

Gravel Optimistic About Village Road Construction

Senator Mike Gravel in an exclusive Tundra Times interview Nov. 19, was optimistic about the outlook for village road construction in the coming session.

He predicted the passage of two proposals that failed in the last Congress, due to an attack on the Federal Aid to Highways Bill that had absolutely nothing to do with the Alaskan amendments.

One amendment, pushed jointly by Sen. Gravel and Rep. Hale Boggs, would have included village boardwalks in the eligibility for funds allotted to pedestrian walkways and bicycle paths. A fund of 10 million dollars was established to back up this program.

The other amendment succeeded in changing the limitations on Indian Highway appropriations, so that they can be applied to privately owned village properties not just tribal reservations. Authorization on these appropriations jumped from 1 million to 10 million dollars.

"Obviously we in Alaska, in our village areas that don't have roads, will now be encountering a lot of road programs," said the Senator.

Gravel expressed concern about the mechanics of surveying large areas of land mass in relation to the Native Land Claims.

"It's all tied to our regulations within the Department of the Interior and the Bureau of Land Management. If the time frames are not adhered to, it will be 20 years before this thing is worked out."

"So obviously at some point along the way we're going to have to go back with an omnibus bill to correct various deficiencies in the Act. And certainly the land selection process will be one of the areas."

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Senator Mike Gravel...

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Gravel did not anticipate that there would be more additional funding to the regional corporations until the enrollment was completed.

"The initial payments," he said, "were to pay the crank-up costs. And that's it. Once the enrollment is completed, then we've got to do some real funding."

When questioned about an alleged \$9 million dollar cutback in Health, Education, and Welfare funds ordered by Nixon on Dec. 8, Gravel said he had heard nothing about it, but that it should not come as a surprise.

"Richard Nixon," he said, "got a great mandate and he vetoed 11 pieces of legislative just before the election, and it didn't seem to bother anybody, so now he's going to exercise his mandate."

"In the light of recent federal cutbacks," Gravel commented that the native land claims would alleviate the situation to some extent.

"I don't see funding coming through the claims, but the claims will develop within the native community their own expertise, an involvement in their own activities. They will be doing something toward their own advancement."

"You know, there are just so many people in Alaska, and we can busy ourselves with so many different things. Presently the natives for some time to come will be busy coming of age economically."

"If they pull the federal funds out of Alaska, we'll all be busy trapping rabbits," the interviewer ventured.

"There's no likelihood of pulling all the federal funds out of Alaska," Gravel assured him. What will save us? "The pipeline."

Gravel hopefully predicts construction on the pipeline will begin between now and Christmas, or "in the spring, certainly within the next five months."

He declined to comment on possibilities for the House seat vacated by missing Congressman Nick Begich. "When the Democrats select their person," he promised, "I will be campaigning very hard to get him elected."

Gravel mentioned that Senator Ernest Gruening had campaigned very heavily for George McGovern all over the country. "The last time I saw Sen. Gruening, he was healthy as a bear, still out campaigning. He's indestructible."