

Interview -

Jeff Smith, city manager of Kotzebue

By Steven C. Levi

For the *Tundra Times*

KOTZEBUE - When it comes to making a living in Kotzebue, Jeff Smith, has one of the toughest jobs around. As City Manager, he's the one who gets the blame when times get tight. "I wanted this job," he told the *Tundra Times*, "and I'm glad I got it. Kotzebue is my home and I have a family here so we feel the impact of every decision that's made."

There is no question that Smith is facing tough decisions in the year ahead. Perhaps the greatest problem is the city's \$1.4 million deficit. Residents voted a 6 percent sales tax in July which should balance the budget over a four-year period but there are still fiscal problems. More and more residents are buying their goods in Anchorage and Maniilaq's unsteady financial condition threat-

ens to add another economic burden to the city.

Costco had taken a bite out of Kotzebue's tax base, Smith agreed, "but Kotzebue is fighting back. The retailers have woken up and are offering better quality and ser-

vice. Both of those are important here. But that's not the full story. The people who buy in Anchorage and ship it to Kotzebue don't think of freight costs as part of the shopping expense. If they did,
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they would find that Anchorage goods aren't all that inexpensive."

Another economic problem Kotzebue faces is Cominco's direct flights to Red Dog from Anchorage. "That's hurt us. When Cominco came here, we were promised a positive financial impact in the city. With the direct flights from Anchorage, Kotzebue residents who work at Red Dog now live in Anchorage. These are good paying jobs and we are losing out on their financial impact."

But there are bright spots. There is hospital construction planned for next year, 20 units of NANA housing, an upgrade of water and sewer systems and the long term possibility of the development of Arctic slope coal. Tourism also holds promise. "NANA is handling tourism correctly. They have good buses and offer a quality product." That's a growing industry that will mean jobs here in Kotzebue.

It's not easy being city manager but, two months into the job, Jeff Smith has a good handle on what CAN be done and what problems lie ahead. "As a city, our relationship with the citizens is important. It's their money. My job is to see that the quality service THEY want is provided."