

# BLM: We're not trying to halt creation of park

by Holly F. Reimer

*Tundra Times reporter*

Despite reports that the Bureau of Land Management is attempting to halt the creation of the Alaska Native Heritage Park, BLM officials say they are working with park representatives to figure out how the park can proceed and follow federal requirements.

A strict set of rules was set up in a master plan when the Bicentennial Park was established in 1974. The

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Heritage Park will be within Bicentennial Park, so BLM is just making sure ANHP officials follow the rules in order to protect sensitive strips of land.

The proposed 40-acre park will be located near Tudor and Baxter Roads in South Anchorage. The land is controlled by the Municipality of Anchorage, but must be managed under federal standards.

Lydia Hays, executive director of the heritage park and head of the Cook Inlet Region Inc. Foundation, said a number of agencies must approve the park before it's a sure thing. She said some of the agencies have up to eight steps which must be followed before any type of approval is granted.

She said the reason why BLM is involved is to make sure the park's federal patent doesn't get violated, otherwise the land could revert back to the state or the federal government.

ANHP's original site plan needs to be reconsidered and OK'd by BLM and a number of other agencies before a lease agreement can be made, according to a BLM official.

Basically what ANHP officials have to do is redesign the park's layout in order to comply with regulations that state certain areas are sensitive within the planned park site and must be protected.

Dick Vernimen, BLM district manager in Anchorage, said the bureau has been working with ANHP officials since the beginning and will continue working with ANHP until everything is finalized.

"The Far North Bicentennial plan of 1974 states that the greenbelt must be protected. . . and in their proposal they had lakes, which are not recommended in the plan, and they had villages in the greenbelt. So we'll be working with them until it's finalized," Vernimen said.

Hays said since the park's focus is on the outdoors, park designers were unaware of any possible impacts to the park land and its greenbelt areas.

But, she said, the plan did have a few manmade lakes throughout the park.

So Hays and other ANHP officials went back and moved villages and lakes around to contour them to the park site, therefore making less of an impact and preserving the greenbelt.

Eklutna Inc. President Debbie Fullenwider said she met with an ANHP officials to discuss the prospects of having the two businesses join together and open a park together.

Fullenwider said Knakanen, which is a subsidiary of Eklutna Inc., was going to open its own Athabascan theme park in May anyway and joining all the cultures together in one park makes sense.

"I feel that this would be good for all of us. We're all Native," she said.

The Eklutna park site is located at mile 25 of the Glenn Highway.

"People could go there — to the park — and then on to Thunderbird Fall and Eklutna Lake," Fullenwider said.

Hays said the heritage park board did a site review of more than 30 parcels of land through a professional

company which specifically does feasibility studies, and she said the Tudor/Baxter location was a prime location for the heritage park.

She said it is in the best interest of the park to be able to operate on a year-round basis so the location meets their objectives.

The park location ties in perfectly with the already existing Bicentennial Park, and Hays said the heritage park can only enhance that.

"For instance our trail system can easily tie in with the existing ski trails and use of our parking facilities can be used by all park users," she said.

"It's for everyone."