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Taalak Sees Benefits of Arctic Borough

By THOMAS RICHARDS, JR.

BARROW — Organization of the North Slope Borough is a significant event not only because it has become the largest municipality in the world, and not only because it has become the only first class borough in Alaska, but also because it is the first opportunity for Alaska Natives to control resource development and education in their own region.

Sentiments of Arctic Slope villagers toward creation of the borough are probably best reflected in the words of Sam Taalak of Barrow:

"We will not have to be bystanders any more. We will now be able to make rules to govern our own country."

Taalak thinks of the borough as a solution to inequities in employment opportunities and education. He has one son, a certified welder, who is unable to get a job on the North Slope.

Another son, a student who had been attending school in Fairbanks, experienced such alienation and prejudice in the Fairbanks education system that he decided to complete high school in a BIA boarding school in Oregon.

"Probably, only one-half of one per cent of our employable people are up North making some money. We can't break into it. It's pitiful. When we observe fifty or sixty or more workers coming up here every day, and they are all from outside Alaska or Fairbanks or Anchorage, you begin to wonder if they don't think that there is something wrong with our people that they don't hire. When we get the borough, we can push local hire.

"My son became a certified welder in the State of Texas. He has been trying to work on the slope for one year and can't break into it. There are lots of young people here like that. For union jobs, you have to go through either Fairbanks or Anchorage."

Educational deficiencies might also be corrected, Taalak thinks

"I believe now, we can see our own high school here. It takes money that people can ill afford to send kids out for a year."

Speaking in general terms of the borough, Taalak states, "I think it's wonderful. It is the only way that we can get something for our losses. A couple of years ago, Fairbanks wanted to form a borough to include the North Slope. I think, now, that we will be able to make the rules for governing our own part of this country."

Responding to opponents of the new borough government, Taalak said, "Those people might as well face up to the fact that they are fighting a lost cause in opposing this thing. Every one else in Alaska has accepted it. I think that we will go right ahead and organize in spite of any delay they create."

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