

Between Worlds - A Struggle for Land

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When corporations are the big landowners, shareholders look to them to get a parcel of their own.

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Frank Ongtowasruk of Shishmaref was born six days too late.

He wanted to apply for a parcel of land under the Native allotment system, but wasn't old enough. He turned 21 just six days after the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act was passed. The law put an end to Natives applying for up to 160 acres of land under the Native Allotment Act of 1906.

"To me, they ripped me off," said Ongtowasruk, who lives in northwest Alaska. Now Native corporations own much of the land in and around villages, so shareholders sometimes look to the corporations for a little land of their own.

Corporations have taken different approaches to providing land for shareholders. Naknek's village corporation in southwest Alaska set up 99-year leases on parcels, allowing shareholders to make improvements on the land as if they owned it. Kootznoowoo village corporation in Southeast gave away parcels. But village corporation shareholders who live in Unalaska have not gotten land, in part because of the high cost of developing it.

NANA shareholders and mill control room operators Clyde Baldwin, left, and Dave Kelsey monitor computer screens showing ore flow at the Red Dog Mine.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL PENN

Unalaska's Ben Golodoff is among those frustrated that the village corporation, Ounalashka, hasn't made land available to its shareholders. The village corporation is by far the biggest private land owner in town, and because little private land goes on the market, Unalaska residents have few chances to buy property of their own. "If you don't got land, you don't got

nothing,\" Golodoff said. \"If you feel like you've got a piece of land, you feel like going to work.\"

Golodoff, a former Ounalashka board member, lamented he and his wife, Suzi, can't buy property to build a bigger home because land is so scarce. They live in a small trailer on a 30- by 60-foot lot they own, and many shareholders don't even have that.

The corporation hasn't made land available to shareholders in part because the area is covered by steep mountains, leaving little developable land, said Dick Davis, the village corporation's CEO.

Also, two-thirds of the shareholders live out of town and, when polled, said they didn't want the corporation to spend money to develop and distribute land. Development costs are high because city ordinances require putting in roads and utilities, Davis said.

Other corporations, facing different sets of circumstances, have been able to come up with ways to sell, lease or give away parcels.

In 1996, Kootznoowoo village corporation in Angoon gave each shareholder a parcel of up to 1.5 acres, said Harold Frank Jr., Kootznoowoo's land and resource assistant manager. Angoon is about 55 miles south of Juneau.

Careful planning allowed the corporation to minimize its own costs for developing the land, Frank said.

In Naknek, about 250 miles southwest of Anchorage, Paug-Vik village corporation offered different land options to shareholders. They could lease land for 99 years, paying \$925 for set-up and surveying. Those with leases also could purchase the land with a 20-year loan.

Despite complaints that there aren't roads to the property, more than 280 people have applied for a lease, said Helen Lons, land manager for Paug-Vik. Fewer than 10 have tried to buy the land.

\"I think it's been very successful just judging by the number of people who have participated in it,\" Lons said.

In Dillingham, land for sale was previously in short supply, so Choggiung Ltd. subdivided property, put lots on the market and made money from the sales. It also financed the purchases, making it easier for people to buy property than if they tried to borrow from a bank.

Choggiung President Thomas Tilden worried Native land would be lost because

those who could instantly qualify for loans for the property were often not shareholders. Shareholders couldn't always afford the parcels or hadn't established a credit history needed for a loan, Tilden said.

As of 1993, about one-third of the 103 parcels Choggiung sold were bought by shareholders.

Tilden would rather not see corporate land sold.

"I really feel strongly if we sell our land, we're kind of selling our birthright there," Tilden said. "I'm just totally against selling land. It doesn't sit well in my stomach."