

Political work needed to preserve our ways

Considering the state of Native affairs in Alaska today it is hard to envision a time when Alaska Natives were not as we are today. Because of our record of political unity on state issues, we are a relative powerful minority.

This was not always the case. It was only 60 years ago, the age of some of our grandfathers and grandmothers, that we did not have the power of the vote. Although we were the people who had lived on the land for thousands of years, we were denied the basic right of selecting the people who made decisions about that land; about our future.

That changed in 1924 and because of changes that that right to vote wrought, we now are in a position where our leaders sit on virtually every decision-making panel in the state from the Legislature to the Boards of Regents to the heads of state commerce agencies.

But that has not always been the case and might not always be the case if we are not jealously protective of our right to vote and of our responsibility to vote and participate in the political process.

When the first white man set foot on Alaskan land, we were the only people. Since then our numbers have remained the same but we have diminished in the now-important area of "ratio." While we were 25 percent of the state population a mere decade ago, we now are only 16 percent of the population. And the trend is continuing. With more people moving to Alaska, we might soon be only 10 percent of the population.

Where once the people who lived here who were not Native tended to be people who made their lives here for good, and who understood the heritage of Alaska Natives, the state is now being populated with people who have little understanding of what it means to us to be Native.

Their concept of Alaska Natives and issues important to us is shaped by the unfortunates they see on Anchorage's Fourth Avenue, Fairbanks Second Street and Juneau's First Street. They don't know what an Alaska village is like or what it means to go to fish camp.

If we are to maintain the position we have in this state and to defend the decision-making power we have fought so hard for, we must recognize the need to participate in every part of the political process.

Alaska Natives have maintained an outstanding voting record over the years. Our vote was crucial in putting every governor in state office for the last decade. And our vote can be important in selecting the next president.

On March 15 Democrats across the state will gather to begin the process to select Democratic Convention delegates. The Republican caucuses will be held March 20. We must be part of that process. Further meetings will be held to continue those processes. We must be there.

We must take our interest in preserving our culture and lives and way of life into the Western political process because if we don't, we run the risk of losing everything we fought to gain.