

# DCRA seeks funds for villages, families

by David G. Hoffman  
for the Tundra Times

Alaska's lawmakers have returned to Juneau to pick up where they left off last May. Nearly 1,000 bills were left over from last session and new ones are being introduced daily.

The Department of Community and Regional Affairs is watching legislative activity closely with an eye toward its impact on Alaska's communities.

Gov. Steve Cowper, in his welcoming State of the State address on the second day of the session, spoke of "a new Alaska rising: stronger, more diversified, more certain of our rightful place in the world." Contributing to that are several programs in which the department is involved.

Since its inception in 1987, the Rural Economic Development Initiative, has assisted more than 50 rural communities develop more than 55 projects which created nearly 500 new jobs in the state.

The \$5.2 million that REDI has granted has triggered the investment of another \$19.3 million from other sources. This year the governor is asking the Legislature to add to the program to make it available to more communities.

The requests for services provided by the economic development specialists assigned to the program have grown substantially. The department, with only two specialists now, has been unable to respond to many exciting, creative ideas for development. With additional personnel, the department will be able to assist the creation of many more viable projects in rural Alaska.

In his annual budget address, the governor noted that state revenues for the next five years apparently will be sufficient to run that state smoothly allowing for slight increases. But local governments still reeling from the sharp cutbacks in state and federal spending of recent years, including a 36 percent decline in Revenue Sharing and Municipal Assistance since 1986, are not likely to see substantial restoration of those cuts.

Local governments have been experiencing financial crises which have led to employee layoffs, reduced services, deferred maintenance on community property, closed community facilities and unpaid taxes.

The DCRA has been inundated with requests from many communities for technical assistance to cope with the problems, but has been unable to keep up with the demand.

The department's Financial Outreach Services to Encourage Recovery program assists local governments in the areas of budgeting, revenue enhancement, expenditure reductions and debt work-out plans.

In his Fiscal Year 1991 budget request, Cowper has asked the Legislature to increase funding to the program so it can help more local governments cope with their fiscal problems.

The Legislature will also continue its work revising the state's welfare system to meet changes passed by Congress in 1988. The goal of the Family Support Act is to provide training and attendant services to welfare recipients so they can work themselves out of the welfare system.

DCRA is involved in two ways with this new initiative. The department administers child care programs which will provide services to Alaskans taking their first tentative steps away from welfare dependency.

In order to help these families stay out of the welfare system, 12 months of child care will be provided during

## OPINION

the transition from welfare to work. We are asking lawmakers for more funding to pay for the additional demand this will place on the system.

In addition, the Job Training Partnership Act, administered in Alaska by the department, will begin training a larger number of welfare clients. As they develop new skills to prepare them for jobs, and for one year after training is completed and a job is secured, child care will be provided to enhance the opportunity for successful transition to non-subsidized work. The department is asking for additional funds for this effort.

In Alaska more than 10,000 children have benefited from the Head Start program in the past seven years alone. Many more could be helped if funds were available.

Last fall, President George Bush told the nation's 50 governors gathered at his historic Education Summit, that he planned to pump more money into Head Start. This year the governor has asked the Legislature to add \$1 million to ease the waiting lists in some of our communities.

The coming months will be busy for

the state's 60 elected representatives and senators. No doubt squabbles and minor disagreements will garner headlines occasionally, and, this being an election year, some will posture for the voters. But in the end, I'm confident the Legislature will make the tough choices that will benefit the state as a whole.