

Alaska Native Language Center News

Dr. James Kari of the ANLC staff recently sent the following as part of a letter to Dr. Morton Hoppenfeld, director of the Capitol Site Planning Commission.

Alaskans and Alaska's Legislators may soon be confronted with decisions for place names in the proposed state capitol area. I think a strong case can be made for the establishment of local Tanaina Athabaskan names. In discussion of plans for the city, reference has been made to a "Mount Bullion" for the 1,500-foot ridge marked "Bullion" on the USGS maps. This is not an official name and is only a cartographic marker. I would hope that this arbitrary survey label will not become established as an official place name. There is already a Bullion Mountain only 10 miles off Hatcher Pass Road. The Tanaina name for the ridge in the capitol area is Ts'ihelh (which could be anglicized and spelled Tseehuth). The name means "darkness" and refers to the wooded vegetation on this ridge in contrast to the clear slopes of Bald Mountain. The name Tseehuth should be established for the unnamed ridge, "Bullion," and perhaps for the city itself.

There are only about 25 speakers of Upper Inlet Tanaina today. Of these, only a very few elders, such as 81-year old Shem Pete of Nancy Lake, know the original names of places in the Willow area. Athabaskan place names are very colorful and are of historic importance. Their place names describe the land and its natural resources and never commemorate individuals. The recognition of the Native place names of the capitol area would be the most appropriate monument to the area's original inhabitants.