

Sen. Hensley Accuses State of Doing Almost Nothing for Bush

Except for welfare, the State government has taken almost no role in the development and planning in the rural villages of Alaska, according to State Senator William L. Hensley (D-Kotzebue).

In a speech before a Democratic Luncheon, February 10, Hensley said most government input into the villages has been by the federal government, while the state has ignored or impeded rural development. He called for a change.

"The villagers who have been served primarily by the federal government over the years cannot see the state as a helpful agent of change and improvement for village Alaska." He cited the development of fish cooperatives in Kotzebue, Emmonak and Bethel, with little input on the part of the state.

"In fact, Governor Hickel fought the development of the Bethel area cooperative. There was little planning assistance provided by the state."

Hensley documented the emergence of a new type of young person in the villages.

"We have reached the stage in which it is possible for some of the young to pull themselves from a subsistence life, that takes up all their time, to other pursuits in government that allow them to assist the villagers with whom they live who cannot bridge the chasm between an ancient way of life and the modern world."

These young people pursue public life and are working to help their people. It is them, he feels, who helped him to topple the "Terror from Teller" and

gain his State Senate seat.

"Unfortunately, in the Miller administration, bush programs—both state and federal—languished, and the tenor of the last administration was not favorable to the bush. We saw this all the way from our lack of negotiations with the state on the land claims issue to the administration's fighting and hindering the efforts of federal programs such as the OEO funded agencies."

Despite this, he said, such federally pushed programs as Alaska Village Electric Program, Head Start, Rural CAP, regional development corporations and the various contracted AFN programs have made a significant difference in the expectations of the people in rural areas.

"In my opinion, the mandate of the Egan administration is clear: it is the development of jobs and improvement of the economy." To Hensley, this means development of economic activities such as mining, geological studies, development of fisheries, fish processing, reindeer processing, research and development in many areas.

"Unfortunately, the state is not geared to accomplish the goals of the rural areas in terms of structure." He recommends the Egan administration reexamine its policies on bush development, the question of local government, the diversity of federal and state programs, the possibilities for post land claims settlement activity.

"I would also recommend that the legislature assume the responsibility that was given to it by the Constitution and spend a day or two as an assembly of

the unorganized boroughs discussing the issue of what to do about regional local government in the unorganized areas."

He recommends changes in regional government structure to allow planning and coordination of programs and leadership development in the rural regions; a restructuring of Local Affairs Agency and Rural Development Agency; changes "in the revenue sharing program to allow a more equitable sharing by the newly formed village governments that have organized under state law in the past three or four years."

"In my opinion, it should be a policy of the state that the entire state have access to radio communications so that everyone will know what's happening within the state and around the world."

On the land claims issue, Hensley criticized the per capita distribution aspect of a bill introduced in the House by Congressman Wayne Aspinall—a bill he said was the long awaited statement of the position of the head of the important House Interior Committee.

"In other states where per capita distributions have been made in a settlement, there has been virtually no development and there has been pure disaster in these situations..." He feels sure AFN will oppose this.

"We know that the oil companies are finally active in the pursuit of a settlement because they have as much to gain or more so than we and the state. They know that until the underlying Native title is extinguished that they will be faced with suits."