

Eklutna unveils plans for village tour attractions

by Steve Pilkington

Tundra Times reporter

Adding modern facilities to Eklutna Village, a small Athabascan home site on the Knik Arm which attracts thousands of tourists each year, could be the best way to prevent the old village and its rich history from wasting away, according to an Eklutna Inc. spokesman.

But a plan to attract three times the current number of tourists by restoring the village and adding park and recreation facilities, if all goes well,

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probably will not come about before June 1990 at the earliest.

"It's the only thing that can possibly preserve this village," said John Fullenwider, Eklutna Inc.'s consultant for Knakanen Corp.

The idea to add tourist facilities to attract paying customers, instead of just sight-seeing tourists, is Fullenwider's.

His family owns a cabin in the village. And the cost of keeping houses in the village prompted him to look for ways to preserve the homes and history of the area, both of which are endangered, he said.

The best way to do that, he said, was to take advantage of the many tourists which visit the village each summer.

Part of the plan is to hire Alaska Natives to give tours of the village and explain its past, he said.

"It's important that we have people talking to people. Athabascan people dealing with visitors. We want them to be a part of it," Fullenwider said.

According to Fullenwider, every year about 50,000 tourists follow the Glenn Highway out to the village to see it during the 14-week summer season.

But if the "Eklutna Village Theme Park" succeeds, about 150,000 tourists are expected to visit the village in its first year, he said.

Unfortunately, Fullenwider said, the cabins and homes which the Athabascans built many years ago have not been lived in for quite a while.

"A lot of these houses are in a state of disrepair," he said. But if he is successful with his plan, they will be fixed up.

But not only does Eklutna's plan call for repairs to the historic buildings, the



photo by Chris Cushman

Debbie Fullenwider, president of Eklutna Inc., displays a map of the proposed tourist development site.

refurbishing of the village has grown into a \$6.7 million project, including a theater, museum as well as a fish trap for salmon, complete with smoke houses and fish shacks.

Fullenwider said that stage presentations, Athabascan arts and crafts, some dancing and Native storytelling, as well as potlatches would be the focus of events during the 14-week visitor season.

Last January, the board of directors for the Knakanen Corp. approved the

plan and agreed to help co-fund it if a partner can be found.

Fullenwider, who was given encouragement for his project by the Anchorage Assembly last week, said he is still trying to get approval for parts of the plan with state and federal agencies. But he doesn't expect any problems, he said.

Eklutna Village, about 25 miles north of Anchorage, grew around the St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church.

The church, which is near a Siberian prayer chapel, has been rebuilt twice and still holds regular services for people in the area.

The Orthodox cemetery, which has spirit houses painted in each family's traditional colors, is next to the church.

Athabascan culture, which would be a focus of the theme park, is renowned for beadwork. Athabascan hunters originally developed the snowshoe and the birchbark canoe.