

# AVEC Tolerated, Often Hated

By JAMES EDE

Alaska Village Electrical Cooperative A.V.E.C. An organization familiar to many rural Alaskan residents. It has been sometimes appreciated, often hated, and generally tolerated throughout many Alaskan villages.

A government authorized monopoly, it was brought about by the need of rural villages to face and survive the rapid onslaught of a foreign culture, A.V.E.C. itself being part of that culture. It was contracted to provide electrical power service to these vil-

lages and was subsidized by the state and federal government because of the prohibitive cost to the people.

In many cases the school was the largest consumer in each village and the subsidies were channeled through the State Department of Education and the B.I.A. A.V.E.C. was a step in making public utilities available to rural Alaskans.

That beginning is past now, the once future situation has become the present, and new outlooks and preparation need to be put into action. A.V.E.C. has failed in its long range planning as a rapidly growing wave of problems has been harassing villages covered by A.V.E.C.

The number of villages with power trouble, ranging from operational breakdowns to legal battles over financial disagreements, and even quite lengthy and frequent outages, has increased alarmingly over the past few years with no near solution in sight.

Some of the reasons for this deteriorating situation are:

1. Failure or lack of long range planning by A.V.E.C. They have failed to meet or correctly estimate the future demand for power in many villages, even while sending a home economist around promoting the sales of household appliances and then later telling people not to use them because the existing generators aren't big enough to handle the load. When provided with advance notice of a coming increased power need, even when the notice is two years, A.V.E.C. fails to be ready.

2. Very poor business and public relations sense. Gross mismanagement and an indifferent attitude by the personnel of A.V.E.C. has led to a great waste of taxpayers money and alienated many of the village residents.

A.V.E.C. is a monopoly, subsidized by public funds and has not been watched as closely as it should have been. The cost of service is high, generally due to the special problems involved such as transportation etc., but A.V.E.C. is not required to pay for damages entailed by the consumers due to faulty services, nor even provide the service as they are paid a flat fee in many cases and thus get paid even for down time. All this has created an unsympathetic bureaucracy that is taking advantage of the people and the government.

3. A superior, arrogant attitude pervades A.V.E.C. operations where its relations to the villagers and local operators are concerned. There is no hurry to repair breakdowns and the organization to do so is haphazard and confused. Local operators are not being trained by A.V.E.C., not allowed to have the responsibility necessary, are very much underpaid, and in some cases are not even known to operation managers of A.V.E.C. who come to the villages.

4. The safety factors involved in the operation of such plants are not considered often enough, with breakdowns and fires the resulting consequences.

Because of the public nature of this service contracted by A.V.E.C., the situation of monopoly that exists, and the growing unhappiness with the worsening conditions, it appears that action is needed to remedy the situation.

A legislative investigation including an audit would be responsible action in this direction and increased interest by the various Native organizations in the state would also expediate correction of the problem.