

# Let us benefit from differences: Leask

Alaska's Native corporations and the rest of the business community should view their differences as something positive and use those differences to mutual advantage, AFN President Janie Leask said in a speech at the Alaska State Chamber of Commerce Convention in Sitka.

Leask's speech, "Diversity in Values — Unity in Purpose," was a variation of the chamber's convention theme, "Unity in Diversity." Although individual Native corporations have been members of the Anchorage and state Chambers of Commerce for some time, AFN became a member of the state chamber only last month.

"Alaska is diversity; all of us represent vastly different backgrounds, beliefs and perspectives," she said. "That diversity extends to the Native community as well. From village to village, from region to region, Alaska Natives probably have as many different faces and views as there are in this room; indeed, in this state."

"We in the Native community have learned repeatedly that we can — we must — make our differences work for us, in the pursuit of whatever goals we set. Applied to the state as a whole, that concept of mutual respect and cooperation can lead to a state that fulfills

our highest goals and aspirations," Leask said.

Turning to the Native corporations themselves, Leask said the 12 Alaskan regional corporations — there is a 13th based in Seattle — have combined total assets of more than \$1 billion. For the most part, that does not include the value of the land they own. When the corporations were set up, under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971, the corporations started with about \$400 million.

The regional corporations took in approximately \$422 million in gross revenues last year and collectively, the Native corporations rank as the third or fourth largest employer in the state, Leask said. The business activities of the Native corporations, both regional and village, span every major industry in the state, from oil and gas exploration, to mineral development, coal, timber, tourism and fishing, she said.

Although the Native corporations' first responsibility is to make profits, like any other private business, Leask said, they have a unique obligation to their shareholders to provide more than profits.

"In that respect, they are different from the businesses you represent," Leask said. "Their shareholders expect

more than bottom-line profits. That expectation presents us with a unique challenge. Should the corporations concentrate only on profits? Do we have an obligation to ensure that Native identity is sustained and nourished? How much attention and resources do we devote to the education, cultural and social needs of our people?"

The dual role of the Native corporations — as for-profit businesses and as protectors of Native well-being — needs to be better understood, she continued.

"I ask that you make an effort to understand us; to understand that for many of us, business success, financial and political strength are not the end, but the means to an end."

"We are Alaska Natives, and we want the freedom to sustain and strengthen our Native identities. It may be that that goal turns out to be to our advantage, for it gives us a sense of purpose that holds immense force," Leask said.

She noted that many people in Washington, D.C. and in Alaska, saw the Native Claims Settlement Act as a termination act, designed to erase Alaska Natives as a distinct people.

"If that is indeed the end result, we will all be the poorer for it. Because I believe that in

the end, the mark of Alaska's richness will be in her people; their diversity, their love of freedom to live as they wish, their heritage, their commitment to the land," she said.

"Instead of ignoring our differences, or trying to reduce them, we should embrace them, highlight them, use them, understand them, respect them."