

WRANGELL MAY GET 1 YEAR

Low Attendance, Rising Costs Force Decision

By MARGIE BAUMAN

Clarence Antioquia, Alaska area director for the Bureau of Indian Affairs, said Tuesday that Wrangell Institute would probably remain open for another year.

The BIA leader was still weighing, however, the economic realities of rising expenses and a declining stu-

dent population against opposition to closure from within the Institute itself.

"This isn't any easy decision," Antioquia said. "We are not taking this lightly."

In more than 40 years of operation, Wrangell Institute has earned very high respect and developed as a tradition and many Alaska Native leaders have received at least part of their education at Wrangell, he said.

Yet, as the student population at Wrangell dwindled to 109 for the current academic year and costs per student jumped from \$7,709 to \$10,353, the BIA was forced to take a sharp look at the possibilities of closure, Antioquia said.

In addition, the operating facilities at Wrangell would need a major overhaul that would cost over \$1.5 million in order to continue operating on a long-term basis, Antioquia said.

In Washington, D.C. meanwhile, U.S. Sen. Mike Gravel, D-Alaska, has urged continued operation of Wrangell for the 1974-75 school year, "with close study of operation for additional years. "The Alaska Democrat said that Wrangell" has performed a valuable service to education in Alaska.

"Any future closure of the Institute should not result in negative economic impact upon the local community," Gravel said.

As word of Wrangell's impending closure reached Wrangell itself several weeks ago the reaction from the facility and staff was one of protest. In a letter to the Tundra Times, the group said in part that they challenged the area BIA office argument that Wrangell should close because the new high schools were being built much closer to home.

"This is by far a better proposal than transporting them so far from home, the letter said. "But our question is, after taking into consideration the type of students enrolled here; those not academically ready to enter high school and have already experienced failure of one sort or another, is the state or the bu-

reau going to provide the individualized education and attention that they are receiving here? NO!"

"Plans are that villages will be building schools and would provide needed special education in their home villages, but we firmly believe that until this becomes a reality Wrangell Institute should remain open to meet the needs of the Alaskan Native children," the letter said.

The faculty and staff of Wrangell added that "major reasons that have been given for closure seem to be money for updating the plant. New gym, covered play area, water lines boilers, staff housing repairs, etc.

"In the past eight years or more the requests for most of these have been pushed to the bottom of the lists, but now reach the critical number one

(Continued on page 6)

Wrangell Closure. . .

(Continued from Page 1)

position because of possible closure. Some things such as the play area have been initially approved since the 1960s, but constantly pushed down the list until now," they said.

Antioquai, on the other hand, cites not only the high costs of operation and renovation, but the trend toward regional and local schools.

Wrangell was founded over 40 years ago, initially as a vocational-industrial school. It later expanded into an elementary boarding school and then a combination high school, he said. Several years ago it moved to an ungraded system, serving mostly 13-16 year-old students.

"But now the trend is pretty obvious," Antioquia said. "Statistics indicate that the school should be closed."

Not wanting to make the decision on statistics alone, the BIA leader last week went to Wrangell, met for two days with representatives not only of the Institute, but the local Chamber of Commerce, local Democrats who had asked to discuss it and a joint meeting of the Alaska Native Brotherhood/Alaska Native Sisterhood.

"Once they recognized the economic situation — costs going up and enrollment down, they recognized the validity of possible closure," he said.

"There is very definitely more personal attention given the students at Wrangell (with a staff of 51 and 109 students), but

the type of student is not unique," Antioquia said. This is not a special type of student being served only by Wrangell, he said. The students primarily are one to two years behind educationally, in comparison to the national norm, but there are others like them in other educational situations around the state, he said.

Yet, Antioquia feels optimistic that the concerted effort to provide education closer to home has paid off, and that the decline in the number of young people wanting to go to Wrangell reflects this. Those students now at Wrangell will have among their future options Mt. Edgecumbe High School at Sitka and the Wildwood School at Kenai, in addition to other boarding home programs, he said.

Just five to eight years ago, well over 1,000 Alaska Native students were forced to leave the state for a high school education, going as far away as Chilocco, Okla. and Chemawa, Ore., because there just wasn't enough room at home. By the coming academic year Antioquia anticipates there will be only 150 Alaskans at the Chemawa Indian School in Oregon and that they will be there by choice.

Despite all this, the BIA area leader insists, closing Wrangell after more than 40 years in operation "isn't any easy decision and we are not taking it lightly," he said.