

Can Sovereignty survive the UTA?

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The United Tribes of Alaska, a fledgling two-year-old organization, has been plagued by financial improprieties which include writing checks with insufficient funds in their account, non-payment of some staff for over a month, and a debt rumored to exceed \$300,000.

UTA members Jim Sinnett and Sheldon Katchatag signed a \$6,500 check to Channel 20 for partial payment of a \$14,000 debt for television coverage-related expenses incurred during September's Congress. The

check bounced. According to Ron Cassidy of Channel 20, UTA members told him that the North Slope Borough would cover the debts incurred by UTA. Cassidy had been promised that UTA would make good on the debt by Oct. 8th or 9th, although by that date nothing had been done.

John Lewis and Tony Kessler of the North Slope Borough said rumors that the NSB would be providing funds to "bail out" UTA were "absolutely untrue."

Cassidy wasn't the only UTA service provider who received a check which later bounced. Alaska Stagecraft President Linda Nelson, whose organization provided lighting for UTA's XIT Concert during the UTA Congress, received a \$4,000 check. "They are trying to work with us. They have offered to pick up penalties. I don't think they did it maliciously. I hope to have payment soon." She refused further comment.

According to employee Charles Oxereok, UTA gave him a \$150 and a \$50 check for immediate food expenses. Both checks, which were received this summer, bounced.

Former UTA chairman Sheldon Katchatag explained UTA's checking policy in an Oct. 11 interview with the *Tundra Times*.

"We made sure that all checks that were issued were made as a

promissory issue, in other words that it's a promissory note to pay. What we were doing was issuing these checks as a promise to pay and we had that understanding with all our vendors and clients that everything was conditional on revenues coming in from the Congress and also supporting it."

But the *Tundra Times* found that none of the check recipients, Cassidy, Nelson or Oxereok were aware that the checks were promissory notes. Oxereok says Anchorage supermarkets will not accept checks from him because the two UTA checks bounced.

In an interview Katchatag said he didn't know that there wasn't any money in UTA's checking account when he and Jim Sinnett signed the checks. But Katchatag did say he received UTA checks which later bounced. "I had some that went into my account that bounced and after that I wouldn't take checks," Katchatag said.

The former chairman later said, "Because of the problems, we couldn't deposit them in the bank... We made payments as they came in; cashiers checks for services (were) provided (to) vendors on an immediate-need basis."

How UTA will pay for the checks is unclear. Financial sources have not been mentioned.

UTA's new treasurer said he hadn't received any figures on the financial status of UTA.

The treasurer or UTA

members have not stated how much money has been raised through membership fees. A brochure states: "What is the UTA membership fee? It's flexible; it slides from \$500 per year for large tribes to a minimum of \$250 per year." There is no public record of fee funds.

"We are a struggling organization and we have to be in debt," said UTA's newly-elected vice-chairman, Percy Nusunginya.

Under the previous leadership Bill Brady served as vice chairman.

Brady said, "I resigned my position. Sitka Community Association did not resign its position (from UTA). My time with other duties would keep me from serving effectively." But other sources say that Brady resigned because the board was not kept informed of financial matters.

Frank O. Williams of Sitka also resigned.

Williams explained that although he supports the concept of UTA, he was not given vital financial information.

"I really didn't get too much information on how the finances were being handled," Williams said.

UTA's former treasurer also decided not to run again because he hadn't been given any figures. Gary Ricketts said that earlier this year, several staffers pulled him

aside in the UTA office and asked him, "Do you know what's going on?" They quickly filled Ricketts in on the situation: UTA was spending money it did not have.

Ricketts said that he went to then-Chairman Sheldon Katchatag and explained that if UTA couldn't pay its bills, the organization would become, "just another bad credit risk."

"It takes money," said Ricketts, "you just can't go out and run off on rhetoric." It soon became evident to Ricketts, however, that nothing was going to be done.

"It really upsets me. They didn't think about the cause... and all those poor people who worked their butts off aren't even getting paid."

Some of UTA's former staff have considered taking the organization to task with the Dept. of Labor over non-payment.

Charlie Kairaiuk, UTA's new chairman has refused numerous opportunities to comment on what steps, if any, UTA's new leadership will take to put its finances in order.

In a recent telephone interview, UTA's new treasurer Chester Ballet said, "It is a large debt and we will do everything we can to get them paid off. It's going to take a lot of work on my part, the council's part."