

# Mutual respect needed for state, Natives

by Paul Swetzof  
for the Tundra Times

I have often stated that I feel Native village governments — IRAs, traditional councils — and the state should work at developing a mutually satisfying working relationship that is beneficial to both entities.

In order to accomplish this it is necessary for both the state government and Native governments to

respect each other and to recognize the rights of each government.

In the past, the state has not only refused to work with Native governments, it has denied their existence and lobbied the Department of Interior to *not* recognize Native governments in Alaska.

I was hoping this would change with the new administration. Not only has it not changed, it appears to be get-

ting worse.

An example of the state's continued opposition to Native governments can be found in a recent bill, House Bill 176, which was introduced by Rep. Ben Grussendorf, D-Sitka, at the request of the governor. It is currently in the House Rules Committee.

This bill, if it becomes law, gives the state permission to accept unoccupied village townsite lands, in trust, from the Bureau of Land Management until a municipality is formed.

The governor is taking this action in spite of the fact that the villages have been working very hard to persuade BLM to turn the townsites, many of which are immediately next to village sites, over to village governments.

The federal government wants to end its trusteeship of the townsites. In recent hearings, which federal officials conducted on this issue, the villages overwhelmingly testified in opposition to the townsites being turned over to the state and in favor of the townsites being given to the villages.

Federal officials are studying both options, but have been under heavy pressure by the state. This bill obviously would affect the authority of the village to control its own lands.

Rep. Ron Larson, D-Palmer, has introduced a number of bills which directly target rural Alaska. One of these bills would force the formation of boroughs everywhere a regional school district exists, using the same boundaries as the school district.

This would affect a village included in a borough which either was or were to become dominated by non-Natives. The Native village would lose much of its voice in governing its own affairs and perhaps much of its revenue.

Other Larson bills would force villagers to send their children out of the village to attend school if a certain number of children were not available to attend school.

This would make the Molly Hootch settlement meaningless, because it requires the state to provide a school wherever eight or more children are present to attend school.

Larson also has been attempting to end the rural electric subsidy, and the list goes on.

An amendment to the state revenue-sharing bill, which did pass last year and is now law, allows organized boroughs to withhold revenue-sharing funds from Native governments, even though the borough is using the population of the village to obtain additional state funding. This is the state's version of representation: We'll count you; don't bother us.

The Native village of Port Graham is a good example of this policy. The Kenai Borough has refused to give Port Graham its fair share of revenue-sharing funds.

Alaska Natives must be wary of the state. The state is out to end our legitimate governments in order to force us to accept the municipality form of government.

Since we cannot keep a Native village "Native" under a municipal form of government, being forced into being a municipality — or some other type of state-approved entity — would result in the eventual demise of our traditional village structure and values. It would also mean the resulting loss of our respective cultures.

We must not let this happen in order to accept crumbs from the state's table.