

New chairman sees benefit to region

By Linda Lord-Jenkins
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Seven years ago Charlie Johnson, who grew up in White Mountain, was working in the Lower 48 at an electronics company. But he decided to return to the home of his birth and last week was elected chairman of the most widely recognized and powerful of Alaska Native organizations — the Alaska Federation of Natives.

The 43-year-old Inupiat said he decided to seek the job because it would allow him to keep closer watch on state and national issues which affect his Bering Straits Region. Johnson is president of the Bering Straits Regional Corp., and is a former president of Kawerak, the Bering Straits regional non-profit corporation.

He is a cigar-smoking father of three who says he would rather be running dogs and hunting with his son than spending time away from his Nome home and family dealing with business. His wife Brenda runs a decorating business.

But he feels that taking on the added responsibilities of AFN will be beneficial to his

region's people.

Issues that are especially important to the Bering Straits region, says Johnson, are the submerged land issue in which Interior Secretary James Watt agreed to not deduct the acreage of lands under waterways from the total land entitlement due each region under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act.

Johnson said he is concerned that Interior Secretary designate William Clark will carry out the policy established by Watt on that matter.

But the first issue facing the new chairman will be the issue of 1991. The entire AFN convention session was devoted to 1991 and nine special resolutions were passed on 1991 issues.

Johnson will be working with the AFN staff to see those issues and position papers are followed closely.

Because of events, AFN is not working in a statewide vacuum in terms of other statewide Native organizations. United Tribes of Alaska held its first general assembly prior to the AFN convention and has been critical of the Federation as being unrepresentative of the villages in favor of the Re-

gional Corporations.

Johnson met with 30 or 40 UTA representatives after it was assured that he would be named chairman and said their meeting was a good one. "It was a very good meeting. They stated their support for AFN. We are not at odds with them and vice versa. We have the same goals and they are developing some of the same; they had a part in developing some of the (1991) resolutions."

Johnson said that criticism of AFN by UTA is not all that bad. "It's a healthy thing. It keeps us on our toes. But some of the critics don't understand the structures imposed on (the Regional Cor-

porations) by ANCSA. The corporations have a distinct responsibility.

"We have to manage the corporations to develop an economic base. There needs to be economic success in order to keep the land."

The Bering Straits Region will be expanding its board of directors to bring more comment from the villages, says Johnson. The board had had 15 members who were elected by all the shareholders. Under new election methods, a board member will be elected from each village and one from the

at-large shareholders.

"It will make the board bigger and more difficult to work but that is a small price to pay in order to get the involvement of the people that we need."

The coming year will see a renewed diligence in protecting the subsistence lifestyle, says Johnson. "We have to continue to work to protect that." And he said he will work to include more Native curriculum in the education system. "People from other countries can't believe that we don't have much Native curriculum in school."

