

Transcript of APRN Alaska News Nightly Broadcast for October 27, 2003

Alaska Natives have a lot of work ahead of them to meet Senator Stevens' deadlines for developing new approaches to both funding and governance. Johanna Urich of member station KDLG reports, that despite the Senators' belief that tribal status does not work, Alaska Natives appear determined to work out a compromise with the Senator that recognizes tribal sovereignty.

Urich: At their convention, the Alaska Federation of Natives endorsed the creation of the Native State and Congressional Commission to come up with new models for delivering Native dollars and for tribal-state relations. They have very little time to do it, AFN president Julie Kitka says the plan is to have a report done by June and a final draft by September, in time for the Senator to pass measures putting the proposals in place before his term as chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee ends next year.

Kitka: So if he is saying by the end of next year, he is going to be dealing with this, we have to take that very seriously.

Urich: The idea of the commission came from AFN in response to Stevens' call for regionalizing Federal Indian dollars now flowing to the more than 200 federally recognized tribes in Alaska. Stevens told Natives last year that they needed to come up with new approaches because he could not continue to deliver the lion's share of the nation's Indian funds to Alaska Natives. He told delegates there was no way he could find enough money to fund all of the State's tribes. The original AFN proposal did not deal with tribal governance issues, but those issues were included in the proposed commission at the Senator's request. The goal is to convince Stevens to drop the riders he attached to funding bills transferring certain tribal funds to the State. These include Alaska's share of Native American housing funds as well money that normally goes to the state's tribal courts and police. Senator Lisa Murkowski in her address to the convention Saturday said that she supports the commission and is opposed to the riders redirecting funds from tribal courts to the State.

L. Murkowski: I do not think that we should abruptly shift the justice monies to the State of Alaska through the appropriations process. We shouldn't make this abrupt switch, especially without any guarantees over how that money would then be spent by the State. I don't believe that we should abruptly terminate what may be the only public safety presence in some communities, and I remain hopeful that together, we can reach a clear consensus that everyone can support. We need to alter the course that the current justice riders are taking us down.

Urich: Murkowski said she thought the commission would be created through another rider. But the threat of future riders remains a major worry for Alaska Native leaders as Congress moves towards an omnibus funding bill. Ed Thomas, president of the Tlingit-Haida council, introduced a measure requesting Stevens withdraw existing riders and refrain from any more riders while the commission is developing its report.

Thomas: So I make that motion that there be another resolve portion added covering that issue.

Speaker: There is a motion made to prohibit riders while the commission is being developed or the process is being implemented, is that right?

Thomas: Right. Yeah. To request of him in a respectful way.

Speaker: To request. Thank you.

Thomas: Right. With all due respect.

Urich: The politics around the issue has been extremely touchy, with Stevens deeply hurt after being called a racist for asserting that tribes pose a threat to statehood. Thomas, like many other Native leaders, does not believe the Senator is a racist, but he does take issue with his characterization of tribal advocates and institutions.

Thomas: As I listen to our senior Senator's comments, I really got the feeling that I was being scolded for something I didn't do. We kept quiet for that whole thing, number one because of our respect for our senior senators, even though we were horribly offended by statements that our tribal governments are pushing forth for self-governance, self-determination, and self-reliance with disregard for federal and state law, we are not, that's a wrong statement and we can't let that go uncorrected.

Urich: Time and again, delegates endorsed language demonstrating their commitments to tribal status. Many tribal advocates don't understand the Senator's concerns, they see no problems with tribes and the state working cooperatively something that even Senator Lisa Murkowski pointed to in her speech. Murkowski called on the Alaska Natives to effect a reconciliation with Stevens.

Murkowski: The war of words must end, the time for reconciliation is now. I'm very hopeful that the fiscal commission concept that is being discussed in this convention will go a long way towards resolving the concerns that Senator Stevens has brought to the convention, but from this point on, the dialogue must be constructive and respectful and it must be firmly grounded in an understanding of the fiscal realities that face the Native communities, our state, and the nation.

Urich: The resolution passed by the Alaska Federation of Natives would provide a couple of months for the state's 200 plus tribes to comment before the final draft in September.

Kitka: This problem is now squarely in the Native communities' hands and it is up to us to propose solutions.

Urich: AFN president Julie Kitka told delegates she thinks 90% of the problem is funding and 10% is ideology specifically the conflict over state rights and tribal sovereignty.