

'More ambitious' elders conference starts Tuesday

by Barbara Crane

Tundra Times reporter

"Restructuring Traditional Native Celebrations" is the theme for this year's 11th annual Elders Conference sponsored by the Alaska Federation of Natives.

The conference will begin Tuesday at 8:30 a.m. in Anchorage's Egan Convention Center and continue through dinner that evening.

"This year's program is a lot more ambitious than those we've had before," said Julie Petro, conference organizer.

"My feeling is that the conference

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• 160 delegates expected

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should be more than just a meeting — it should be a special day for the elders.”

About 160 delegates from all over the state are expected, Petro said, and any Native elder is invited and welcome to participate.

The day will begin with a Native dance performance and opening prayer. Janie Leask, AFN president, will welcome the elders to the conference.

Elders from three regions of Alaska will then talk about their traditional ways of celebrating.

Poldine Carlo of Rampart will discuss Athabascan traditions; Alfred Qaagraq Wells Sr., chairman of the NANA Regional Elders Council, will speak on Inupiat Eskimo traditions; and Charles Nelson of Ketchikan will share Haida traditions with the group.

“After lunch, the conference will break into small discussion groups to talk about traditional ways of celebrating,” said Mary Schaeffer, conference moderator.

“We decided it’s better to meet in small groups because the elders feel more comfortable talking that way. Then later each of these groups will give a report to the general assembly,” Schaeffer said.

The elders will also hear reports from various regional elders conferences held over the past year.

Before concluding the conference, elders will discuss and decide what resolutions they want to present to the full AFN Convention.

“Every year they have different concerns,” Schaeffer said. “We never know what those will be until they get together and begin talking among themselves.”

Cook Inlet Tribal Council is treating the elders to lunch, and dinner will be served by Our Lady of Compassion Care Center. Princess Tours is providing four motor coaches to transport the elders.

Each of the elders will receive a tote bag filled with gifts and information.

“We’ll be providing a lot of information to help the elders,” Petro said. “There are so many assistance programs available that the elders may not know about.”

The Elders Conference is open to the public for observation, but only elders may participate and vote.

“If people would like to come and listen and learn from the elders,” Petro said, “they are more than welcome to attend.”