

## Between Worlds - Political Clout

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Native corporations and their leaders are becoming politically savvy, helping shape government policy.

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THE JUNEAU EMPIRE

The Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act added to the political clout of Alaska's Natives, but its effectiveness appears to have been limited. The growth of Native corporations has resulted in an increase in their influence. However, the political power and experience helps Native corporations with their businesses more than it influences social policies affecting Natives, according to corporation executives, lobbyists and legislators. "ANCSA corporations have opened doors in many ways," said Byron Mallott, executive director of the Alaska Permanent Fund Corp. and co-chairman of the Alaska Federation of Natives. "I think we have more political sophistication than we did at the time of ANCSA."

Rose Borkowski, 56, mixes dough for fried bread, a staple food in many Native villages. Borkowski was recently elected to the Chuloonawick Tribal Council. While attending Mount Edgecumbe school in Sitka, she learned how to type and speak English - skills that helped her become involved as a village representative.

PHOTO BY BRIAN WALLACE

That political power has been used to effectively promote the corporations' activity, Mallott said.

There was no congressional opposition, for instance, when Congress recently approved a \$39.4 million purchase of 218,000 acres of Calista Corp. land to add to a national wildlife refuge. The land's appraised value was about \$5 million. For all practical purposes, the buy was a gift to the regional Native corporation, a fact noted on the record before the measure was approved in the

House of Representatives. But the vote in favor of it was unanimous.

Conversely, despite repeated statements from the U.S. Department of Interior that the agency would not allow further delay in taking over subsistence fisheries management in the state, the delay happened anyway in October. Alaska Natives weren't consulted about the deal.

Disappointed and angry, delegates to the Alaska Federation of Natives voted in favor of an AFN resolution to ask for the resignation of Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt. Delegates later showed their displeasure with the state by approving a resolution calling for secession from Alaska.

The AFN's more than \$500,000 base budget is paid for by membership dues from the regional Native corporations, regional non-profits and the majority of Alaska's villages, said Julie Kitka, AFN president.

Over the years, Natives have gained more tools with which to work on issues affecting them. Changes in federal law have given tribal governments control over health and other programs that were once administered by federal agencies. "People do have more resources available than before," Kitka said. "Are we meeting all our needs? No." AFN isn't necessarily in step with the political aims of all the state's Native organizations. There are occasional fractious disputes, she said.

John Christensen is vice president and tribal administrator for Chenega Bay IRA Council. "Forty years ago, Natives in Alaska were told they needed to learn politics," he said. "So we did. Thirty years ago they were told to learn business, so we have."

PHOTO BY BRIAN WALLACE

When it comes to representation in the Legislature, Natives and rural Alaska are losing ground, said state Rep. Richard Foster of Nome.

But the Native settlement act isn't to blame for the loss of representation, he said. Rather, it's the way election districts are drawn up and the fact that

urban Alaska is growing faster than rural Alaska.

Before 1959, a quarter of the Legislature represented the rural area around Nome. Now, just one state senator and representative from that area are in the Legislature. As the urban voting-age population continues to outgrow the rural population, he said, rural areas will continue to lose political representation.

"We're becoming vastly outnumbered," Foster said. "Our influence is rapidly decreasing."

There is power, though, said Reed Stoops, a longtime Juneau lobbyist. The political might of Native corporations appears to be as strong as any other corporation. "I don't think it's a function of them being Native or non-Native," Stoops said. "Because they're business corporations, they're likely to have more influence on business issues than social issues. The larger the corporation, the more employees they have and the more influence they have."

In general, Native corporations with the most abundant economic influence and the most shareholders have the most clout, he said.

Accounting for about 16 percent of Alaska's population, however, gives Alaska's Natives more say in state politics than tribes have in the Lower 48, said Morris Thompson. The president for Doyon Ltd. said that in more populous states Natives account for such a small relative number of voters that their phone calls to lawmakers go unanswered.

"I would hate to be a tribe in California or New York," he said. "I know we have influence. I think our voice is heard in Juneau."