

Rural economic project needs bucks to work

A writer once said that good ideas have two enemies politics and economics. There is a good idea now in need of rescue from the strain of Alaskan rural economics; the idea is called the Rural Capital Improvements Project.

Set up late last year, under the auspices of the Fairbanks Town and Village Association for Development, the project is designed to identify and prioritize capital improvement projects in 46 Interior communities, falling within the boundaries of the Doyon-Tanana Chiefs Region. The program is also intended to encourage villages to begin long-range economic planning of their own and to help bureaucrats with money to spend in the bush decide how best to put government dollars to work.

The Rural Capital Improvements Program began with \$37,500 to conduct economic needs surveys in the Interior villages, but needs at least that much more to finish the survey work and begin the second phase of the project, which consists of assisting the communities to write their own economic development plans to provide a framework for the type of growth that each villabe would like to see.

Although the Fairbanks Town and Village Association originally applied for funding at a more realistic level, about \$75,000, this request was about halved and the project now finds itself short. The financial hardships of travel in rural Alaska being what they are, we are hopeful the State Senate will see fit to endorse a measure that passed out of the House this week: a supplemental appropriation that will keep the Capital Improvements Project alive.

We think there are several reasons that the project is a good idea. For one, the eventual beneficiaries of the effort, the people of rural Interior Alaska, have indicated their interest in an economic planning process directly based on their input. A list of development priorities based on their own shopping list is vastly preferable to one drawn up in Juneau or Washington, D.C.

In addition, the aim of the Capital Improvements Project goes beyond making a wish list for 46 villages. What the project recognizes is the need to PLAN, to map a schedule of development tailored to the ability of each village to support additional development. One of the dismal stories of federal and state dollars flowing into rural Alaska is not one of neglect or ingratitude by local residents, but of the inability of bureaucrats to design capital improvements projects to suit the scale and the temper of the average bush community. The survey and planning work contemplated by the Fairbanks Town and Village Association could go a long way toward putting an end to such waste and inefficiency.

We are also pleased that the program has demonstrated particular sensitivity to such rural values as personal communication, a subtle thing at best. It may cost more to buzz the bush, but people tend to open their hearts and minds to the one who is willing (and we should add, financially able) to discuss things face to face. Communications delegated to a river of paper is bound to be no communication at all.

We strongly urge the Senate to concur with us that a little money spent planning today could save all of us millions in confusion and poor management in the years to come.

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