

Convention may resolve unfinished business

The Alaska Federation of Natives is a large, complex organization. It has a small staff and a far-flung board comprised of diverse interests whose members are always on the go. Trying to maintain both a good defense and a good offense in the service of Native rights, AFN's platter is perpetually full. Some days are much longer than others.

Between conventions, AFN's strategy is managed by the board, which has essentially three moving parts. These are the sub-groups comprised of representatives of Native regional corporations, Native non-profit associations and villages. For the most part, these three groups function as a whole. Sometimes they address topics separately if they are most immediately related to the function of the groups's members outside their AFN role.

During the last 12-14 months, several issues have arisen which may spark discussion at this year's convention about how AFN policy is made and implemented between annual meetings:

- Just prior to last year's convention, the Human Resources and Legislative Committees of the AFN Board adopted a resolution calling on the Bureau of Indian Affairs to continue contracting with Native non-profit associations to provide federal programs, instead of contracting with tribes, while still finding ways to give tribes greater say over disposition of contracting funds. This provoked the ire of tribes, who feel some non-profit regional associations are trying to maintain their own power bases and bureaucracies using funds earmarked for tribes who want to break away from the non-profits and provide their own services. Tribes charged they were not consulted by AFN, and are not adequately represented on its board.

- After hours of debate, the AFN Board voted in June to support opening the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil development. This issue deeply divides several AFN members and their regions along cultural, political and economic lines. As such, it would have been more in character for AFN to set it aside in the interests of unity on broader issues.

- Some Native village corporations were upset when regional Native corporations persuaded Congress to prohibit sharing of certain revenues under Section 7(i) of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act which would have bolstered village economies. While the merits of the village position may be debated (and will continue to be debated in court), the refusal of Alaska's Congressional delegation to extend even the courtesy of a hearing was an alarming development. Although AFN officially took no sides, some village leaders feel AFN tacitly supported the regional measure by not sharing crucial information with village corporation members about the timing of Congressional action. It raised questions about the ability of the organization to effectively represent widely divergent perspectives, and whether the excellent access to Alaska's Congressional delegation enjoyed by some AFN members (regional corporations, non-profits) is essentially hindering access by smaller, less-well financed village corporations and tribes.

- AFN staff recently participated in meetings with national Indian organizations to strategize ways to save funding for Native American programs, much of it targeted for tribal programs. This, and the relatively low profile of the Alaska Inter-Tribal Council, the statewide tribal consortium, in recent months again raises questions about who

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is willing, able and authorized to represent Alaska tribes, only some of whom belong to AFN.

Resolving these issues is no simple matter, even under the best of circumstances. Adding to the challenge, current procedures provide that resolutions introduced at AFN annual meetings be rigorously screened ahead of time. Convention rules and timeframes are tight, making it very difficult to challenge or re-direct policy from the floor. This makes for a more efficient meeting, which has its advantages. It remains to be seen if it affords Alaska Natives an adequate forum in which to nurture the cohesion and consensus needed to deal effectively with common enemies, and to deal with unfinished organizational business.