

Interior, coastal residents oppose road system

By John Christensen
for the Tundra Times

"A road is not usually for us, for us Eskimos you know. Caribou still migrate through here. We'd like to keep it that way," Ambler resident Truman Cleveland told a gathering called to discuss a proposed "transportation corridor" through the upper Kobuk.

Cleveland's friends and neighbors meeting in Ambler on March 5 and 6 agreed. The meeting's participants, largely drawn from villages along or near the proposed route, endorsed four resolutions condemning the plan.

The gathering brought representatives of state and local agencies, regional elders' councils, village governments, NANA Regional Corporation, and Bear Creek Mining together to review the Department of Transportation (DOT) proposal originally outlined in the Western Arctic Transportation Study (WATS).

Citing the potential threat to subsistence resources and current lifestyles, residents and regional elders opposed any plans for a road or railroad through their country.

The route proposed by DOT would enable development of

the region's mineral wealth by linking the upper Kobuk's mining sites with a road or railroad in the interior, an ice-free port on northwestern Alaska's coast, or both. Despite the high quality of local deposits, high transportation costs have prevented development of the area's mines.

Flatly stating that, "It will be 10 years or more before anything serious happens," Bear Creek Mining spokesman John Babcock also made it clear that his company cannot profitably fly ore out of the remote region. Babcock pointed out that local mining operations would create 300 to 600 jobs. But, Babcock stressed, without a road or railroad full-scale mining operations could not begin.

DOT spokesman John Martin assured village residents that the route had been proposed for, "cost estimation purposes only and in no way commits the department to any type of construction."

Unmoved, village residents and particularly representatives of recently established elders' councils continued to express their firm opposition to the plans.

"We know it will come sooner or later," Ambler's Art Douglas conceded, "but the main thing is to delay it as long as possible so we can work on our main goals: protecting subsistence, cultural heritage and our traditional way of life."

Representatives from Inter communities and organizations supported and encouraged local opposition to the proposal. A similar gathering of that area's residents had recently been held at Allakaket. That gathering's participants also were opposed to transportation proposals they view as a threat to their way of life.

Tanana Chiefs President Spud Williams warned, "When I first heard about this proposal I thought that it didn't concern us, that it was for those Eskimos to worry about. But we can't think that way anymore. The lines on their maps point both ways. We have to get together to merge their plans and get our first look at the big picture they've planned for our country. For too long we've been separated, divided and conquered."

"There's something very wrong with this whole planning process," Williams continued, "We bring these people together to talk to us and they end up talking to each other. Subsistence was a minor concern of this study. Instead of looking at the mineral economy or a copper economy. It's a subsistence economy, which is just another way of saying the way we live. Without it there wouldn't be much food on our tables."

"DOT still tries to plan for the mining companies or some other special interest. I want us to be the special interest, at least when they draw up plans for our land. We're not asking for some massive project either. Our real transportation needs are easy to meet. All we ask for is runway improvements, trail markers and in some cases lengthened trails, simple things."

"Ultimately," concluded Williams, "it comes down to a political decision. We have to say what we want, how and where we want it. We have to participate in, and control our own destiny."

Billy Sheldon of Norrvik, head of the Regional Elders'

Council, firmly endorsed Williams' remarks. "All elders oppose building roads and railroads. If you are against this project I am with you."

Pauline Harvey of Noorvik observed, "You never see animals where there are roads. Our children aren't prepared for that kind of life. We know all the good points of this road. The elders are opposed to this because we also know the bad points. I oppose roads for the sake of my children and grandchildren."

"You find minerals," remarked Kiana's Tommy Sheldon. "You look for the cheapest way to haul them out. Okay, we can understand that. Just like we understand all the drawbacks to this road. Quite a few things come our way already — barge, airplane. Now days we need money like everyone else in the world. And you say this will bring jobs, put our boys to work. We're still afraid."

Joe Sun, one of the area's oldest men spoke in Inupiaq. His translated remarks reflected the impact past development has had on the region's fragile, wilderness ecosystem. "I remember the way of life up here going back to 1910. Used to be some hard times all right. But ever since low flying planes come around, even more since they put rubber canoes down from Walker Lake, game migration has been affected. The white man has always been a noisy man. No matter how safe they say these plans are, game will be affected. Someday there will be a road up here all right, because of the minerals. But there will be consequences and I want you young people to be aware of them."

Kathrine Atla of Huslia illustrated the importance of protecting the subsistence, commenting, "our people — Ir.dian or Eskimo — how many have a big pile of money in the bank? Not many. That's because our bank is the land. You better believe we're going to watch out for our investment."