

BETHEL COUNCIL UNDER FIRE

Near All White Council Not Representative Says Legal Services

The City of Bethel on the Kuskokwim River has a population that is approximately 90 per cent Eskimo and about ten per cent Caucasian and yet its city council is 100 per cent Caucasian or nearly so.

William H. Jacobs, executive director of the Alaska Legal Services Corporation, in a letter early this week to the Bethel council, charged that the local government was not representative based on the percentages of the population.

"In our preliminary inquiries in Bethel," Jacobs pointed out, "the following allegations were noted:

"Eighty-six per cent of the residents are oriented to the Eskimo language;

"More than fifty per cent

of the residents have little or no facility with the English language.

"Accordingly, everyone agreed that nearly all natives had lost interest in the council activities because they could not follow or understand them, much less take any part.

"A more extreme opinion was often voiced that the council was more like a chamber of commerce—responsive only to the vested interests of its members and without any larger governmental concern for the city as a whole."

Charles Baumbach, lawyer consultant to the Alaska Legal Services from Washington, D. C. under the authorization of the Office of Economic Opportunity, had this to say about the situation:

"The situation is peculiar because the best interests of the commercial people and the best interest of the native people, which are not always the same, tend to fall into one language group or another so that a government that has to represent two language orientations cannot be truly democratic unless it pays attention to both languages."

Baumbach believes that this is a fairly common problem around the State.

Jacobs said that whatever the relative truth of the findings, clearly the council was not reflective of the population and best traditions of representative government had become somewhat lost.

He said surely this result was partly due to language

(Continued on page 6)

BETHEL CITY COUNCIL . . .

(Continued from page 1)

problems. He added that a number of people in Bethel had asked if Legal Services could do anything about the problem.

"In behalf of the native speaking population of Bethel," Jacobs continued, "I urge you at your first opportunity to amend your procedures so that all public deliberations are held in Eskimo as well as English."

He said that there were excellent interpreters available in the city.

"The benefits of achieving representative government far outweigh any losses in short-term expedience.

"In the interests of fairness and good representative government, we are sure that you will agree with these recommendations and act quickly toward a solution," Jacobs concluded.

The Alaska Legal Services is a non-profit corporation incorporated in the State. It is operating on a grant received from the Office of Economic Opportunity.

The program, which has gotten underway just recently, will have eight attorneys when fully staffed

who will handle cases of poor people all over the State regardless of race origin.

The ALSC also has an economic development consultant under the direction of Nat Goodhue. Goodhue spent two years in Chili in South America as a member of the Peace Corps.

Based on 1960 census, the State has about 7,000 poor families of which 4,200 are native people.