

The evolving pattern of village Alaska

We're going to shoot from the hip, just a little.

The Federal-State Land Use Planning Commission recently sent us a list of publications that their staff has prepared on a wide variety of land policy issues in Alaska. One of these is entitled, "The Evolving Pattern of Village Alaska."

We confess that we have not read the entire report (although we have ordered it); what we did read was the excerpt quoted to explain what the report is about:

"...in spite of all the new and complex influences which have fallen upon Village Alaska since 1971 (date of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act), five well-established historical trends are likely to continue for a generation or more: (1) Net migration of Natives to the largest cities will accelerate for another decade...(2) Within Village Alaska, the larger places will continue to grow more than the smaller ones...(3) Village life will continue to become more urban in style and more closely interconnected with the major cities...(4) Village life will continue to become more dependent upon outside sources for cash income...(5) Those sources of earned cash income in the Villages will continue to be highly seasonal..."

We are certainly in no position to dispute the facts as they were so briefly presented in the news release. But we fear that all of these assertions, which imply a degradation or erosion of village life that we feel is simply not taking place, may be misunderstood or misused by those who, for one reason or another, wish to see the fabric of rural Alaska torn apart.

Of course, it is possible that the authors of the commission study, William Alonso and Edgar Rust of Berkeley Planning Associates, would find our observations most unscientific; we will let the readers judge for themselves the thoughts we present to support the contention that village Alaska is experiencing a dramatic growth in its ability to survive and direct its own future:

-The Carter Administration, through several spokesmen, has put itself behind the concept of strengthening local tribal governments through the continued exercise of its Native American trust responsibility and implementation of the policy of self-determination.

-Many Alaskan villages, either through their own initiative or with assistance from state agencies, have undertaken the formation of local municipal governments. These have taken the form of boroughs and first and second class cities that can contribute significantly to protecting local and traditional ways and values.

-In conjunction with local government initiatives, the formation of a score of regional school districts has brought the regulation of rural education where it belongs, in the hands of rural people whose children are receiving the education.

-The subject of education brings to mind many encounters, many conversations this writer has had with the village people who count the most--the youth of rural Alaska. Berkeley Planning Associates may have found a net migration of Native people from village to city, but they were not talking to the same people we rub elbows with.

Many, many young people, born and raised in the little towns, are going back, as soon as they finish school, as soon as they have acquired a few of the tools needed to lead the fight to preserve rural Alaska the way they like it--rural.