Sitka gets houses

Destruction of 14 houses in Sitka's historic Indian village will signal fruition of six years of struggle to gain modern housing for the town's Native community. Nearly one-fifth of Sitka's population is Native (predominantly Tlingits of the Raven and Eagle clans).

Thirty-four modular homes will take the place of the structures to be torn down in the Katlian-Kogwanton area. After a June meeting in Sitka between officials of the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Juneau-based Tlingit-Haida Regional Housing Authority (T-HRHA) to work out problems which jeopardized final approval of the project, HUD announced it would release the $3 million necessary to fund construction.

"For a change we had so many people there we had them outnumbered," Johan Dybdahl, executive director of T-HRHA said of the meeting which was arranged by Congressman Don Young and U.S. Sen. Mike Gravel.

"They (HUD officials) tried to get involved in city-borough business, but they overstepped their bounds," Dybdahl added. The feds were concerned over the size of some of the lots and whether there would be adequate access, parking and fire protection.

"But we were able to deomonstrate those concerns could be rectified," Dybdahl said. He said the

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T-HRHA will try to "fast track" the bids to two or three firms in August and negotiate with one outfit as soon as possible. The new units could be occupied by next spring.

The project spawned in 1972 with a planning effort headed by residents of the area who formed the Ad Hoc Village Planning Council. Byt plans for the new neighborhood were delayed for several years, largely due to haggling with federal agencies.

Half of the approximately 16 acres at the village site was held in trust by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). And, it took a year to get a waiver from HUD to pay residents fair market value for the necessary property, as required by the BIA.

"There was a lot of outside pressure from people looking for property in Sitka," said Dybdahl, "so the assessment kept rising as the project was delayed. It could've priced the project out."

Indeed, plans were almost killed because of skyrocketing costs. By the time federal approval was eminent, the development coast of each unit (excluding water and sewer, which will be taken care of the U.S. Public Health Service) was pegged at an astonishing $88,500.

Thus, another waiver was needed, this time from the state of Alaska which limits unit development costs on such projects to $81,600.

Dybdahl gives a lot of credit to T-HRHA development director, Ernest Hillman, a former 20-year resident of Sitka whose parcipation began with early planning council meetings.

"Mr. Hillman's perserverance over the years has prevailed over one of the most complex housing projects nationwide ever pursued by a housing authority," Dybdahl told a Sitka reporter.

He said the authority will sell its own notes to finance the new homes and eventually repay the money which is coming from Indian Mutual Help funds. The authority presently handles about 400 units of housing in Southeast Alaska.

The homes will be three and four bedrooms. "We have ended up with transient groups in the smaller, two bedroom units," said Ventura Samaniego, deputy director of T-HRHA. "Families just outgrow them."

The overall design of the redevelopment plan netted two national planning awards for the architectural firm of Naramore, Bain, Brady and Johanson.

The housing authority plans to place wood burning stoves in the homes to help residents offset the often exorbitant energy costs which plague many small Alaskan towns.

But maintenance of sewer and water systems is still a problem for many public housing projects. Dybdahl endorsed a recommendation by the Indian Health Service to regional maintenance of those operations.

"Homebuyers don't have the resources to take care of, say, plumbing problems, so it falls in the lap of the authority," said Samaniego. Part of the home payment does go into a non-routine maintenance account.

Homeowner payments on the new units will be based on 25 percent of the buyer's adjusted income, with an allowance for utility costs.