

Guest Editorial

Rethink AFN membership

Guest editorial by Gary A. Moore

On Oct. 17-19, the Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN) hosted its 30th Annual Convention and celebrated the 25th year since the passage of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA).

It is noteworthy that AFN has endured for more than a generation as Alaska's collective Native voice to Congress and our own state legislature. AFN's presence and influence over the years have aided in the passage of multiple legislation that has benefited Natives across Alaska.

having acknowledged AFN's longevity and accomplishments, why would anyone question AFN's record or continued leadership role? Critics, such as myself, boil down the argument to one problem. AFN represents both corporate and Native governing interests alike. Congress' sanction of permitting corporate voting powers in Alaska's Native governmental function is odd to say the least and destructive at worst.

A prime example of this problem occurred at last years' convention. The debate was over the potential opening of the Alaska National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) to oil exploration. Since the for-profit corporations hold the majority of votes in AFN's membership the end result came as no surprise. AFN sent a resolution to Congress in support of ANWR development.

Another example from our past to consider is ANCSA itself and the influence that AFN had in its design and passage into law. The historical land and cash settlement that resulted from ANCSA seemed like a win, win situation for Alaska Natives who had long sought justice for the loss of their lands, culture and lifestyle. However, there was a significant price that the villages had to pay. The legislation abolished all aboriginal rights to fish and game resources for Alaska's indigenous people. The aftermath of ANCSA's passage has jeopardized villagers' livelihood and has plagued the court system with battles between subsistence, commercial and sportsmen's interests, which carries on even today.

When viewed together, AFN's activities on ANCSA and ANWR reveal the rationale for AFN not continuing its role as a representative of both corporate and tribal interests.

When a governmental structure evolves and for-profit corporations are authorized to participate and hold the majority of votes in that system, the system becomes unbalanced and tainted, All is well when both corporate and tribal interests see eye to eye on

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an issue. However, when they are at odds the interests of the tribe or governing entity always loses.

Change may be long overdue, but we cannot wait for AFN to stand up and acknowledge their inappropriateness in Native governing affairs. On the contrary, AFN is currently entrenching themselves even further into Native governing affairs. At our own congressional delegations

direction, AFN recently drafted the first version of the Alaska Native Omnibus Bill. When finalized the legislation will enact many of the social and economic recommendations made by the Alaska Native Commission's two year study on the matter. The intentions that AFN proposed in the draft legislation are not the problem. The are of concern is that AFN also appropriates millions of dollars through legislation to itself or its subsidiary for program implementation.

So why do tribes remain in AFN's membership? It is not a question of legality, but of policy. Tribes can relinquish AFN's leadership at any time. The trump card that AFN holds over tribes is that the corporations control all of the assets that

resulted from the passage of ANCSA. This includes virtually all of the land, cash and political influence with Congress. Therefore, a tribe has no incentive to leave AFN's membership or feels helpless to change AFN's embedded position in Native governing matters. Noting the above examples, AFN's perseverance over the years becomes less of a mystery and more of a lesson in corporate self-preservation above all else.

The governmental system of Alaska Natives can change for the better, but it will require a tribe or consortium of tribes to take the first bold step. That initial step is the process of recruiting other tribes to consider withdrawing from AFN's membership. Once a majority of tribes have decided to leave AFN, then they will have the power to insist on recognition from Congress as the appropriate statewide representative of Alaska's Native tribal governments.

When that day comes to pass we will then see a proper statewide Native government system in place that truly represents the tribes or village's best public interests. I will be watching the horizon for a sign of that movement to come.