

Lestenkof assumes control of fast-moving BIA

The Area Director for the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Alaska, Jacob 'Jake' Lestenkof, is a relative newcomer to the BIA, having been appointed to the position in May of 1981. He brings more than 20 years of experience in government service to the area director's office as well as a number of years of public service associated with Alaska Natives.

After retiring from the Department of Military Affairs in 1974, Lestenkof started a manpower office for the Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN) under the direction of Roger Lang. Two years later, when Lestenkof left the AFN to pursue private interests, it was not as a manpower specialist but as the organization's executive vice-president.

In 1977 Lestenkof accepted the position of executive director for the Cook Inlet Native Association (CINA) and stayed with CINA until coming to the Bureau of Indian Affairs in 1981.

Presently at the helm of an organization that is changing faster today than at any other time in its history, Lestenkof appears to have a tight rein on most of the problems associated with the rapid change.

The Tlingit and Haida Tribal News interviewed Mr. Lestenkof about the changes presently taking place within the BIA.

TRIBAL NEWS: Can we start with a general description of your duties as area director?

Lestenkof: O.K. Of course I serve as the chief executive of a very large federal agency here in Alaska. We have a management responsibility for 1,000 to 1,100 employees. That figure includes our education people which we provide administrative support for.

"Our budget runs from \$60 to 78 million (per fiscal year). In addition to managing those resources — people and money — there are other operational concerns that a chief executive has to be aware of. Especially in dealing under P.L. 638, the Self Determination Act. Executing that mission with the tribes and tribe's contracts is a big responsibility.

"The other responsibility that has taken a lot of my time in this past year is in implementing the changes brought on by the new administration in our country. We are in a period of retrenchment with some new directions and re-direction.

"We have had budget reductions, but moreover we're experiencing a philosophical re-direction. These kinds of changes require us to critically review our missions, our roles and accomplishments, . . . and to insure that they are as relevant in 1982 as they were in 1941. Sometimes in government we fail to do that, we fail to assess and update what we're doing. This government re-direction has almost forced us to re-assess ourselves, which



BIA Area Director Jake Lestenkof

I think is healthy.

"I keep saying to tribal organizations and to our people that we can't afford to duplicate services that other units of government and agencies are able to provide constitutionally or because of their local responsibilities.

"I'm primarily referring to the State of Alaska as having a greater wherewithal now than it did 20 years ago, and its ability to assume and administer a lot of the roles the Bureau (BIA) had heretofore. Simply because the old Territory of Alaska and the new State of Alaska just didn't have the resources to assume those responsibilities.

"In summing up the question concerning the normal management of a large bureaucracy in a changing environment, I think its major task is blue-printing out new roles for the future."

T.N.: "Are the budget reductions your primary reason for the reduction in staff here in Juneau and the move to Anchorage?"

L.: "There are other reasons for the move, but the budget cuts throughout our country have instigated and accelerated a lot of action. The Bureau is re-aligning nationally and,

starting in fiscal year 1983, the plan is to reduce the 12 area offices to 6 regional headquarters. We're part of that total scheme.

"Alaska and the Navajos are retaining special offices that won't be part of the regional arrangement but will report directly to Washington (D.C.). As for our decision to relocate, it's based in part on the new arrangement and on earlier studies recommending that the area office of the BIA be located near the majority of tribal organizations' headquarters, which is the Anchorage area.

"With Anchorage being the communications center for the state, it's easier for us to get through to the rural parts of the state. So, based on that, we're re-deploying and re-aligning the structure (of the BIA) here in Alaska. The area office will remain here in Alaska. The area office will remain here in Juneau along with the administrative division and the trust division.

"It's important, I think, in the transition period of two to three years, that the top decision-maker in the bureau, me, be co-located with the decision makers of the state: the governor, his cabinet and the Leg-

islature."

T.N.: "Are you in favor of the State of Alaska assuming the administrative responsibility of the BIA's day schools?"

L.: "Transferring the schools out of the bureau to the state has been a difficult and emotional situation, but it must be understood that this whole transferring process has been taking place for a number of years.

"The bureau began transferring schools in 1939 to the Territory of Alaska (the first day school transference). Subsequently, then and after statehood, the whole process has been going on, only now it's accelerating. In 1963, there was an agreement reached between the bureau and the State of Alaska that spoke about transferring all of the schools over a period of time and going for a single educational system.

"I support that, I think that is has to come about. Alaska Natives are citizens of the state and they have to participate in the whole spectrum of state services including education.

"As for village schools, we presently operate 37 and plan to transfer approximately 17 of them to the State REAAs

(Regional Education Attendance Areas) at the end of this school year. I'm not too fearful as far as the village schools are concerned because the infrastructure is already there in the communities.

"We only run elementary schools. In most all these communities, the state and REAAs are running the high schools. Many of them (high schools and elementary schools) are co-located, some even in connected buildings, so the educational infrastructure in those communities exists.

"We're not creating something entirely new. Once we get over the emotional gap, the state takeover will not be very traumatic.

"We are, however, concerned about Mt. Edgecumbe High School. Mt. Edgecumbe is our only boarding school and it provides an opportunity for many children who would otherwise have difficulties at the local level. The rural high school program in Alaska is still in its infancy and it still has many problems.

"I think they will solve those problems in the future but right now there still is that unstableness about the school system and REAAs created under the Molly Hootch mandate. Because of that we've been interested in seeing Mt. Edgecumbe retained for another year. After that year we plan to close Mt. Edgecumbe. Hopefully, by that time the total school picture in Alaska will be clearer."

T.N.: "I attended the closure hearings (Mt. Edgecumbe High School closure) in Sitka and there were a lot of people testifying against the closure next year or the year after. It seems that most Natives feel that the school should remain open and that the decision to close it is an arbitrary one on the part of the Interior. The consensus of those who testified is that the Department of the Interior is just going through the motions of taking and recording testimony on the matter; that the decision has been made and the hearing won't affect the decision. How do you feel about this?"

L.: "The closure of Mt. Edgecumbe and the bureau moving out of there is nothing new, that whole plan has been around for a long time. In the late 60's or early 70's the great amount of money appropriated by Congress to upgrade the school was held in abeyance because of the wishes of some of the Native leaders and Native communities stating that it was desirable to create local high schools so students can be close to their families while attending school.

"So, much of the money that was designated for upgrading Mt. Edgecumbe never came to be used because of that. Then, shortly thereafter, the Molly Hootch case came to be.

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Changes are fast and furious for BIA

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creating local high schools. The bureau knew all along that it would eventually move out of the Mt. Edgecumbe facility.

"What is unfortunate is the fact that we never set a date stating the time and intention to leave. That's one of our problems, we should have done that some years ago. We did not and we were kind of forced by budget process to accelerate and finally make the decision to close.

"I think Mt. Edgecumbe provides a greater array of subjects and opportunities that are not common to small village

L.: "Well, you know I'm emotionally tied to Mt. Edgecumbe, having attended that school. It's one of those policy decisions (Molly Hootch) that, unfortunately, are made in court that have impacts such as this.

"If the State of Alaska, the Native community and the Interior Department, working through the Bureau of Indian Affairs, some years ago laid down a blueprint for education in Alaska we probably would not be at this point.

"The Native community, on the other hand, is not all in favor of retaining Mt. Edge-

were some problems over there, but Lee Demmert has done a good job. It's unfortunate to see a successful school like Mt. Edgecumbe be phased out, but things change. If the country and the state could afford it, to have some place like Mt. Edgecumbe continue indefinitely would be fine. But when you are working with limited resources it's difficult to justify.

"Trust responsibility — I stated before, and I was happy to see U.S. Senator (Ted) Stevens state it in the paper recently, that there is a special relationship between the federal government and Alaska Natives. But that special relationship doesn't come in providing services that may not be needed.

"It ought to come in a form of insuring that people who have a special relationship with, i.e. Alaska Natives, are well taken care of and well provided for. I believe that happened up here before. Where the territory was not able to provide adequate education, the bureau came in and did it. When it is able to do it, in the form of the State of Alaska now, then I think it (the BIA) ought to stand back. "If in the future, for some reason or other, the State of Alaska is no longer able to provide adequate education, the bureau should step in again. This is how it ought to work as far as a trust . . . and I hate to use the phrase 'trust responsibility' carelessly as so many people do, I prefer to refer to it as a 'special relationship.'"

T.N.: "Is there anything you'd like to touch upon before we close this interview?"

L.: "Yes, first I'd like to re-emphasize that the 'special relationship' between Alaska Natives and the federal government does exist and I think

instruments that it takes to make them strong and long lasting, such as the IRAs, I think we must be supportive of.

"We have a trust relationship with land, approximately two million acres of land that will be under the purview of the bureau in the form of (Native) allotments. I think we need to strengthen that activity because, at the rate we're going, it's going to be 2070 (AD) before we finish the job. Many people will have passed on by that time, including me. So we need to re-deploy some of our resources

porations deserve some concern, and we are concerned about them. We're beginning to look into the situation to see what we can do."

T.N.: "So where the bureau is moving away from some programs, they may incorporate new programs in the future?"

L.: "Yes, I think something that we should recognize is the fact that the services developed for the bureau to execute are normally designed for an environment called 'reservations.' We don't have reservations in Alaska, except for Metlakatla. We need to create a bureau that is adapted to the

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schools. But we're at a period where we cannot afford the luxury of having a high school in the village and also another high school that's available to a parent to send a child elsewhere. Unless it's a private school. If it's a school supported by either the state government or the federal government, I don't know whether we can afford that luxury anymore. Costwise.

T.N.: "I listened to George Davis of Hoonah (at the closed hearing) speak of the need for Mt. Edgecumbe school as an alternative school, he spoke of the vast amount of money taken out of Alaska by way of its natural resources — gold, oil, timber and fish. He recounted the good that the school, through its graduate students, has accomplished in the past. To put his testimony in a nutshell, his message was simply — Alaska is so rich — the federal government has definitely profited by Alaska — yet it cannot afford to provide a much-needed service to the young people of the state, who are not just children of Alaskans, but children of America — American citizens first and foremost. And that what would be good for the American citizen — the nation would ultimately benefit from at some future date.

"There's no amount of explanation or justification that will convince people that think in these terms that it's not a selfish move on the part of the federal government to close the school because they cannot afford it. Some people see the closure as a breach in the 'Trust Responsibility' between the federal government and the Native population of Alaska. Can you respond to this?"

cumbe. There are many parts of the state's Native community, Native organizations, that would prefer to see Mt. Edgecumbe close.

"Mt. Edgecumbe creates a competing situation between it and the local high schools. You might have read a few years ago where the REAAs in the Bethel area were faced with a problem in the fall because their student counts were down and they couldn't really run a high school program after many of the students elected to go to Mt. Edgecumbe. It's hard to run a program when you have these sorts of conditions.

"Because of that, many

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"Special programs that the bureau runs designed for Natives ought to continue, not programs that are designed for poor people. I think, also that, over a period of years, we've gotten lazy by receiving a lot that we could have done without."

REAAs would prefer to see the closure of Mt. Edgecumbe. The Alaska School Board has supported the closure for many years. The State of Alaska is on record for closing Mt. Edgecumbe, they want to move to a single educational system here in the state.

"I guess that's coming to pass. The Bureau should be proud of what it's done in education. It's been maligned and it's been criticized quite a bit in the past about what they've done in Alaska, but I think they've done a good job in education, I think they've done a good job with Mt. Edgecumbe.

"For a period of time there

my superiors in Washington (D.C.) appreciate, understand and feel the same way I do about that 'special relationship.'

Second, we have to look critically at the roles that the bureau has played in the past, what roles it's playing today and what roles it will play in the future.

"There are a number of things the bureau did that the State of Alaska can very well do and probably do better, with a greater amount of resources and more local control. The Bureau of Indian Affairs really ought to be concerned about the viability of the tribes in Alaska. Any legal

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toward that end.

"Finally, I think there might be a new role for the bureau regarding Alaska Native Settlement Claims Act villages. The village corporations, formed under ANSCA, must be successful in order to be the true managers of the land that was conveyed to them. If they are not healthy and viable, the whole integrity of the Claims Act, the success of the Act itself is in jeopardy.

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vide support in that area in the future.

T.N.: "The bureau will help then, if there proves to be a critical need in the gap left by the elimination of the General Assistance Program?"

L.: "I think that we are certainly not going to stand by if people are starving. That won't be the case. We have been trying to work very closely with the State to insure that there are no extreme difficulties. For the Interior Department to re-institute a welfare program like general assistance — I don't think that will come about. Because we were somewhat unique in providing that program in Alaska. Elsewhere, that's really not provided except where there is a local condition where welfare is paid from local taxes.

T.N.: "The majority of Native Alaskans have been riding the wave of economic prosperity with the rest of the state, now, with the federal cutbacks, the economic slowdown, the subsistence issue rapidly becoming a showdown and the dim forecast for the '82 fish processing industry, it looks as if Natives will have to bear perhaps more than a fair share of the burden, do you see any good emerging from all of these changes taking place?"

L.: "I do see some good coming out of these changes. But, I think some time ago, we made a mistake. Alaska Natives are not poor. There are a few poor Alaska Natives, but the majority are not. We tended to lump Alaska Natives under a lot of the OEO (Office of Equal Opportunity) programs of the past for the poor. It was a mistake. Those

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us too dependent on Washington and the federal dollar. Alaska Natives were and are independent and we are not going to strengthen that independence with more welfare money."

T.N.: "Where do you and the bureau stand on the subsistence issue?"

L.: "Unfortunately the subsistence issue has taken on a kind of racial overtone. It is not a racial issue, it's more of a locational issue, I think.

"There is a different way of living in Alaska, in the rural

parts of our state. We apparently have agreed, among ourselves, that ruralness and remoteness of many of our communities is good for us. It is a part of Alaska, a very important part of our total state. In order to live in those communities you have to take from the land and the sea in the subsistence way. Not only because of the way of life, but even because of an economic need."

"The cost of living in rural communities is very, very high. In recognition of that, we continue to run the North Star.