

Bethel faces alcohol vote in Oct. 3 municipal election

by Holly F. Reimer

Tundra Times reporter

On Oct. 3 Bethel residents will be faced with a ballot question: Should alcohol be sold through licensed stores or restaurants?

This is the fifth time voters in Bethel have decided an issue relating to alcohol in the last two years.

This ballot issue is the result of a petition signed by 288 residents. It will appear on the regular municipal election ballot on Oct. 3.

On Sept. 4, 1988, a state law went to effect allowing community votes only once during a one year period to

ease alcohol restrictions.

Votes can be called for more often only if communities seek to tighten their liquor controls. In Bethel's case, three of the earlier votes were before the law went into effect.

Bethel is currently "damp," which means that alcohol cannot be sold, but people can import it in limited supplies and have it in their homes.

Gene Peltola, president of the Association of Village Council Presidents in Bethel, said it's a democratic right for the community to have the vote, but he added he is per-

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sonally against the sale of alcoholic beverages in Bethel.

"There are so many deaths related to alcohol. People drowning in the river and freezing to death in the winter. I'm against it," Peltola said.

"I support the right to have the vote, but I don't support the issue," he said. "I think this local option vote will fail."

According to Bethel Police Chief Kevin Clayton, the idea of going wet seems to be gaining support.

"A year ago there were many people who adamantly opposed a wet status for Bethel. But, lately, many people have changed their position and are willing to try going wet again," Clayton said.

Capt. Glenn Godfrey, Alaska State Troopers chief of Rural Enforcement Services, commented on the number of votes in Bethel.

"It's getting to be a routine thing in Bethel to vote on the status," Godfrey said.

"From past experience, like in Kotzebue and Bethel, the enforcement priorities shift. The bootlegging will be almost non-existent," he said.

Godfrey said from an enforcement standpoint, if the law does pass, disorderly conduct, alcohol abuse and violence may be on the rise.

On the other hand, Godfrey said, there will be less money and manpower spent trying to catch bootleggers.

"Some people may not like to hear this, but it's the truth," he said.

Godfrey said if Bethel does change its status, it may affect some of the surrounding villages that have banned the sale and/or importation of alcohol in their villages.

"Some of the surrounding villages voiced opposition to that in the past. Many may be disappointed," Godfrey said.

Both Peltola and Clayton said it's difficult to assess how people throughout the rest of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta feel about the issue. They both said they haven't heard any comments from other villages in the area about how they feel yet about the vote.