

Tundra Times Interview: Janie Leask, AFN President

Interview by Jim Benedetto
Tundra Times Editor

Tundra Times: The villages have been pushing for some time to have a more representative voice in AFN. Why now? How did it happen that this moment was chosen to grant them real representation?

Janie Leask, AFN: A resolution was passed during the 1984 Convention which called for the restructuring of AFN. That was 84-83. For a long period of time, at least since I've been with AFN, I have heard continual criticisms of AFN being a "tool of the corporations." I think part of this is to broaden AFN's base in order to include the villages, and I think that has been a long time in coming, and I think it's overdue. AFN back in 1977 restructured. It was originally started as a board of directors only of the regional corporations. The non-profit Native associations were a committee of the board — they were the Human Resources Committee — and then in 1977, Human Resources and the non-profits felt that they really wanted to have an equal say in the policy matters of AFN. So, there was a long discussion which lasted over a couple of years on what is the best way to do that; whether or not to have Human Resources and the non-profits as another board of AFN, or should they go out and establish their own organization. It finally came down to the point where the Human Resources felt they wanted to stay within the structure, and AFN then accommodated that as an organization, so that now we have the non-profits and the profits which combine together for the full board.

Still, there has been a lot of criticism, even though AFN took that step from the regions to expand to the non-profits, there has always been a real question in some people's minds of whether or not those organizations speak for them. And I think people are looking for a more direct participation, and a direct say-so in the policies that AFN comes out with.



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Tundra Times: So, in a sense, this is the third part of a triad of representation for a village, because a village can now be represented directly by village representation, and indirectly through the provision of services through non-profits and as shareholders through the regionals?

Janie Leask, AFN: That's right. Plus, they can also have individual memberships of AFN, although individual memberships are just memberships in the organization and don't provide any kind of a vote.

Tundra Times: Sounds good. Any negative reaction to this move?

Janie Leask, AFN: Not that I've heard of, no. We've been struggling with this, both the AFN board and the Village Steering Committee, for a year now trying to figure out what was the best way to do it. During all of that time, I think people were working toward participation in AFN, it just depended on what was the best way, through board representation, or participation at the convention. But I haven't heard any negative responses.

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Tundra Times: There must be several options available to AFN as to how village representation can be implemented on a more permanent basis.

Janie Leask, AFN: There are basically two different points of view: one, would be the allocation of votes just during conventions, and the other one would of course be looking at a permanent village board, which would expand the board of AFN to 36 (members). But also included in discussions of this permanent board would be (the question of) how this board would be selected. The regions and the non-profits are dues-paying members of AFN which help to support the staff budget here, and all the activities that we do. So, there's that whole question, too: if villages want to have a permanent-type board of AFN, then what portion of the dues would they share? And how would that be based? And who would be the villages that would then be eligible to vote on a board seat?

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Tundra Times: Do you think that this will satisfy all the concerns of the villages over representation?

Janie Leask, AFN: Well, I think that's pretty difficult to say. On the one hand, you may have villages who may be satisfied by this,

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but then you have villages who may not be satisfied until they themselves feel that they have a direct voice and a direct link into AFN. In the Calista/AVCP area for instance, they have 56 villages. Can they elect one representative to sit on a statewide board that will represent all of their interests? It's going to be interesting, because the regions and the non-profits get criticized for not being able to speak on and represent village concerns; whether a village representative will also get that criticism... I think that's a real possibility. This may satisfy some people's concerns, and hopefully it will satisfy the majority of people's concerns, but I think that there's always going to be room for criticism.



Tundra Times: Is this, in some part, a way of taking the middle ground, of mediating your stance in the ideological conflict between UTA and AFN?

Janie Leask, AFN: Not overall; if you take a look at the overall picture, no. The criticisms about AFN, and the overwhelming need (for village representation) that we've heard, even before UTA was formed, have been building. The board has begun over the last couple of years to realize that there was going to have to be some kind of mechanism for addressing the lack of representation of the villages. How that mechanism was going to be structured, people didn't really know, they knew that they were going to have to do something to address legitimate village concerns. So, while the timing of this issue looks as though we're doing this to mediate the differences between AFN and UTA, I think this whole restructuring, and the need for restructuring and the voice on behalf of villages which really felt the need to restructure has been coming for a long time.

Tundra Times: What must a village do in order to take advantage of their opportunity to be directly represented at this convention?

Janie Leask, AFN: The process that was outlined by the board of directors and the Village Steering Committee is that a village must have a form or a resolution, which we will be sending out to them, which lists their delegates, and tells them their eligible number of delegates to send to the convention. If a village has 65 people enrolled, you get one delegate vote per 25 people enrolled. So if you have 65 people enrolled, then you would get two delegate votes. You have to pay a fee of \$12 per delegate vote. So you would have to have both the form, the delegate form and the fee in to AFN by noon on the 23rd. That would then go to the Credentials Committee for certification, and then to the convention. So, hopefully we'll be able to have the majority of villages here, and represented during this convention, although we realize that it's a short time.

☐ Janie Leask has been president of the Alaska Federation of Natives since 1982.