

Interview with Sen. Ted Stevens

By NORMA BOWKETT

FAIRBANKS—Senator Ted Stevens "would have liked to have seen greater protection for older people in the native communities" built into the native land claims bill that cleared Congress this week but, he said in an interview here yesterday, legislation as complex as this

"could not completely satisfy anybody."

Some AFN leaders, some state people, and representatives from federal agencies have reservations about this legislation, Stevens said, but "that's as it should be. The bill does reflect substantial problems raised by the state, satisfies the basic de-

Interview with Senator Stevens...

(Continued from page 1)

mands of native people, and has built into it protections for the non native community to assure that their rights will be protected too."

Still, Stevens said, "it's going to require real leadership to see that the older people of the villages do receive benefits from the settlement."

These older people, he said, "are substantially outnumbered and are not going to benefit from scholarships and long range programs...Many of them financed the search for settlement and ought to benefit before they pass away."

The land provision of the bill was the most difficult all the way through, Stevens said, because "it was hard to get people to focus on the large size of the State of Alaska and it was difficult to get people speaking for Alaska natives to accept the concept of contiguity."

"Once we did what I think the village people wanted anyway," he said, "and identified the lands around the villages, we had no problem."

Senator Stevens credits no person or group of persons with passage of the bill, pointing out that it "was sort of like the statehood bill" in that it required a united effort on the part of many individuals and groups to succeed.

Native leaders "made a substantial effort and succeeded," Stevens said. "We arranged meetings for Don Wright with the President. These were very effective. Don and the majority of the AFN members there in Washington acted in a very responsible way."

He feels, though, that criti-

cism of a meeting between Alaska's congressional delegation and Governor William A. Egan was "unfortunate."

John Borbridge, President of the Tlingit and Haida Indians' Central Council has been quoted as saying that the meeting "created a deep sense of native resentment."

The meeting was held, Stevens said, at the request of Senator Alan Bible (D-Nevada), who charged the elected officials with the task of coming up with a united position.

"Certainly the native leaders were involved all the way along," Stevens said. "I had met with the AFN leaders the night before..."

Pointing to an article in a recent issue of the Tundra Times in which Don Wright was described as saying that he was "greatly disappointed in the inability of the members of the Alaska Congressional delegation and the Governor of Alaska to unify on one solid land claims position," Stevens laughed and said, "Then we got together to do it and we got criticized."

Senator Stevens said that he believes the President will sign the bill into law.

Then, he said, the Secretary of the Interior will have a short time frame for action. "We did this intentionally," he said.

Not only will the secretary have to make basic decisions about land withdrawals, Stevens said, but he will also have to set up procedures for hardship determinations.

"I talked with the secretary the day after the bill passed," he said. "He is going to set up department-wide briefings and

create a task force to start lining up procedures to follow in carrying out his heavy duties under the bill."

And, once the bill is signed, villages will have to start earmarking the land they want in terms of what they think the population will be. This can't be final, however, Stevens said, until the role of all natives is complete.

Because the state will be able to start selecting land immediately—from land outside of the 25 townships—Stevens said that "we should see action from the state immediately."

Stevens also said that some of the things that aren't in the bill are significant by their omission. There is no competitive leasing provision in the legislation for example.

Nor is there any real restraint on the use of money "except that it flows through a corporate structure to the beneficiaries involved."

This is the first settlement in recent history, Stevens said, that has "not required a plan in advance from the people who are going to get the money."

Is there an agreement between the federal administration and the AFN that the President will not sign the bill into law unless it is approved by AFN?

"I don't know if such an agreement exists or not," Stevens said. "I hope we don't have to cross that bridge."

"If this settlement, which is the most generous in all of history" won't do, "I don't think we'll ever get a native land claims bill through again..."