

No bush television expansion in 1979

By LAURY ROBERTS

Television service to bush communities will not be expanded this year under Gov. Jay Hammond's proposed budget, and future costs of the satellite delivery system will have to be borne by users.

Hammond's 1980 budget includes a \$2.9 million subsidy for the 18-month-old satellite demonstration project and zero monies for the Office of Telecommunications (OT) which will be phased out. Last year the legislature okayed an \$11 million appropriation with the intent of expanding TV service from five urban centers and 23 rural sites to 176 towns or every community with more than 25 residents. However, Hammond cut the item back to \$2.2 million and just 11 new locations were added.

A steering committee has been set up to oversee the diffusion of OT, and one member told the Tundra Times that a new agency could be organized with telecommunications as a division. Slightly more than ten per cent of the proposed 1980 appropriation will come from user fees, meaning that broadcasters will pay for part of the programming they receive from the satellite. "He means business," said Hammond's special assistant Mike Harper, referring to the governor's intent to end state subsidization of TV delivery by the end of his term.

Weaning delivery of TV service from dependence on state support "without disrupting the status quo will be difficult," according to Robert Walp, director of OT. Several factors figure into determining how the service can be continued: who will

own the 100 small earth stations that transmit the satellite signal; who will control the satellite that provides live programming; and who will foot the bill for it all.

The state must decide what to do with the earth stations jointly owned with RCA. Last year Sen. Frank Ferguson, D-Kotzebue, the father of the TV demonstration project, spearheaded trade between RCA and the state. The state would have given up its share of the earth stations and RCA would have provided 2 years of free programming. But the deal never went through.

Presently, OTZ and United regional utilities want to take over several earth stations which also beam telephone calls. According to Walp, RCA doesn't want to let go of the stations, but the telephone service issue will probably be a "catalyst" to a determination of ownership which will ultimately be made by the Federal Communications Commission. If the telephone utilities get the earth stations then they would be responsible for delivery of TV. RCA's control of the satellite will surely be considered when the ownership question is reviewed.

"There's not total agreement in the state as to where the earth stations should go," said Harper. "And there's been no real business-like discussion in the Administration on that policy. We should do it soon."

One thing is clear, however. Broadcasters and viewers will soon have to pay for TV programming provided by the satellite. Harper thinks the villagers are willing to pay a reasonable

fee for the service. The trick is to find a fair fee assessment structure. "We can't assess a flat charge," said Walp. "We'll have to look at disposable income and pro-rate the cost," Walp sug-

gested that a user cooperative could be formed to purchase service from the satellite owner. In Seward the TV charge is included in the light bill.

Broadcasters who receive live

programming, such as the Super Bowl, virtually free have offered to pay \$17 per hour for satellite coverage. Harper calls this a "low" figure and said more negotiation is needed.



In last week's front page photo of the bush caucus, we inadvertently neglected to identify Jack Fuller, D-Nome, second from right. We can't do that, as our friends in the bush need all the support and recognition possible.

— The Editor