

Piamut residents want to return home

By Linda Lord-Jenkins

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Ten years ago the 49 or so people of Piamut on the Yukon River were forced to give up the homes their ancestors had lived in for generations to move to Hooper Bay in order that their children may get an education.

Piamut residents were told that the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which provided schooling for their children, wouldn't build a school for the few Piamut residents so they moved to the larger community.

Since that time, they contend they have been systematically excluded from housing improvements because they are

not "from" Hooper Bay and now 49 of the Piamut residents — 11 households, are seeking support to return to their home.

Representatives of the group have been speaking to federal, state and local officials to seek support for their cause and last week were in Juneau to talk to the Alaska Federation of Natives, their state legislators and the governor.

At the AFN Full Board meeting in Juneau, Piamut Elder George Napoleon explained that the village residents moved because the BIA wouldn't build a school in their village. Without a school for the children, they were forced to Hooper

Bay.

But housing is limited in Hooper Bay, said Napoleon, because of lack of actual land to build on and because no new housing is being built for the Piamut residents.

Piamut is a recognized village under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act and maintains its own tribal council and village council, separate from Hooper Bay.

Projects such as housing are funneled through Hooper Bay administrators, said Napoleon. "We don't get housing because we aren't from Hooper Bay," said Napoleon.

He said that Piamut citizens

want to resettle "so we can get our own homes. I am not only thinking of myself. I am thinking of my sons and grandchildren so they have a nice place."

Tom Richards, vice president of operations for the 56-village-member Association of Village Council Presidents (AVCP) said another compelling reason for relocation is that the inlet near Hooper Bay is becoming silt-laden so Hooper Bay residents now can't beach their boats at low tide.

Hooper Bay itself is losing land mass to the sea, he said, and soon might have to relocate itself.

The original Piamut location, on the other hand, has a harbor area 12 fathoms deep and much good land with good gravel. Two cabins are located there now, one maintained for emergency use by lost travellers and the other by Convert Napoleon, a Piamut resident who stays there frequently, said Elmer Simon, who translated for George Napoleon.

Richards said the villagers were seeking a way to relocate, build a school, water and sewer facilities, and of course, homes.

He said the villagers met with U.S. Sen. Ted Stevens recently and "his attitude was basically 'you'd better get used to living in Hooper Bay.'"

Richards said that the residents are leery of using federal Housing and Urban Development money because of the many regulations necessary to get HUD money often drove the cost of a house up to \$119,000.

He said a BIA Housing Im-

provement Program could build good four-bedroom homes for \$35,000 each.

Napoleon said after the meeting that he feels he is discriminated against for housing because he is from Piamut. "Hooper doesn't say so in open but you get the idea from submitting applications for homes. The people of Piamut have agreed to come forward with a plan for rebuilding the village to determine if it is possible.

Included in that plan would be the thing that forced the relocation — a school for the 15 Piamut children now living in Hooper Bay.

The AFN passed a resolution supporting the Piamut residents by: encouraging the Alaska Congressional Delegation and BIA to provide housing improvement funds for a BIA community housing project.

Encouraging the State Legislature to appropriate state funds for construction of an airport, local roads, dock facilities, school and community hall; and