

Tribal judicial conference charts practical course

by Tundra Times staff

Although speakers focused on the politics of global indigenous unity took up a lot of microphone time at a recent tribal conference in Anchorage, there was still a lot of nuts-and-bolts work being done by more than 300 participants.

Organized by the Alaska Inter-Tribal Council, the conference provided a forum for tribal leaders to discuss some of the possible implications of a recent federal court ruling which held that Alaska Native tribes have jurisdiction over some Native-owned land. In particular, sessions provided a close-up look at several tribal courts which have been operating successfully in Alaska for some years.

Even as delegates met, the tribal sovereignty drama continued to unfold in court. The state filed its last-ditch appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court, asking justices to review a 9th Circuit Court ruling upholding tribal jurisdiction over Native-owned lands in and around villages. At the same time, the Alaska Federation of Natives, representing Native village and regional corporations, announced it was filing a brief in support of the so-called Indian Country ruling.

Much of the conference was devoted

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Joe Williams, representing the Organized Village of Saxman, talks to participants of the Alaska Inter-Tribal Council conference, "Scope of Indian Country," regarding repatriation issues in his region, and how Indian Country would help in keeping remains and artifacts close to home. Stevens Village Chief Randy Mayo waits his turn at the microphone. AITC hosted a 3-day conference in an effort to answer questions of tribes and tribal governments about Indian Country's tribal powers.

Photo by Anna M. Pickett

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to question-and-answer sessions with attorneys representing Native interests about just what the 9th Circuit ruling in the Venetie case meant for the exercise of tribal authority in their communities.

Perhaps one of the most significant

developments to emerge from the conference was the unmistakable sentiment expressed by many that it was time to reassure alarmed Alaskans that tribes can and will govern responsibly and fairly, that Native sovereignty is not about denying due process or overrunning prior

existing rights. Many asserted that this was not time nor the place for firebrand rhetoric, that no matter what legal or political provocation is created by state government, tribes must function in the real world where federal, state, and in some cases municipal, governments will have to share governing powers.

Will Mayo, president of Tanana Chiefs Conference Inc. of Fairbanks, told par-

ticipants that reassurance through responsible governance was the only sensible way to deal with the misinformation and scare tactics being used by state officials and legislators to block Native self-governance.

The conference, held April 1-3, also resulted in formation of the Alaska Tribal Judicial Conference to provide technical assistance to tribal courts.