Governor won't attend UTA meeting

By Bill Hess
Tundra Times

Alaska Governor Bill Sheffield says he will not attend the United Tribes of Alaska general assembly in Anchorage next month, a fact UTA President Willie Goodwin of Kotzebue reacted to with disappointment.

Goodwin says that during a visit to Kotzebue two weeks ago, Sheffield told him he would speak at the Oct. 19 meeting. Earlier, Sheffield had said he would be unable to speak to UTA because of prior commitments.

"We wanted to hear his preliminary response about how how the state will deal with sovereignty issues," Goodwin said. "We have made every attempt to meet with the governor, we have invited him to our board meetings, but he seems reluctant to come."

Goodwin said he was especially disappointed that the governor's office informed UTA about the decision after two weeks had lapsed. Sheffield wrote saying that the state had not yet developed a policy governing tribal/state relations and that the governor had contacted Native organizations most interested in the issue for input.

Goodwin said the real issues concerning sovereignty are being addressed at the village level, which, he said, is where the governor should go. Goodwin cited the Native-hire ordinance recently adopted by the Indian Reorganization Act government of Kotzebue, Venetie's efforts to take over sovereign governmental functions on land owned by the tribe, including conducting its own oil-lease sale and game and fish management, as examples.

He also mentioned Tyonek, where the council has ordered two non-tribal-member families to leave the village under provisions of the IRA constitution as another example of sovereignty issues the villages are interested in.

"We're going to discuss all of the issues, and get input from the villages about how they want to deal with the governor's office," Goodwin said.

"I think the governor is trying to side-step the sovereignty issue. He's told us we can write letters back and forth, but we know we won't get any place until we can sit down together and talk."