

Tribal Bill Founders in Fairbanks

By JEFFREY R. RICHARDSON

A bill that would recognize regional, non-profit Native associations as tribal organizations and prevent village groups from contracting with the federal government to take over federal programs was not well received in a hearing last week in Fairbanks.

The bill (S.B. 2046), introduced by Senator Mike Gravel, is designed to recognize the right of the non-profit associations to contract to deliver federal programs in their regions. The associations have had to fight harder for federal dollars because they are not listed as "tribal organizations" which have contracting priority under the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975.

Representatives of the Association of Interior Eskimos and the villages of Arctic Village and Venetie blasted the bill and criticized the performance of the Tanana Chiefs Conference in delivering services. They told representatives of the Senate Select Committee on Indian Affairs that the ability of other organizations to contract should be preserved.

Although the non-profit associations played a key role in drafting the bill, they are not entirely happy with it either. In an interview last week, Clifford Black, president of AFN/HRC, Inc., the statewide group made up of the 12 non-profit regional associations, said it was never the intention of the non-profits to exclude the villages from contracting on their own. He said the associations were seeking tribal recognition in order to avoid having to obtain resolutions from every village in their region stating village support for contracting, a very costly process.

"In my mind, what we have to do is get the regions recognized as tribes so that the village right to contract is protected, but we don't have to spend thousands of dollars getting village approval on a constant basis," Black said.

Michael Cox, minority counsel for the Senate committee, in response to a question from one of the speakers at the Fairbanks hearing, said that the bill would have the effect of preventing other organizations besides the regional associations from contracting.

Fred Baker, executive vice-president of the Tanana Chiefs Con-

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ference, outlined the advantages of having regional associations deliver social services, including more efficient administration, lower administrative costs and a stronger voice in advocating human needs. He said it is unlikely that the federal government would be willing to appropriate the funding required to contract with a large number of village groups.

When Cox asked Baker if Tanana Chiefs would support the idea of amending the Self-Determination Act to include the non-profits, rather than passing S.B. 2046 and excluding the villages, Baker responded, "I think that would be a real viable alternative."

In southeastern Alaska, Edward Thomas, president of the Southeast Alaska IRA Councils, criticized the Senate bill and the dominance of the regional associations in federal contracting:

"The IRA councils of Southeast Alaska feel strongly that programs administered on behalf of communities by the regional agencies should be done only after ratification by those communities through the use of consenting resolutions. Too often when a non-consenting resolution system is used, the resolutions are sent to supporters of regional management who seldom, if ever, participate in the local affairs, and, therefore, the resolutions never get to the people for approval or disapproval. One reason regional agencies give for not wanting to use consenting resolutions is because it would cost too much to go to each community to get the resolutions signed. I ask this: How do the regional agencies get the services to the people if they do not communicate regularly with the communities? It is true that communications are difficult in rural Alaska, and this is the main reason why programs should stem from community needs and not from the regional power structures.

"It is also true that a regional agency could better deal with some of the needs of the people; however, any regional government must be built from the local government up, and not the reverse."