



It's a question of human dignity

Rep. Cliff Davidson, D-Kodiak, is working on a very important piece of legislation this session, which is aimed at solving problems Alaska Natives have had with repatriation of their ancestral human remains.

Current law makes unauthorized and intentional disturbances of unmarked burials illegal, with a fine of \$1,000 or six months in jail or both. But the action is considered only a misdemeanor.

The state also has rules in place that strictly regulate how "historical resources" of the state are treated.

It is our firm belief that the ancestral remains of Alaska Natives are *not* historical resources of the state of Alaska, and people who intentionally disturb these sacred resting places should be considered felons.

Davidson is in the process of clarifying House Bill 436, which he introduced earlier this year, so we can't quote specifically from his bill. But we can state our support for his two goals:

- If unmarked burials were disturbed in the course of legitimate activity, such as road construction or licensed archaeological projects, the remains would be disposed of in a manner consistent with the wishes of the local tribal group from which they came.

- If there were reasonable anticipation that Alaska Native unmarked burials would be necessarily disturbed in the course of legitimate activity, the local tribal group would be notified in advance of such probability and would have the authority, if it chose to accept it, to decide what the disposition of the remains would be.

Apparently, some people in the scientific community have said they fear that Native groups won't give them permission to continue their work or that they won't be allowed enough time. Our answer is that the decision must rest with local tribal officials. If they say no and some scientific information is lost in the process, so be it.

What would these same scientists say if someone came to them, wanting to dig up their relatives for study? It seems unlikely the scientists would give anyone blanket authority to have at the graves.

What we're talking about here is human dignity. It's nothing more, nothing less. Tribal officials must have a say in how their ancestors are treated, and if they refuse to allow the graves to be disturbed, their wishes must have the force of law.

We hope Alaska Natives who are concerned about this issue will contact Davidson to let him know their wishes.