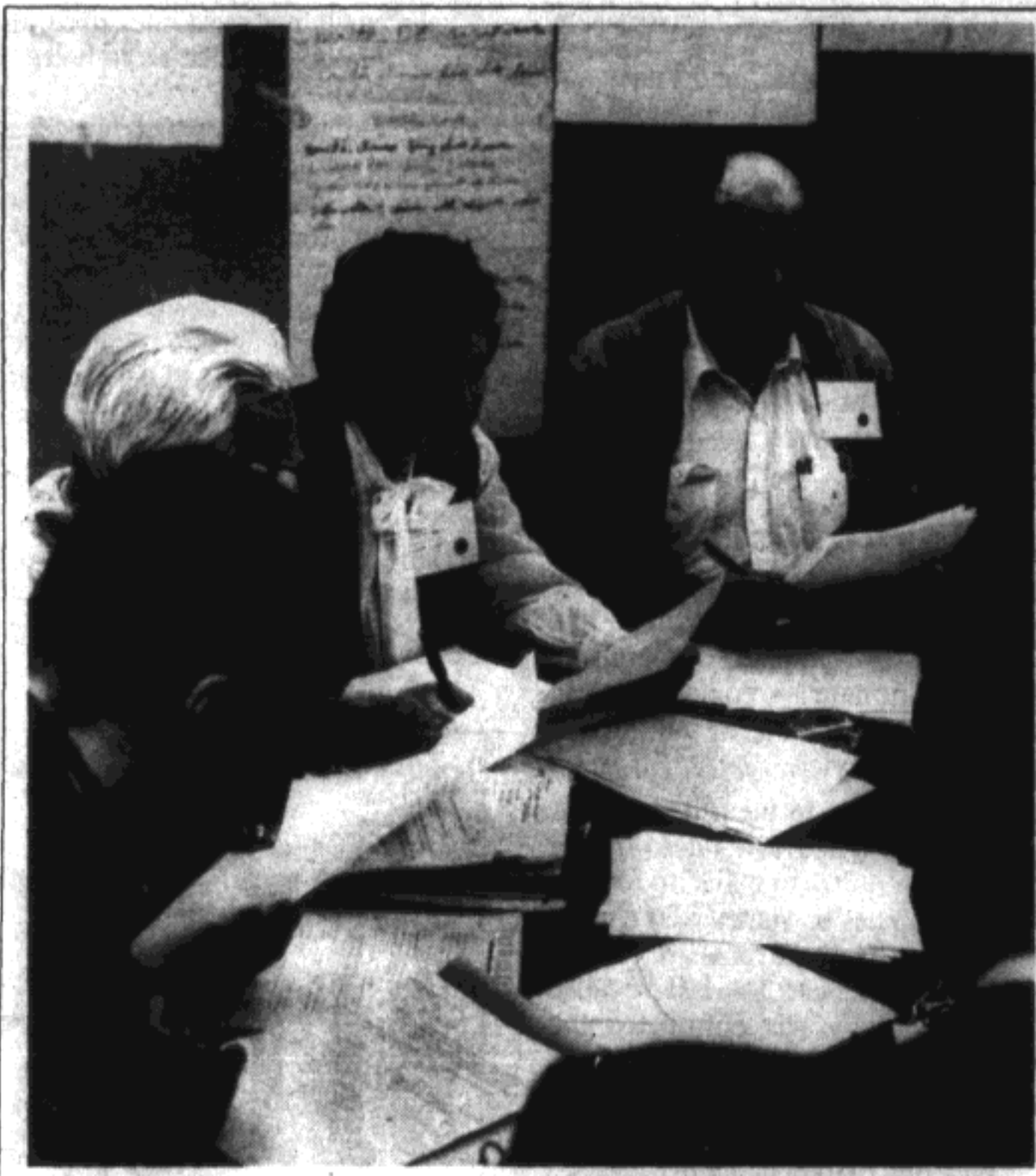
Other speakers include Janie Leask, who reported to the General Assembly during what has become a tradition: the Native food potluck dinner prepared by the Alaska Native Sisterhood, Juneau Chapter. Leask spoke of the report on the status of Alaska Natives issued just prior to the VPC.

She congratulated the planners for choosing accountability as the VPC theme, saying, "I am a very firm believer in both accountability and local control, because I feel that local control and accountability go together."

"If you want to assume the power to make the decision, then you must also assume the responsibility for the outcome of those decisions."

...for what better qualifications do you have as local people for making decisions, you who have to live with those decisions that are being made by state or federal policy makers?"

John Borbridge received a standing ovation after his speech, in which he



Each of the six VPC working groups selected a representative to sit on the Resolutions Committee which reviewed all conference resolutions.

Before choosing the theme, they talked about their own villages and problems. After some time, they decided that in the current economic decline, it has become increasingly important for villagers to find local approaches to solving village problems. Every solution, they said, began with one person's decision to make a difference.

'Because when we ask that same question in the context of a tribe, I want no member of my tribe to be left on the outside. No member. My obligation is to the future generations, to the generations yet to come.'

—John Borbridge

cited author Frank Cain: "Responsibility is the thing people dread most of all. Yet it is the one thing in the world that develops us, gives us manhood or womanhood fiber."

He said in determining accountability, it is necessary for each person to "start with myself."

"When the question is posed to us as shareholders in a corporation, 'Should we allow new shareholders into our corporation? If we do, it's going to reduce the worth of our stock...' And when I hear that I ask myself, 'What room am I in? Are we fellow Alaska Natives when we talk in this fashion?'"

"Because when we ask that same question in the context of a tribe, I want no member of my tribe to be left on the outside. No member. My obligation is to the future generations, to the generations yet to come."

For the first time in 16 years, an Alaska governor missed the opportunity

to formally address the General Assembly. However, it was for a good cause: Gov. Steve Cowper was called to Anchorage to meet President Bush's plane during the president's stopover en route to Japan.

Although Cowper could not make it to his scheduled morning VPC address, he returned to Juneau that evening to host a special reception for all conference participants at the Governor's Mansion.

Lt. Gov. Steve McAlpine substituted in formally addressing the General Assembly.

In a ringing speech, McAlpine stated that, "Rural Alaska is going to be here long after urban Alaska has suffered the woes of the budget and suffered the woes of modern urbanization."

"It's going to be here because of people who have attended this type of conference, people who made the personal commitment to themselves... to

insure that the cultures of Alaska survive, that the distinctions of the cultures throughout Alaska survive... that people... understand that we do have a challenge, and that challenge will be met."

Referring to the alcohol abuse problems in Bush Alaska, McAlpine said, "We can't pass laws that guarantee that people engage in sobriety... It's going to have to come from residents of the community who say, 'We don't want to see our lifestyle... our cultures destroyed.'"

Hannah Solomon, a much respected Athabaskan leader, spoke to the General Assembly on the importance of leadership from a personal level to public service.

"There always has to be a leader of some kind for people to learn from other people," she said.

She reminisced about her youth, raising 14 children, 12 of whom are

still living, and the Native traditions with which she grew into a leader herself. She emphasized the importance of children in Native societies and said, "No matter what nationality we are, we are all God's children. We love one another... Mahsi' Choo! (Thank you.)"

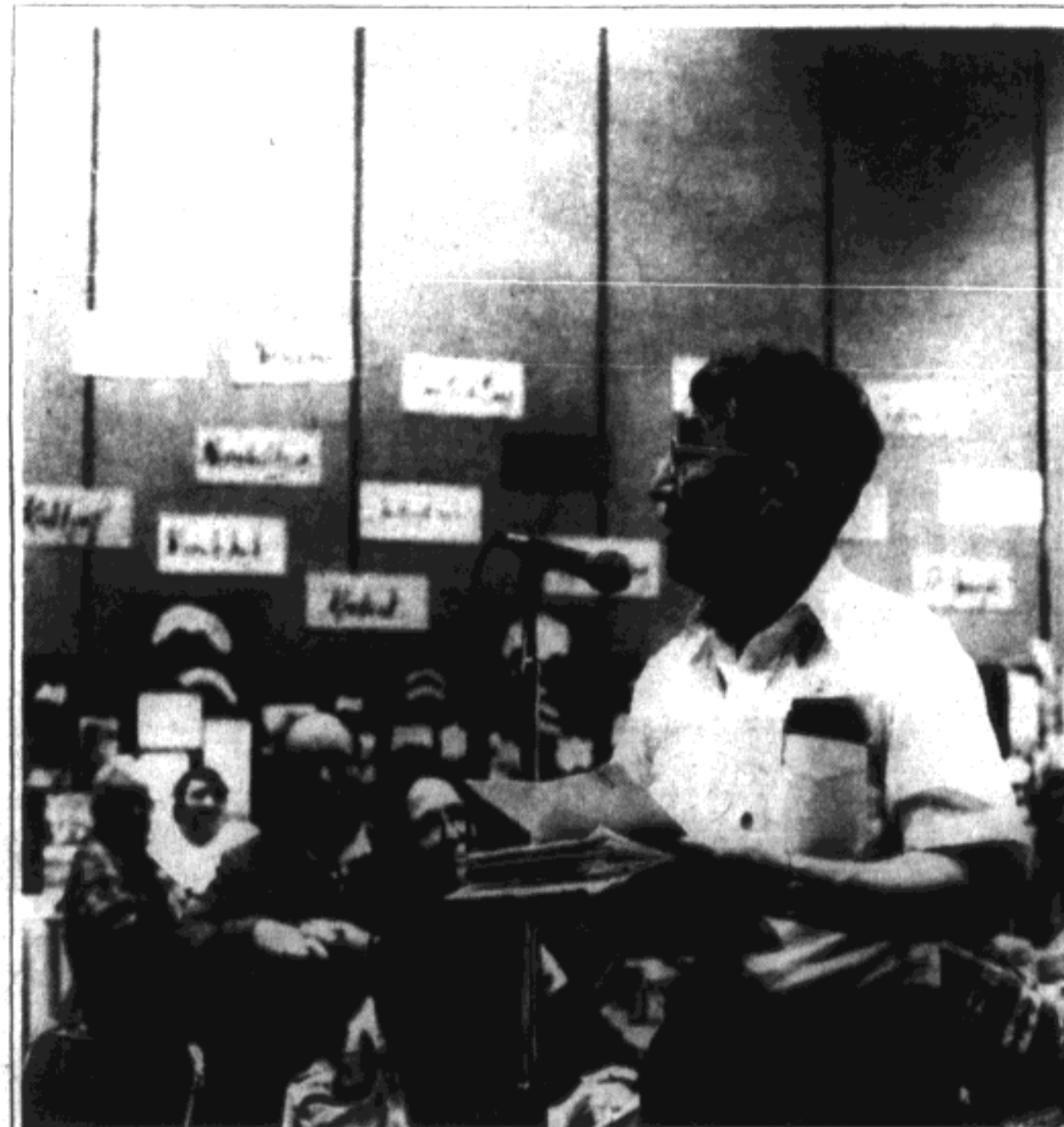
Rep. Kay Wallis of Fort Yukon spoke about the debilitating effect that fear can have on the ability of people to survive. She led the group in a rousing series of affirmations: "I like me! I am responsible! I feel terrific!"

Cumulatively, the speakers inspired the entire conference, challenged them and made them feel good about themselves and the work they were doing. Other highlights of the 1989 VPC included a special session facilitated by Doug Modig, director of RurAL CAP's Alcohol and Drug Abuse Prevention Program on "The Challenge of Sobriety," and a report to the General Assembly by members of the Bush Caucus.

The report from Alaska's rural legislators was organized with help from Sen. Al Adams' office and was attended by Sens. Adams, John Binkley and Fred Zharoff, as well as Reps. Lyman Hoffman, George Jacko and Eileen MacLean.



Representing the Ninilchik Tribal Council, VPC participant Grassim Oskolkoff addresses the General Assembly.



Paul Gregory of Nunam Kitlutsiti in Bethel discusses subsistence issues.

- | | | |
|---|---|--|
| <p>99-0A To Dedicate the 1989 Village Participation Conference to the Memory of Susan James</p> <p>99-01 In Support of the Gwich'in Nation: Regarding Developing in the Carving Grounds of the Porcupine Caribou Herd</p> <p>99-02 In Support of Regulatory Proposal #294</p> <p>99-03 In Support of the Proposed Budget of \$17.8 Million for the Power Cost Equalization Program</p> <p>99-04 In Support of Any Legislation that Mandates Education and Funding of Such Educational Programs on Alcohol and Drug Abuse and the Prevention of Suicide</p> <p>99-05 The Governor Should Create a Division under the Department of Health and Social Services for Rural Alaskan Affairs</p> <p>99-06 In Support of Harsher and Stronger Laws Against Drug Pushers</p> <p>99-07 Statewide Funding for a Core Village Group in Each Village to Request Training in Self-Help Effort — To Include Health, Mental, Alcohol, VPSO, VPO, But Not Limited to These Groups</p> <p>99-08 Establish a Joint Committee on Health and Social Issues in Rural Alaska</p> <p>99-09 In Support of Local Control of Subsistence</p> <p>99-10 Lack of Funds for Adequate Waste Disposal</p> | <p>99-11 Village Health Clinics Are in Need of Additional Funds</p> <p>99-12 In Support of the Pros/Cons of ANWR Being Publicized Using Factual Information</p> <p>99-13 In Support of Increased Revenue Sharing for Rural Communities</p> <p>99-14 Rural Economic Development</p> <p>99-15 In Support of Reinstatement of Access to Subsistence Activities by Communities in Southeast Recently Denied Such Access by the Board of Fisheries</p> <p>99-16 To Change Rural Service Funding Policy</p> <p>99-17 Limited Entry on Bottom Fishing</p> <p>99-18 In Support of the State of Alaska's Existing Salmon Fishery Regulation</p> <p>99-19 In Support of the Alutian Community Dock</p> <p>99-20 In Support of Health Services for Kodiak Area Native Association</p> <p>99-21 Tatitlek Runway Lights</p> <p>99-22 In Support of More Native Representation on Fish and Game</p> <p>99-23 Village Public Safety Officer Program Funding</p> <p>99-24 Elderly Housing</p> <p>99-25 A Resolution Reaffirming the Alaska Native People's Right to Use Sea Otters for Subsistence and Handicraft Purposes</p> <p>99-26 Subsistence Use of Migratory Birds</p> <p>99-27 Calling for the Reevaluation of</p> | <p>Teacher Tenure Standards</p> <p>99-28 Resolution for the Encouragement of Economic Development in Rural Alaska</p> <p>99-29 Reclamation of Mining Sites</p> <p>99-30 A Resolution Honoring Mr. Gordon Jackson, Past President of RurAL CAP</p> <p>99-31 Airport Lights in Levelock</p> <p>99-32 In Support of Senate Bill #175</p> <p>99-33 Certification of Alcoholism Counselors</p> <p>99-34 A Resolution Urging the Alaska Federation of Natives to Present Native Government Recognition as a Necessary Component in Addressing Psychosocial Problems in Alaska's Village Population</p> <p>99-35 Safe Water and Sewer Systems</p> <p>99-36 In Support of Head Start Funding</p> <p>99-37 1990 Census of Population and Housing</p> <p>99-38 Re-evaluate the Policy on HUD Housing Pertaining to Villages</p> <p>99-39 Economic Development in Rural Areas</p> <p>99-40 Emergency Repairs and Improvements of Deteriorating Conditions of Airstrips in Rural Alaska</p> <p>99-41 A Resolution Requesting RurAL CAP to Develop programs to Promote Family and Community Involvement in our Children's Education</p> <p>99-42 In Support of the Ouzinkie Break Water</p> |
|---|---|--|



Harding Ewan of Gakona Village Council meets Gov. Steve Cowper.

Photos by
David Hardenbergh