

Resident preference hire bill needs the support of Alaska Natives

by Dennis Davidson

Current attempts at "legislating" a resident preference hire bill are beginning to approach the problem from an economic and social damage angle.

This approach attempts to establish a connection between non-resident employment as a detrimental cause of economic and social distress on the residents of an area impacted by non-resident hire on a project or development in the area.

Current legislation attempts to illustrate that the loss of jobs to outsiders can cause economic and social harm to residents of a local area, which of course is true to varying degrees in different areas of Alaska.

Rural Alaska is especially affected because job opportunities are in short supply and play a vital role in the supply of needed cash for the local economy.

Two sections of SSB 271 or its counterpart SSHB 466 — attempt to address the economic and social harm done by outsiders taking employment opportunities in rural Alaska.

One section (sec 36.10.160) would require that 50 percent of the jobs in an "economically distressed" area, sub-area or census division be provided to qualified residents of the area on each project located within the area. The second section (36.10.170) further states that qualified minority residents of an economically distressed area "shall be given preference for at least 25 percent of employment on each project" located within the area.

The preference applies to worker hours on a craft-by-craft basis.

This proposed legislation will apply to all natural resource development occurring on state-owned (or leased) lands. It will apply to construction, repair and maintenance projects, funded partially or wholly by the state including the University of Alaska and Alaska Railroad Corp. It includes public works projects under grants to municipalities.

These two sections of SSB 271 or SSHB 466 will, if enacted, also provide much needed local preference for rural residents on jobs within their areas which attract other Alaska Resident workers from big cities such as Anch/Matsu, Fairbanks, etc.

In order to see that benefits of resident hire are shared by rural Alaskans, it is extremely important that Alaska Natives and other rural residents provide both firsthand testimony on economic and social distress brought about by non-resident hire and provide support for resident hire initiatives contained in SSB 271. or SSHB 466.

Rural testimony and support will help assure that resident hire legislation does not end up benefiting only residents of the large population centers like Anch-Matsu or Fairbanks, where large concentrations of resident workers reside.

Organized labor, with most members located in larger population centers, is a major advocate for resident hire legislation and has endorsed SSB 271 including the two sections affecting rural Alaskans.

However, I believe their support of these two sections has been and will continue to be of secondary importance because their membership is concentrated to a great extent in the urban areas.

They will support these sections for the same fundamental reasons that Alaska Natives and other rural residents should consider when supporting SSB 271: more job opportunities for all Alaskans.

Urban, rural, union and non-union residents will benefit from resident hire legislation and Alaskans must resist efforts by critics and opposition of resident hire to divide its supporters, especially union vs. non-union or those recently professing concern that Alaska Natives' employment needs are not being adequately considered in resident hire bills.

While this sounds good at first, stop and look at who is expressing their concern and at the industries these individuals represent and their record on Alaska Native hire.

You soon see the actual reasons behind their statements is to further divide those who support employment preference for Alaska residents.