

Human Rights Group Lauds Bartlett, Gravel

The Alaska State Commission for Human Rights, at the close of hearings in Bethel recently, lauded the efforts of Sen. E.L. (Bob) Bartlett and Speaker of the State House of Representatives Mike Gravel for their efforts to alleviate problems in housing and education faced in rural Alaska villages.

Bartlett's Native housing bill, now in Senate subcommittee hearings, will establish a low-cost loan and grant program for home-building in wilderness areas.

At present, villagers cannot apply for loans under existing federal programs because weather and climate conditions limit sewer and water systems in communities, part of the qualifica-

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tions for present federal home-building loans.

Loans from commercial banks are not available because chronic unemployment, long a problem in the bush areas of the state, produces a low credit-rating.

Gravel's multi-million dollar regional high school package will build schools for rural youngsters nearer their homes, and offer a chance for education beyond the elementary level to students kept out of high school because of overcrowded facilities.

The House Speaker, now campaigning against incumbent Rep. Ralph Rivers for Alaska's sole seat in Congress, introduced the school proposal as a bond issue to be put before the voters in next fall's elections.

An official closing statement of the Human Rights hearings in Bethel blasted the "paternalistic government attitude" that has led to demoralization and a welfare-economy in Alaska's villages.

Housing, health and sanitation standards were described as "deplorable."

"To speak of human rights in the face of the living conditions that exist in the villages is meaningless, for the most basic American right of an opportunity to fight for a better life for one's family does not exist. With the highest infant mortality rate and lowest life expectancy in the nation, the housing, health and sanitation standards can only be described as deplorable.

"Through a paternalistic governmental attitude that fosters not the virtues of hard work and initiative, but acceptance of a life of mere existence, we have isolated one of the hardest and most self reliant people in the world, leaving them with little opportunity for self improvement.

"Because of the remoteness of these areas, too few Alaskans, including our own

government officials, have had an opportunity to see first-hand the conditions that exist in the villages. Because of the many years of neglect by a government far removed in Washington, and the trials and problems of an infant state government in transition, only now are the problems beginning to be attacked.

"At a time when the Federal government is spending billions of dollars each year for economic aid to underdeveloped foreign nations, it is high time that a critical review be given to the needs of our own people.

"The Human Rights Commission particularly lauds the efforts of Senator Bartlett in introducing legislation in the United States Congress for grants for native housing; and Speaker of the House Mike Gravel in introducing legislation for regional high schools.

"These efforts must only be the forerunners in a massive new joint program of the state and federal governments to alleviate the problems of the Alaskan natives."