

# ***Local Contractors Miffed at BIA***

By JEFF RICHARDSON

Local contractors are on the warpath, alleging that the Bureau of Indian Affairs has ignored them in awarding contracts for housing construction.

According to Tom Ridenhour, of Independent Lumber, Inc. of Fairbanks, the charges stem from two separate situations. The first was the disastrous storm that hit the Seward Peninsula last fall. The other is contracts for the 1975-76 construction seasons.

John Heffle, president of the Association of Interior Eskimos, has formally requested Sen. Mike Gravel to investigate the situation.

Clarence Antioquia, area director of BIA in Juneau, said he felt the awarding of contracts was handled as "fairly and openly" as possible. He acknowledged that both Sen. Ted Stevens and Rep. Don Young had questioned him about the housing problem, but

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he added the congressmen seemed satisfied with his response.

According to Ridenhour, while the storm was still ravaging Northwest Alaska, Heffle, who is also disaster chairman for the Tanana Chapter of the Red Cross, called him from Nome for an estimate on the cost of a house to replace those destroyed by the storm. Ridenhour's estimated including freight and the cost of construction was \$33,900 per house.

Ridenhour asserted that no Alaskan firms were invited to bid on the Nome houses. He added that the price quoted by the Oregon firm was \$35,000, which did not include the cost of assembling the housing components in Nome.

In response to charges that the contracting firm did not utilize local hire, Antioquia said more than 40 residents of the SEward Peninsula area were employed to build the houses.

Ridenhour said although the BIA in Nome and Juneau was fully appraised that Independent Lumber could supply the housing components and another Fairbanks firm the construction crew, the contract was awarded to a firm in Oregon, Niedermeyer-Martin.

Antioquia said he was not aware of any firm approaching the BIA in November or December seeking the Nome contract. He added the BIA did not become directly involved in the emergency housing problem until mid-December.

Antioquia also pointed out that in both cases the plan for the houses was one prepared by the BIA and approved by the Dept. of Housing and Urban Development.

Antioquia told the Tundra Times that in a presidentially-declared disaster, under authority of the Federal Disaster Act, it is possible for involved government agencies to bypass normal bidding procedures to ease an emergency situation, and that this is what was done.

This is also the essence of a January letter to Ridenhour from the area office. Nowever, in a phone conversation between Roger Ridell and the area office later in the month, BIA reportedly told Ridell, "We assumed there was no Alaskan dealer who could handle this type of contract."

Another local firm, Dinyea Corp., the corporation for Stevens Village, also missed out on the bidding for the Nome houses. Referring to competition with a local firm, Ridenhour said, "It's not the fact that you don't get the job, it's that you don't get to compete."

In the second situation, BIA, acting as an agent for several Native regional housing authorities, sent out invitations to bid on 368 housing units. Ridenhour said he received his invitation on the 3rd of February. Bids were due two days later. He said he would have had to fly personally to Juneau to deliver them on time.

Greg Thies, of the Dinyea Corp., said his firm received its invitation in ample time to bid. The Dinyea Corp. has been forced to delay construction of its housing factory because it was not awarded the second contract.

The second contract was again awarded to Niedermeyer-Martin. However, the award was actually made by the housing authorities, not the BIA.

According to Commissioner of Indian Affairs Morris Thompson, speaking at a press conference in Anchorage, the award was made to the lowest of 16 bidders.

Ridenhour asserted that Niedermeyer-Martin bidding on the same house plan, bid \$6,000 more than they bid on the Nome

houses.

Area Director Antioquia emphasized that the BIA only provided technical assistance on the second bidding. He said the selection of the Oregon firm was a joint decision of the housing authorities of the Bristol Bay, Calista, Bering Straits and NANA regions.

Ridenhour, citing private information sources, said it appears to him that BIA is "literally taking them (Niedermeyer-Martin) up and down the coast to the corporations."

"What the whole thing boils down to is that the Area BIA office in Juneau appears to be being very selective about whom they award bids to," Ridenhour told the Tundra Times, "From the letters I've seen, there's a lot of misinformation coming out of Juneau to Washington."

Commissioner Thompson said he was confident that BIA regulations had been strictly followed in the bidding procedure and noted that Alaskan and non-Alaskan firms had participated in the bidding.

Thompson, on a week-long swing through Alaska will inspect the completed houses in Nome.