

Protect interests before things change

Local Native leaders and providers of services are going to be facing some tough decisions in the next few months.

Because it is certain that the Alaska rural community will be facing some hard times when it comes to services which they vitally need and can no longer afford because of federal budget cuts proposed by President Ronald Reagan.

Those budget cuts already are being felt in the Southeast area where 250 Comprehensive Education and Training Act employees who had provided services to residents have been cut. Similar situations are going to be faced in all other regions of the state.

People who work providing services such as legal and health aid to the Bush are viewing the federal situation with skeptical caution. They know they are going to be effected and aren't happy about the decisions they will have to make.

As one service administrator put it when asked what services his organization would stop providing if it had to, "That's like asking which of your children would you kill. I don't want to cut any of them."

As Alaskan leaders work to find out the situation and how it effects them, they should look hard at the block grant funding approach proposed by President Reagan.

Block Grants calls for the federal government to give lump sums of money to an agency to distribute.

That approach can be administered in several ways. It could see lump sums of money given directly to the state government to distribute as the state sees fit. But there are several other ways of distributing the money, according to a recent report of the National Congress of American Indians.

The block grants could be given directly to the tribes, or Alaska Native Corporations as if they were states; they could give block grants to the corporations through the Bureau of Indian Affairs acting as middle man; or a set aside provision in each state's block grants could be directed by state authorities to the corporations within Alaska.

The fear has been repeatedly voiced that if the federal government gives a block grant to the state government to administer, the rural, Native areas would be treated like poor cousins at the banquet when it comes to equitable distribution of the monies.

What needs to be decided and quickly is whether the rural areas will benefit from the block grant approach.

History would seem to say no but Gov. Jay Hammond has established a committee to study the matter and the Alaska Federation of Natives is working with that committee to assure Natives a voice in the decision making.

Whatever is decided by the corporations, the AFN input should be listened to long and hard and all rural and Native leaders should make every effort possible to make sure they are included in the process.

What cannot happen is for a system of funds distribution to become a reality without concern to Native needs and with the corporations not prepared to take full advantage of the programs.