

Bethel walks its sobriety talk

by Jay Barret, KYUK
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YKHC Messenger

Over 50 Bethel residents "walked their talk" Dec. 5 at the Kuskokwim College's town meeting on what to do about problem drinking in Bethel.

Organized by KuC's Gerri Sumpter, and moderated by the Yukon Kuskokwim Health Corporation's Ori Williams, the event at the Yup'ik Cultural Center drew a concerned and vocal crowd.

Williams said the meeting was not called to debate the dry vote or being wet or dry. "That's been decided," he said. The meeting was called on the assumption that Bethel has an alcohol problem, he added.

Going from that premise, the topics covered concern for teens and their education on alcohol, public drunkenness near schools, making it harder for bootleggers to do business, rehabilitation, changing possession laws, and support for recovering alcoholics.

Stopping bootleggers, though, became the focus, with suggestions ranging from asking the city and state governments to pass laws that would make it easier to arrest bootleggers, to police or residents following known "bootlegging" cabs to the homes of bootleggers.

Said one man, "just have police follow the black cabs with the yellow lettering to the bootlegger's home. You might not be able to arrest them, but you'll stop them from selling."

Many in the group were surprised to hear several statistics from Police Chief Chris Liu concerning bootleg-

ging. One was that it takes a very long time, with many involved steps to make a bootlegging arrest. Another was that Liu's department had tried 35 times this year to make undercover bootlegging buys — and all of them failed. He said, "Bootleggers are reluctant to sell to people they don't know."

Many resolutions came from the meeting: ideas and suggestions that could make bootlegging harder, such as establishing a centralized importation site where all liquor must pass and be taxed before it can be picked up. Another is to ask the City Council to pass an ordinance restricting the type of container alcohol is imported in — specifically plastic, as bootleggers prefer plastic bottles of vodka.

The night's most significant resolution was to ask the City Council to authorize and fund two more police officers to concentrate on alcohol interdiction.

That, Liu said, would allow his department to do a better job in solving the visible alcohol problem. He said it would cost taxpayers about 100-thousand dollars a year.

Very little talk, however, was directed at curing the underlying alcohol problem: why some people have a need to drink, causing the demand that fuels the supply from bootleggers and creates public drunkenness.

Some there had to point out to others that an alcoholic needs to want to change and that morality and need could not be legislated.

Another meeting is planned for December, when the group will discuss progress on their resolutions. The date and time will be announced later.

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