

Money decides Edgecumbe future

By Linda Lord-Jenkins

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For three years the future of Mt. Edgecumbe BIA Boarding School in Sitka was a political football kicked around in the halls of Congress. Then Congress agreed to release the school to state control and made an offer to turn the school over to the State of Alaska for control and continuation.

But, even as the state and federal government work out the details of a state-federal transfer, the school is once again being kicked around by state legislators, school boards and individuals who have different goals and needs and who all need school funding money.

A memo of agreement was sent by the BIA to the state this week and included the fed's promise to pay \$20 million to renovate the old school, according to Alan Blume, special assistant to Gov. Bill Sheffield.

But, the money for renovation isn't really at issue any more as people begin to question how operating the old building would affect their

purse strings and their student populations.

Operation costs estimated to be \$7 million annually by Blume, would mean less money spent on other state schools which already are facing cuts in state funding.

Because of that and other reasons, the Association of School Boards recently passed a resolution asking that Mt. Edgecumbe remain closed. Some of the loudest supporters of the resolution came from rural areas with Sidney Huntington of Galena and Robert Nick of the Lower Kuskokwim School District as adamant supporters of the resolution, according to Bob Greene, executive director of the Association of School Boards.

Both cited a desire to control their childrens' education as their prime reasons for opposing the boarding school.

According to Anchorage School Board Chairman Lee Gorsuch, the Edgecumbe opponents felt they had "a greater interest in their kids than the state . . . and if the parents see the need to send the kids away, that was their parental

responsibility."

They also questioned the decision to continue Edgecumbe, according to Gorsuch. "They wondered who said that pouring all this money into a facility is the best use of the funds?

"The School Board commissioners argued that there should be options (other than the four-year Edgecumbe program) and no one argued that, but the focus (of DOE) is on a single program in Sitka," said Gorsuch.

Greene said there was also the feeling that the Rural Education Attendance Area (REAA) schools established under the Mollie Hootch judgment need time to work before the state establishes another boarding school.

Those concerns were primarily rural but the question of money united rural and urban school board members, said Greene, who said "while there was probably not vehement opposition to alternate education designs, they wondered if the Mt. Edgecumbe design is the most appropriate and cost efficient. They ques-

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Mt. Edgecumbe

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tioned if going into a 46-year-old facility and renovating it is the most cost efficient or should we use the existing school systems that have the established abilities and may be closer to home in regional school centers?"

Greene said "We heard last year from the Legislature that they were not funding new programs and we said 'Okay'"

He said the boards face an already smaller state "foundation budget" and the problem of accommodating additional programs if Edgecumbe is re-opened.

Greene said the overall state "foundation budget," which pays for special education, vocational and bilingual education programs is \$430 million annually. If that amount stays stable, it will still be worth less because of the increase in cost-of-living which will pare away \$21 or \$22 million, plus an increased population to serve which will cut \$7 to \$10 million statewide. There also is the need to take over the BIA schools which will cost \$5 million.

The governor has budgeted money to cover the BIA and the growth factor but hasn't covered the \$21 million cost of living, said Greene.

Blume said, however, that the last figures on the foundation impact of Edgecumbe would be a \$1.5 million impact statewide to be divided among the 53 school districts.

The fact that rural board members oppose Mt. Edgecumbe has been made much of but Alaska School Board Member Sam Kito points to another group of rural representatives who have spoken loudly and consistently about wanting the school open — the Alaska Federation of Natives.

More than 900 AFN delegates voted this year and last year and the year before that to keep the school open, said Kito.

In all the resolutions passed by AFN on education this year one supporting Edgecumbe was voted without comment. The one resolution that drew any heated debate was one aimed at seeking better high school preparation for students bound for college and for jobs in the outside world.

"I think that says a lot."

Other opponents of Mt. Edgecumbe also fear a "brain drain" of brighter students from the REAA schools because they aren't getting the courses they need for advanced education in their small village schools. If smarter students leave, they won't help inspire classmates to greater heights.

But, one person said, "There will be (brain drain) anyway . . . from people who want a good education. . . They deserve a choice and a chance."

The "brain drain" has other implications based in money. The state pays each school district a certain amount for

each student in school. In Anchorage that amount may be \$3,500. In the North Slope it may be \$10,000 or \$12,000 per student.

Each time a student leaves the school district for another school, the school budget is cut that much and it doesn't take that many students to cut out a teaching position completely.

Complaints arose from the Lower Kuskokwim area that Mt. Edgecumbe had gutted their high school population and cut their budget dramatically.

Sen. Frank Ferguson, who along with Sen. John Sackett has reservations about the school, said he is worried about the funding. If money is avail-

able, he said Edgecumbe is no problem but if money is tight, he is worried about other schools.

There is also the question of what form the boarding school will take. There is no question that the school will not be what it once was — a school for rural Alaska Native students.

Under state control, the student population can't be limited to Alaska Natives as it once was but several other alternatives are being considered according to Sheffield press secretary Pete Spivey.

Those alternatives include a regular four-year boarding high school, a school for exceptional students, a vocational school or a preparatory school.