

Sackett talks on Edgecumbe

The following letter was sent to Janie Leask, President of the Alaska Federation of Natives:

The subject of state ownership, renovation, operation and funding of Mt. Edgecumbe High School has received widespread attention during the past several months.

Of particular importance to me and most everyone with whom I have discussed the matter is the serious question of funding for the school and the impact such funding will have on local school districts particularly in rural areas.

Because Mt. Edgecumbe has played an important role in the education of many Native Alaskans in the past, it appears the issue is becoming an emotional one with little thought given to the ultimate impact on local education.

I want to take this opportunity to explain my position concerning Mt. Edgecumbe High School, particularly for you and the Alaska Federation of Natives, who at the last convention control and funding of the school.

As most are aware, Sen. Frank Ferguson and myself oppose the federal government's offer to turn the school over to the State.

The question of receiving federal funds to renovate the facility surfaced at the Legislative Budget and Audit Committee meeting of October, 1983. At the meeting those legislators present voted to receive some \$22 million in federal dollars to provide for drastically needed improvements in the 46-year-old facility.

Although a member of the Budget and Audit Committee, I was weathered-in at Ruby and

unable to get to Anchorage to argue my point.

Of particular annoyance was my request to have the decision on Mt. Edgecumbe school delayed until such time as a gathering of the full committee could hear the pros and cons concerning the school. Such requests are usually honored as a matter of courtesy to legislators.

For those able to attend the meeting testimony was presented which brought forth several major points which I believe are very strong arguments in opposition to state funding of Mt. Edgecumbe High School.

First, acceptance of the \$22 million in federal monies has the effect of committing the state to operating Edgecumbe at *state*, not federal, expense. The federal funds only apply toward renovating the old facility to make it safe for any students and personnel at the school.

Funding for upkeep, and other necessities will have to come from the already declining financial resources of the state.

More to the point, I suspect financial support to operate the school will be taken directly from revenues now used to operate local school districts with the greatest impact likely to be on rural schools.

In simpler terms, funds currently earmarked to educate Native children in local schools will instead be used to re-open and operate Mt. Edgecumbe School, which must by law be open to anyone who qualified to attend. It will not be a "Native" school but a statewide public school.

What is so objectionable from my perspective is that I have worked long and hard in Juneau

over the last decade with the support of hundreds of villagers, rural residents and educators, to build a viable local school system allowing children to be educated close to home rather than uprooted from the family.

Now, just as we have come of age and built quality schooling throughout rural Alaska, a small handful of people and an even smaller number of short-sighted legislators want to re-open Edgecumbe and effectively pull the financial rug out from under our local schools.

Even just taking a few students from a small school to send to Mt. Edgecumbe could result in dramatic losses in state foundation support funds for those schools.

For example, if just three students from Kuspuk School District were to attend Mt. Edgecumbe High School, the Kuspuk School District would lose in excess of \$45,000 of state school foundation support. Such a loss could mean eliminating a teacher, reducing the lunch program, or making other cutbacks to absorb the loss of state funding.

Beyond the financial question of the millions it will require to operate the school each year (some estimates run as high as \$40 million or more per year) is the questionable wisdom of uprooting students from their school, family and friends at an early age for the sake of attending school away from home.

I seriously question the wisdom of sending youngsters in high school, whose ages range from 13-18 years of age, away from the family to attend school at a time when just about everyone agrees that keeping the

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important step in guiding young people towards a healthy, and productive future.

Who will fulfill the parental role for those students who do attend Mt. Edgecumbe?

I feel it is very important that strong support be given to our local school districts particularly in view of our declining state revenues. In my view, this is not the time to question or act in a manner that would ultimately undermine the development of rural educational opportunities.

My discussions and contacts with people throughout Alaska, particularly rural residents and educators working in village schools, clearly indicate they do not want funding jeopardized for their schools.

I have not been able to iden-

tify support for state funding of Mt. Edgecumbe, certainly not at the expense of local schools, nor have I seen it as a priority on anyone's list, or for the AFN, in fact.

I would welcome an explanation as to why AFN considers this important enough to offer a resolution of support for Mt. Edgecumbe High School state funding when such action could have grave consequences for rural schools. Can you advise me who specifically is supporting and lobbying for the re-opening of Mt. Edgecumbe at state expense?

I appreciate your taking time to consider my thoughts on this matter. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

John C. Sackett
Senator