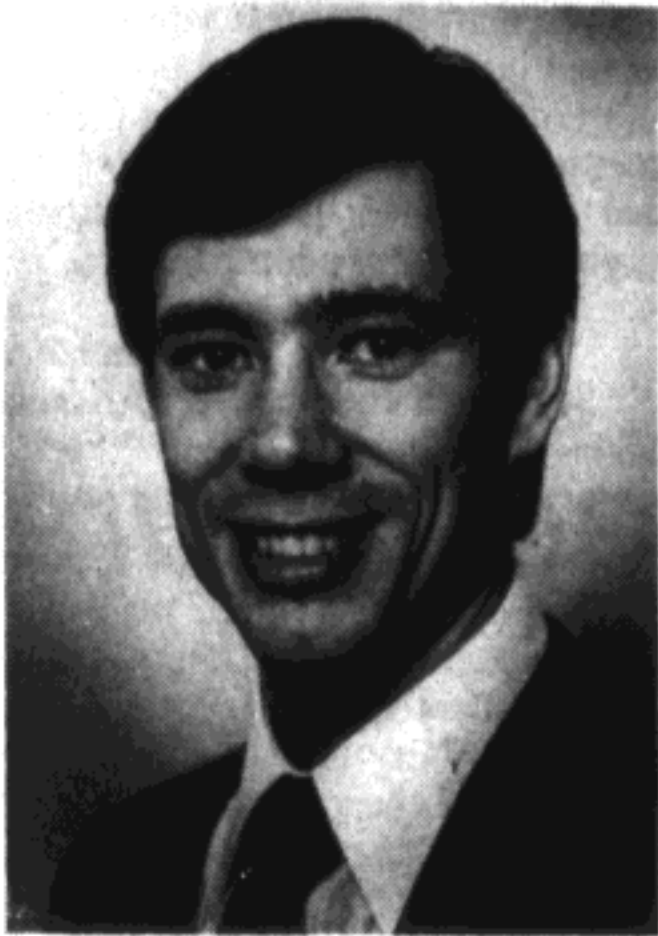


Rural Alaska languishes in Third World



news from the CAPITAL



by Sen. John Binkley
for the Tundra Times

A few weeks ago a newspaper story appeared in papers across the country, including Alaska, describing how a small rural town in Mississippi had just gotten water piped to the front porch of each house. But, according to the article, "there progress has stopped," with about 20 homes still without indoor plumbing.

News coverage of that community's tragic plight resulted in calls from groups and individuals all over the country offering donations of fixtures and money.

One offer even came from the Alaska State Housing Authority, which was preparing to surplus fixtures from substandard, low-income housing units that were being demolished.

Quite frankly, the news story amazed me. First, because so much national attention was focused on a community in the Lower 48 that still did not have running water and indoor plumbing. A story like that about an Alaska community wouldn't even make the back page.

What also amazed me was that an Alaska agency would be so generous with its offer when the need for those same items is so great within the state.

Alaska needs to continue its financial commitment to develop utility systems for all communities in the state. Since there are no shortcuts to good health, we can't afford not to.

As it turned out, for one reason or another, the Alaska Housing Authority's toilets, tubs and sinks can't be used for remote village projects within Alaska. But the situation does illustrate how most Americans take for granted the simple basics of a flush toilet and clean water running from a tap.

We've come a long way in the last decade, but many communities in rural Alaska still use the old "honey bucket" system, picking up buckets of human waste using a three-wheeler, then dumping it into a lagoon that's often no more than a pond out on the tundra. That waste often filters back

into nearby rivers and lakes, thus contaminating the local drinking water supply.

An adequate supply of safe water and a sanitary sewerage disposal system are key elements to healthy communities. Not having one or the other has contributed to serious health problems in the rural parts of our state.

In the last decade, more than a billion dollars has been spent in providing basic sanitation services to the nearly 200 villages within the state. About half of that has come from state oil money. Yet much more needs to be done.

Building these facilities in the Bush costs a lot. Extremely low winter temperatures, permafrost, marginal soil conditions in the wetland areas and often a lack of permanent fresh water source are all factors that contribute to the high costs.

Two of the most successful state programs have been the Village Safe Water Program and the Remote

The Remote Maintenance Worker Program provides state-funded maintenance service on a roving basis to 88 communities. The program ensures that water and sewer facilities in those communities are kept in good working order and don't break down for lack of proper maintenance.

After 20 years of effort, nearly every community in Alaska now has at least one source of clean drinking water. Seventy-six villages have piped water and sewage systems. In 62 communities a piped system didn't make economic or practical sense, and these are served by a community washeteria where sinks, showers, washing machines and toilets are available. Thirty other communities are served by a simple watering point with individual homes using hauled water.

However, waste disposal remains a major need in many communities. The lack of adequate sewage disposal systems is a major contributor to the health problems in rural Alaska.

Many diseases such as gastroenteritis, diarrhea, salmonella and infectious hepatitis are commonplace in rural Alaska.

Nearly half of these cases have been reported from villages in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta region. That's a frightening fact since the Y-K Delta was particularly hard hit during the last epidemic about 10 years ago, with one in 10 local residents contracting the disease. Public health officials estimate that as many as 35,000 Alaskans are at risk from this latest epidemic.

The unmet needs in Alaska provide a stark contrast to the needs of a small town in rural Mississippi. Alaska's three largest cities — Anchorage, Fairbanks and Juneau — have all had water and sewer facilities for more than a generation. But rural Alaska is still much like a developing Third World country in that regard.

Alaska needs to continue its financial commitment to develop utility systems for all communities in the state. Since there are no shortcuts to good health, we can't afford not to.

All Alaskans deserve clean drinking water and adequate sewage disposal. And certainly good health and freedom from disease demand the same.

Maintenance Worker Program, both administered by the Department of Environmental Conservation.

Under the Village Safe Water Program, DEC provides technical assistance to unincorporated communities and second class cities in designing projects that can be built and maintained with local labor and minimal investment. DEC works with the communities as *partners* to design systems they support and can afford.

This program has constructed more than 120 water and sewer facilities in 110 villages, benefitting more than 20,000 Alaska residents.