

Heavy decisions facing villages

By LONE E. JANSON

"Alaska's Native village corporations grapple with problems that would make a General Motors executive weep with frustration."

That was the message of Helga Eakon, a petite, college-trained young lady from Unalakleet who is determined to do something about it. Helga has been hired by the Alaska Native Human Resource Development Program (Kellogg) as curriculum developer and writer, charged with putting together training materials on village decision-making.

In general, said Helga, Alaska's village corporations face three basic problems not encountered by General Motors executives: 1) they lack highly-

trained specialists in finance, management, etc., 2) they do not have almost unlimited time and money to spend in corporate day-to-day activities, and 3) they do not have access to sources of information.

Despite these deficiencies, the Native villages have some heavy decisions to make, and right now. They are in the areas of reconveyances required under section 14(c) of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA), and in planning for 1992 when shares of stock can be sold and land can be taxed.

The village corporations need help, says Helga, not in making the decisions, but in developing decision-making processes that work in the special village situation. Helga's real commitment is to develop training that takes into account the traditional decision-making processes that Natives have always used, and adapting it to dealing with the new, unaccustomed problems.

To begin her work, Helga made a survey of existing literature on the subject of decision-making processes and found it totally unsuitable for Alaska village needs. She will now make a survey of village culturally-oriented decision-making processes.

Fortunately, at this very time, Mauneluk, the non-profit corporation for the Nana region, is sending two teams around to the villages in conjunction with a regional strategy plan they are developing. They want to find out what issues the villages want to cope with, and what the biggest concerns are. These teams will explain the results of a region-wide survey done in December, and give the villagers a chance to discuss them and expand on them. From this they will establish the goals and objectives on all the issues impacting the villages, social, economic development, subsistence and so on.

Mauneluk has a steering committee for this project; some of the members are John Schaeffer, president of NANA, Dennis Tippleman, Mauneluk executive director, George White, superintendent of Northwest Arctic School District, and Newton Chase, who works for HUD in Anchorage. They also hope to have a professional planner on the committee.

Helga is especially concerned with the pressing need for action by the village corporation on 14(c) reconveyances. The importance of moving ahead with these actions cannot be over-

stressed, she said. That section of ANCSA calls for reconveyance of primary places of business, residence, campsites, and so on, to individuals, and to non-profit corporations. It also calls for a minimum of 1280 acres to be reconveyed to a municipal corporation for city expansion or to the State of Alaska in trust for a future city. Without action on these issues, new schools will be stalled, people will not get title to land or be able to obtain loans for homes, and all sorts of necessary public works will grind to a halt.

"So far, none of the villages have made these reconveyances," she said. "It takes three years from the time of the BLM survey till approved in Washington, so immediate action is needed. The trouble is, no one wants to be first."

The section of ANCSA reads as though it is simple, Helga pointed out, but in action it means making many decisions, and that's where the decision-making processes come in.

"Some of the decisions ahead for village corporations under 14(c) include: who had an existing business, home, camp site, on December 18, 1971? Which land should the municipal corporations get? That involves what land is suitable for subdivisions, where garbage dumps should be, drainage, roads, and a host of things to decide. Time is short, and it's really important."

She said BLM has a whole team standing by to make reconveyance surveys for the villages, and is afraid after the first village makes it move, they will be swamped with reconveyance survey requests, further delaying what is already a long process.