

AFN considers annual summit

by Steve Pilkington

Tundra Times reporter

Continuing problems in education and poor communication between the private sector and villages hamper rural business opportunities, according to state and business speakers at the first Alaska Native Economic Development Summit.

And unless village leaders pursue timber, mineral and tourism opportunities, unemployment and poor conditions will continue to plague villages, speakers said at the May 11-12 summit.

"There is the need for jobs, the need for the private sector to communicate better with rural Alaska," said David Heatwole, chairman of the board for the Alaska State Chamber of Commerce.

"The way you create new wealth in any economy is through private sector investment," Heatwole said. "But they have to feel welcome."

The summit, co-sponsored by the Community Enterprise Development Corp. and the Alaska Federation of Natives, gave some 250 rural Alaskans a chance to hear how to improve conditions in their villages.

The idea for the rural development summit came from a January AFN report, "Alaska Natives: A Call to Action" which detailed the social, professional and health shortcomings which are threatening villages. AFN's plan was to help village leaders recognize opportunities for develop-



'The way you create new wealth in any economy is through private sector investment.'

—David Heatwole

ment and how growth would affect their communities.

And according to Julie Kitka, vice president of AFN, the positive response has led AFN to consider an annual economic summit which would take place every fall along with AFN conventions.

William Demmert, commissioner for the Department of Education, said during the summit that devastating problems in Native education continue to multiply unemployment.

"The drop-out rate is 68 to 70 percent for Native students in rural areas. They do not read well," Demmert said.

But Demmert listed several of his ideas for solutions.

"I would like to see Native corporations employ high school students in internships during school," he said.

Demmert also said statewide Native

scholarship programs help.

Dr. George Kanahale, who has had many years of experience in developing Native business in Hawaii, said villages should depend on value-based economies, where members of the community decide what opportunities or resources to exploit.

Community involvement has been the key to success in Hawaiian business ventures, Kanahale said.

Gov. Steve Cowper, who spoke briefly on the last day of the summit, said improvements in villages must come from the people in the communities. But the state can help, he said.

"We realize that in many of your areas economic development is very difficult," Cowper said. "But any time you need assistance you can come to us," he said.