

RurAL CAP meeting underscores issues

by Eileen Panigeo MacLean
for the Tundra Times

The annual Rural Alaska Community Action Program Village Participation Conference was recently held in Juneau and there were about 60 villages in attendance.

This is an event where participants from rural areas throughout the state identify issues that are affecting their communities. They include social and economic development, employment and the economy, education, land and natural resource management, health and welfare, social and cultural issues.

It is an important opportunity for sharing information about concerns and problems experienced in rural communities throughout the state and provides an important communication link to work together to find solutions.

Some of the issues are continual and have been around for a long time. Substance abuse and suicide prevention, need for improved education, cultural maintenance and preservation are issues which require long-term solutions.

We are trying to address some of the same concerns in the Legislature. Last year, for example, legislation was passed stiffening the bootlegging penalties. I'm also working on several education bills which I hope will work toward better opportunities in education.

The issue of bootlegging has been a concern of the rural areas especially its impact to the life, safety and health of people who are affected by the bootlegging activity. Many concerns are continually raised on this issue at local, rural, regional and statewide meetings or conferences.

But in most cases the efforts to find solutions to these issues will take internal leadership from the local residents. The Legislature is also an important group that local residents can approach by requesting changes in laws or appropriation of state funds for prevention/intervention programs.

Last year, the Legislature increased the penalty for certain unlicensed manufacture, sale, possession or barter of alcoholic beverages in a local option area. For these local option areas, bootlegging is a Class C felony which carries a maximum \$50,000 fine and up to five years in jail. A Class B felony has the same fine but it has up to 10 years in jail.

It is premature to determine what impact this law has made on communities in local option areas, but more than 32 cases have been identified since August of last year.

In my House District 22, the communities of Barrow and Kotzebue are "damp," meaning the sale of alcohol is prohibited but importation is allowed. The status of going "damp" has made positive impacts on the two communities including the outlying villages.

To help address the "bootlegging" issue, Sen. John Binkley, R-Alaska, is proposing introduction of legislation to impose penalties on bootleggers who use underage children as runners in their operations. I support Binkley's proposal which would make it more difficult for the bootleggers to continue their activities.

As for education, I recently introduced House Concurrent Resolution 18 to establish a joint House and Senate committee on school performance.

HCR 18 will continue work that the Senate Special Committee on School Performance began last year.

I am also working on legislation that would revise a section of the Alaska Statutes relating to the requirements

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for issue of certificates. This bill will clarify the language on issuance of teacher certificates and will give the responsibility of establishing various classes of teaching certificates to the State Board of Education.

This legislation will create another type of certificate for instructors of language and culture including instructors of vocational education and ROTC.

I'm also planning to introduce legislation in the House to create a joint House and Senate committee on suicide prevention.

The purpose of the committee will be to continue to explore issues relating to suicide, alcohol and drug abuse that the Senate Special Committee on Suicide Prevention began last year.

I would like this committee to look into recommending the development of a special curriculum for school districts to use for substance abuse and suicide prevention programs in the classroom.

I would appreciate hearing your comments and ideas. If you would like more information please contact my office at 465-4525 (collect) or by mail at Box V, Juneau 99811.



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