

Kobuk Valley Residents Demand To Be Heard

By the time Kobuk Valley residents learned of highway department plans to build a road link from their villages to Fairbanks, preliminary work contracts were already in bid.

Even then, nobody asked them for their opinions on the matter. But they gave their opinions without being asked, and in some villages more than ninety-five per cent of the adults signed petitions against the road construction.

"You've expressed your desire not to be connected by a road system to the interior of Alaska, which is fine. This I certainly hope will have an effect on what easements the Commission recommends...but don't think for a minute that we are in a position to stop these roads from happening. The Highway Department is not too worried about having to condemn rights of way...don't get the idea that

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the fact you've testified against roads to us in going to stop these roads from being built."

— Commissioner James Hurler, Federal-State Land Use Planning Commission Hearings, Kotzebue, April 30, 1974.

During the spring and summer of 1974, Wien Airlines suspended bush service in the Interior and subcontracted the routes to local charter carriers. While the result in some villages has been more dependable service, freight service has virtually ceased in others because the smaller carriers lack cargo capacity.

In most villages, there is no more direct service to and from Fairbanks; thus while passengers from Tokyo, New York, and Houston can now fly with no change of planes, passengers from nearby Native villages must take two or three flights and in many cases overnight in Bettles or Fort Yukon.

"The point isn't so much whether these things are for good or ill, but that the people out in the villages should have some say in them," said Eric Triesman, director of a new project concerned with Bush Transportation.

"Up to now, virtually all decisions on transportation for rural Alaska have been made by bureaucrats in consultation with commercial and industrial interests. Roads were planned before land uses were determined.

"Land use should directly influence transportation planning, not the other way around. The people — the rural Alaskans

whose lives are often drastically affected — have been ignored."

"We want to put rural people in touch with each other, to give them a chance to compare notes on advantages and disadvantages existing transportation systems have had for their villages and uses of their lands.

"We also want to tune them in to the various alternative proposals in the works, like extension of the rail system and the Marine Highway, and get their reactions to these proposals. Most important, we want to educate people on how they can involve themselves in the planning stages — how to find out what the highway department and the transportation commission are up to, and how to make themselves heard."

The project will end with a conference next spring, involving residents of the villages and other rural communities throughout the state.

"We're looking for ideas and suggestions for the conference right now," Treisman said. "Ultimately, we want to involve both rural and urban Alaskans in an ongoing dialogue on the problems and opportunities of rural transportation."

The project is sponsored by the Alaska Humanities Forum and the Fairbanks Environmental Center through a grant by the National Endowment for the Humanities. Treisman, a former deputy director of Alaska Legal Service, helped organize the Min-to conference on Justice in the Bush.