RURAL GOVERNANCE REMAINS UNFINISHED BUSINESS IN ALASKA -A CALL TO ACTION

November 2014

- Report on the reconvening of the Alaska -
Commission on Rural Governance and Empowerment

This project reflects the commitment to strengthen governance in rural Alaska by all who participated and supported this work. The staff of First Alaskans Institute and North Star Group worked in partnership to convene and facilitate the 2013 gathering, and we hope to continue to advance issues of rural governance through fostering statewide dialogue that reflects the spirit of those convened, and the specific recommendations contained herein. We invite you to join us.

First Alaskans Institute

NORTH STAR GROUP

A RECONVENING OF THE

COMMISSION ON RURAL GOVERNANCE & EMPOWERMENT

Executive Summary

Empowering rural people through strengthening rural governance systems – in accordance with the mandate of the Alaska state constitution – was the underlying theme throughout the recommendations of the original Rural Governance and Empowerment Commission (RGC).

Almost all of the RGC's original recommendations remain relevant today. Although the overall issue of rural governance has been discussed in various official capacities and reports over the decades, a true lasting resolution of the rural governance issue has not been achieved. A clear need exists to identify and advance effective solutions to a host of persistent rural concerns.

Whatever their title status under Western law, the lands Native peoples have stewarded and occupied for thousands of years are not currently equitably managed and leveraged to benefit those who call these lands home; instead these lands are systematically (sometimes tacitly or unintentionally) developed to benefit people who live far, far away. Excluding Native and rural people from the management of these lands is a perpetuation of colonial governmental structures. A similar argument was made with regard to the administration of the rural Alaska Native justice system in the Indian Law and Order Commission (ILOC) Congressional report: systematically excluding local people from local law enforcement protections (e.g., through non-local State Troopers, magistrates, jails, etc.), or imposing on local people a legal system set up with no local input, and related rule-from-afar systems, mirrors the governmental structures of the colonial era. It is discriminatory and oppressive, and hurts people in these communities. Promoting local control benefits everyone, saves money, and saves lives. Colonialism is not good for Alaska Natives, and it is not good for Alaska; it should not be perpetuated.

Potential solutions exist. Native and rural Alaskans could effectively administer governance through the borough mechanism offered by the state constitution, local school boards, or by establishing Indian Country status (where a 'Native Country' term of art may need to be adapted for Alaska that is inclusive of Indian Country, trust lands, allotments, Native townships, etc., and ANCSA lands). Where no tools exist, they must be created, such as establishing a mechanism (e.g., legislation, constitutional amendment, etc.) where Alaska tribes – as the sovereign nations they are – negotiate and partner with the state of Alaska on an officially recognized, permanent government-to-government basis. Because no 'formal' form of that relationship currently exists, one would have to be established to ensure that tribes are equitably seated at the table and empowered to coordinate their efforts in good faith with the state government.

With these thoughts in mind, participants in the RGC reconvening identified the following **Strategic Action Areas** as most in need of reform:

- **The state needs to formally recognize a Native Ways of Life priority**
- **Clarify, amend and empower tribal jurisdiction and Indian Country**
- **Develop natural resources to benefit local people and includes them in decision-making**
- **Strengthen Native cultures as the key to overcoming challenges faced by rural Alaskans and Alaska Natives no matter where they live**
- **Work with and for Native cultures, not against them**
- **Expand tribal compacting**
- **Accelerate the production of the Alaska Native leadership pool**

Rather than pointing out things that "someone" should reform, the reconvening participants closed the dialogue with personal commitments to carry this work forward in whatever capacity best-suited the task. To this end, participants agreed to continue the discussions and the commitment, to press for better communication, and to share knowledge and experience. Additionally, the group identified broad **Arenas of Action** where the work will occur.

- **Everyday Life**
- **Educational Institutions**
- **Tribal, Federal, State, and Local Governments**
- **Healthcare and Cultural Wellbeing**
- **Keeping the Conversation Going**

We all have different gifts, communities of support, and spheres of influence. Only by banding together can we effect meaningful reform and a movement towards a true paradigm shift for Alaska. Alaskans, Native and non-Native, rural and urban, can do it, but we must do it together. "Ultimately, what is needed is a change in how the problems in rural Alaska, and their solutions, are thought about, especially by non-rural Alaskans: a paradigm shift that transforms rural empowerment work from isolated activity into collective impact."

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1998 Original Rural Governance Commission Established

Recognizing that there were numerous unresolved issues impeding rural self-governance and empowerment, especially in state-tribal relationships, and after much advocacy from across the state, in February 1998 the state of Alaska established the Commission on Rural Governance and Empowerment, a 22-member group co-chaired by Robert Keith of Elim and Byron Mallott of Juneau/Yakutat.

The original members of the Rural Governance Commission (RGC) broadly represented the people of Alaska, and included urban and rural residents, Natives and non-Natives, members of state and tribal governments, school board members, mayors, Alaska state constitutional scholars, and even original framers of the state constitution. The commissioners formulated a comprehensive set of recommendations to reform the state government's official policy toward federally recognized tribes in Alaska, and examined more broadly how state, regional, and local governance occurs in Alaska.

Overcoming Challenges to Rural Empowerment and Self-Governance

"The Alaska Commission on Rural Governance and Empowerment affirms the right of all rural Alaskans to maximum local autonomy and the delivery of essential services, and affirms the vitality of their diverse cultures, ways of life and communities."

- Preamble to the 1999 RGC Final Report to the Governor

This vision statement, adopted by the Commission in 1998, remains as true today as it did then, as Alaska has achieved little progress in the 15 years since the commission released its findings and recommendations. Everyone that gathered in December 2013 – predominantly rural residents, people from rural communities, and former Commission members and staff – agreed that the original 1999 RGC Final Report to the Governor could have been drafted 50 years ago, five years ago, or five days ago. Nothing has significantly changed to improve or empower the governance systems of rural Alaska to ensure the maximum benefit for local people. The report could even be drafted the same way five or even 50 years from now if Alaska does not step up to address the disempowerment of Native and rural people. The current systems have no internal motivation to change. Change must be instigated at the tribal, federal, state, borough, municipal, corporate, non-profit, private enterprise, and individual level.

The RGC's recommendations spoke principally to the state government's executive branch, although they also addressed public policy actions under the purview of the legislature and the

1 *The full report is accessible online at:* ***http://www.commerce.state.ak.us/dca/RGC/***

judiciary. In the findings articulated in the original Final Report to the Governor, the Commission affirmed the right of all rural Alaskans to maximum local autonomy and control over the delivery of essential services, analysis, and solutions on specific issues related to government policy and structure, economic development, health, education, public safety, and justice. While most of the recommendations were necessarily broad, the Commission found that a willing and capable citizenry was ready to assist the state government in its efforts. The 1999 RGC Final Report noted that supporting tribal governance does nothing to harm municipal forms of government, and cited numerous examples of innovative governance structures where blended tribal and state systems better serve rural communities than state systems alone; local control is the most responsive and best-suited way to govern rural communities.

In 2013 Rural Governance Commission Reconvened

In December 2013, 11 of the original commissioners met with Alaskans from all parts of the state. While the original Commission and mission was a state-sponsored project convened by then-Governor Tony Knowles, the reconvened Commission was initiated independently by former members and other interested Alaskans, both Native and non-Native. All had the desire to work for Native people across the state, but especially those in rural Alaska, who are most vulnerable to political and other forms of marginalization. During the two-day meeting, the group re-examined the Commission's original findings and recommendations, and then turned its attention to identifying the current state of rural governance and empowerment, charting out a future vision those assembled will work to bring about.

This convening was conceived, planned, and executed through the coordinated effort of two organizations. One was the Alaska Native Policy Center (ANPC) at First Alaskans Institute (FAI), a statewide Native nonprofit organization known for its role as a catalyst and convener of critical community conversations. The other was the North Star Group (NSG), a community and government affairs firm led by Veronica Slajer, former staff director for the original Commission.

FAI facilitated the event, engaging participants to recapture lessons from the first RGC, inspiring interactive and meaningful discourse about the present state of rural governance, and strategizing a collective paradigm shift. Participants were led through a process that tapped their individual expertise and collective knowledge, producing both shared goals and individual

commitments to continue this vital work by advancing the solutions and activities identified in participants' lives, communities, and organizational roles.

NSG and FAI worked to bring everyone together and then assembled the dialogue notes, which FAI drafted into this report; NSG managed the logistics and materials production. The dialogue process, including the invitation, agreements, and daily flow, are included on-line at www.ruralgov.org.

Reforming State-Tribal Relations

The 2013 reconvening continued the original Commission's call for meaningful and innovative partnerships between tribal, state, and municipal governments. This is a crucial goal that cannot be realized unless the state of Alaska eliminates existing constraints to a full and formal relationship with tribal governments.

This begins by clearly, officially, and permanently recognizing Alaska Native tribes as the sovereign governments they are, just as the federal government does. The issues created by the state of Alaska's failure to recognize tribal sovereignty include the inequities in the administration of rural justice described in the Indian Law and Order Commission (ILOC) report, which was published just days before the RGC reconvened.

Alaska needs a call to action to break through the inertia that grips how rural Alaska is treated by the rest of the state, in a debilitating status quo. The group agreed that this reconvening should not result in yet another report making bold recommendations which are never read or implemented. The vision for this dialogue from the very start was to identify the current situation, and flesh out steps the Native and non-Native community can take immediately to shift the tide and make rural governance and empowerment a statewide priority. It was from this starting point – to generate a strength-based call to action – that the conversation began.

Using a process based on Native values and knowledge, FAI hosted the reconvening using indigenous principles, processes, and adaptations of other social technologies to ensure that all who came were able to contribute in an interactive, thoughtful, and empowering manner. The first day started by asking the original Commissioners to reflect on different aspects of the original RGC in a "fish bowl" style dialogue. It was an intimate conversation between the original Commissioners who were present, giving them an opportunity to discuss what they remembered and what their experience had been, and to activate their collective memory about the 1999 RGC.

While they talked, the other participants were able to listen deeply and learn about what had happened in the original RGC, what the aims and objectives were, what had motivated the members,

and how the main issues were addressed as the work was conducted. While there is an official RGC Final Report, everything that went into creating that report wouldn't be accessible to those who did not participate. This conversation gave everyone a chance to learn the inside story and connect with the original members.

After the "fish bowl" concluded, participants formed small groups to reflect on what they heard and how it relates to perspectives on rural governance today, and to identify the biggest unresolved issues facing rural Alaska today at all levels of governance. The original Commissioners spread out among the various small groups.

Paradigm Shift

At the end of the first day, FAI posed the following question to the full group: "While this first day focused on challenges we face in rural Alaska, we want you to focus tomorrow on how to transform those unresolved issues; what are the practical steps we can do now to solve these problems we've identified today?" Pondering this question was the group's homework to prepare them for the second half of the convening.

After the first day closed out, FAI staff and a dedicated volunteer participant analyzed the barriers and biggest unresolved challenges the small groups had identified. The underlying and current issues that are the ultimate source of disharmony, the disruption of Native and rural ways of life, and the impairments to self-government were categorized into thematic groupings of perceived assumptions or 'paradigms.' Whether explicitly or tacitly built into state systems, created or believed by non-Natives or urban people, or unconsciously internalized by Native people themselves, these paradigms are the mistaken ideologies that shape how Natives and rural Alaska have been, and continue to be treated. The dominant paradigms – current assumptions about Native and rural Alaskans that shape interactions at every level – shape an unbecoming picture of those who erroneously view Native peoples in these ways.

Upon analysis, six dominant, current paradigms were found: all were flawed, inaccurate, and hurt ful representations of Native peoples. Instead of the picture these models paint, there is a deeper reality about Native peoples – the real truth – that needs to be acknowledged and incorporated into everyday life and state systems. Native peoples are capable, important to Alaska, contribute powerfully to our society, and have the skills to resolve the challenges and issues identified as impediments to rural advancement and empowerment. Too often the erroneous paradigms noted below provide 'cover' for harmful stereotypes and make it socially acceptable to ignore and perpetuate inequities, prejudice, and ignorance against Alaska Native peoples and rural communities.

The act of articulating and codifying these six paradigms was like driving a dagger into all our hearts, because they are not the truth about Native peoples or our communities. They are, however, ideologies, perceptions or opinions that have shaped and continue to shape the policies that govern Alaska Native peoples' lives. Native and rural social, economic, and cultural struggles are symptoms of these paradigms, not the other way around. Any superficial reforms to policies that do not address these underlying assumptions are only bandages on a festering wound. A paradigm shift is crucial to transform the way Alaska, as a society of people living in this state, embraces its indigenous soul. The relationship between the three sovereigns in Alaska – namely tribal, federal, and state governments – must incorporate this paradigm shift in order to maximize the effective use of human resources in this abundant, unique, and diverse land.

For the final day's discussion, participants identified which of the "perceived paradigms" made them react in some way – sad, angry, or inspired to action – and then discussed them in small groups. They talked about the meaning to each person and to the group collectively, as well as the situation today, and the problems that are created by these paradigms. Then they focused on what needs to happen to change the paradigm in question to the truth. Participants rotated between groups in order to contribute to more than one topic. The following is a chart listing the 'perceived' paradigms felt by participants, contrasted with corresponding truths.

Perceived Paradigms	The Truth
Colonialism is good for Alaska Natives.	Worldwide, colonial policies hurt Native cultures, divided Native peoples, disempowered them, make them fearful and ashamed to be who they are, ashamed to go from the village to the city. But we can fight those tendencies, infuse our governance structures and systems with inclusive values, adapt as we always have, and thrive once again. Decolonizing and making everyone healthy, successful, strong, and proud will benefit everyone in Alaska; colonialism hurts us all.
There are no tribes in Alaska.	There are tribes in Alaska; they are sovereign and self-determining First Nations.
Village and Native Alaska are a drain on the rest of the state.	Rural Alaska and Alaska Natives are assets in terms of people, lands, and resources.
Alaska Natives lack capacity to govern their peoples, lands, and resources.	Self-governance is already occurring, but rural people could do more if they had more resources. It's difficult to access more resources because rural villages lack a tax base comparable to urban communities.

Perceived Paradigms	The Truth
Alaska Native social issues and problems are part of their cultures, and their own fault.	The social dysfunctions that burden Native people today are legacies of oppressive colonial policies, ethnocide (the attempt to kill Native cultures), brutal boarding schools, and other massively traumatic events in Native histories, including devastating plagues. These traumas were inflicted on Native peoples, and while the continuing impacts (both intentional and unintentional) cling to them like parasites, they do not define Native peoples. Our communities can regain what was lost, but it will take tremendous effort, strong leadership, and education. Native people can change these things, but this does not excuse others (e.g., governments, businesses, citizens) from their responsibility to help and support this advancement.
Native people lack the power to change the paradigms.	Natives have successfully fought the system many times before and have won, such as in the Katie John case. But we can't let the courts or the state define who we are; we know who we are.

Strategic Action

What needed to arise from this discussion was a strategy for how to effect the paradigm shift and to make transformational progress happen for Alaska Native people and Alaska as a whole. Participants were asked to talk about practical steps that can move Native people from where they are now to where they want to be – to have healthy, thriving Native peoples, as they had for over 10,000 years before Western colonization.

The ideas presented below are some of the **Strategic Action Areas** the group identified and committed to working towards in some capacity:

- **The state needs to recognize a Native Ways of Life priority**

  The state of Alaska, through its courts and officials, has argued and continues to argue that the Alaska state constitution prohibits recognizing a Native subsistence priority (contrary to the federal mandate in ANILCA). The original RGC Commissioners recommended a constitutional amendment that would allow the state of Alaska to finally recognize that the Natives of Alaska have a right to preferential access to the lands and resources they need to sustain their ways of life (commonly misconstrued as bare survival and erroneously called "subsistence"). That has not happened. In the 2013 reconvening, the groups recognized that the need of Native people to access the lands and resources that sustain their ways of life is still a critical issue in urgent need of resolution. Fair access to lands and resources is a crucial component to cultural survival, self-sustaining and healthy communities,

and rural empowerment. The original recommendation for a constitutionally recognized solution is still relevant, timely, and needed. This group will continue to advocate for greater protections under state law for Native customary use of the land and sea.

Fifteen Years Later - The Messages Remain the Same

Protecting subsistence is the top priority of rural Alaskans (1999 Report to Governor on Page 12). The State should resolve the subsistence crisis by adopting a constitutional amendment recognizing a rural subsistence priority that meets the requirements of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) ('99 Report to Governor on Pg 17). Subsistence is a way of life in rural Alaska that is vital to the preservation of community, tribal cultures and economies. Subsistence hunting and fishing exist as part of a mixed economy in rural Alaska, where harvest of wild foods and the cash incomes to support harvest activities are both essential ('99 Report to Governor on Pg 69).

- **Clarify, amend and empower tribal jurisdiction and Indian Country**

All assembled agreed that it is critical to affirm that Indian Country exists in Alaska (e.g., allotments and Native townships). Still more importantly, all agreed the Secretary of the Interior must assist interested tribes in creating new Indian Country in Alaska (in accordance with recent Supreme Court decisions, which, unlike the Attorney General of the state of Alaska, agreed with the conclusions of both RGC conventions and the ILOC report). This is within the scope of the Interior Secretary's powers in Alaska, and is a mechanism for, among other things, settling lingering disputes between the state of Alaska and tribes about tribal jurisdiction and enforcement that severely limit access to justice in rural Alaska. The current confusing matrix of laws not only serve to perpetuate unequal colonial practices in Alaska, but present a major handicap to utilizing the strengths of the sovereigns – tribal, federal and state – to improve the lives of all citizens, and implement the necessary protections of lands, properties, and persons. Where appropriate, we will work with tribal leadership to continue to pursue these options.

Fifteen Years Later - The Messages Remain the Same

Tribes exist in Alaska. Tribes have the authority to govern, and they do. The lack of recognized geographic delineation of tribal government jurisdiction complicates tribes' ability to fulfill needed governmental functions in rural Alaska. Tribes respect the rights of non-members (1999 Report to Governor on Page 11). The Commission made the following recommendations: Formally acknowledge and accept Tribes ('99 Report to Governor on Pg 15) and cooperate with tribal efforts to transfer land into trust status ('99 Report to Governor on Pg 17).

- **Develop natural resources to benefit local people**

  Most of Alaska's vast resource wealth – minerals, petroleum, timber, the commercial fisheries, etc. – are located in or adjacent to Native and rural Alaska communities. Yet all too often, the economic benefit of developing those resources flows to urban communities or out of state. Local people deserve a share of the wealth generated by these lands and waters, as is done in the case of the federal Community Development Quota (CDQ) fisheries program.

  Access to a share of those resources will help build socio-economic capacity in Native communities and promote resilience against the major economic and environmental challenges looming on the horizon, including declining oil revenue and mounting climate change. Besides the CDQ program, the Northwest Arctic Borough offers a model of natural resource extraction, namely the Red Dog Mine, benefitting local people. The borough mechanism could potentially help other regions, but some participants noted problems with implementing that tool, including burdensome state taxes and reporting requirements. We will seek out and pursue additional options to increase local benefits for extracting resources.

"We have an opportunity here to make our state a better place to live. We have all the resources, and the money, and there is no reason why we should have winners and losers in the state." - Mike Williams, Alaska Inter-Tribal Council (1999 Report to Governor on Page 62)

Fifteen Years Later - The Messages Remain the Same

Much of Alaska's resource wealth is located in rural Alaska. The North Slope oil fields, Alaska's rich fisheries, timber, mineral deposits, and visitor attractions are all present in rural Alaska. As a center of commerce for the economic use of these rural resources, urban Alaska benefits greatly from a cooperative relationship with rural Alaska. Successful private developments in rural Alaska must be pursued in partnership with local people and government. Both ongoing local support and publicly funded infrastructure create opportunities for private sector investment and jobs ('99 Report to Governor on Pg 68).

- **Strengthening Native cultures is the key to overcoming the challenges faced by rural Alaskans**

  Language, dance, art, and other forms of cultural education are essential for transmitting pride and strength, or attaining educational or academic success, and are powerful tools in combatting high rates of suicide and crime. Health care was repeatedly mentioned as an ongoing need in rural Alaska, and reconnecting with cultures is powerful medicine.

  One way to promote cultural activity is to facilitate strong inter-tribal and inter-generational connections. Though the chain of knowledge that stretches back 10,000 years has been strained

it is not broken. That chain must be re-forged for Native peoples to be whole again. And, as can be seen today, failure of these connections has dire consequences, not just to Alaska Natives, but to all Alaskans. Advocating and pushing for this cultural empowerment is a commitment we are all willing to support.

Fifteen Years Later - The Messages Remain the Same

Rural Alaskans consistently identify family violence, alcohol and substance abuse and suicide as major problems in their communities (1999 Report to Governor on Page 95). Many villages rely on tribal governments and ancient cultural traditions to meet community needs ('99 Report to Governor on Pg 10). Culturally based and locally administered prevention, intervention, treatment and aftercare programshave proven effective in reducing the incidence of substance abuse and related problems and supporting recovery and healing ('99 Report to Governor on Pg 96).

- **State systems must work with and for Native cultures, not against them**

Holding close to your culture has been demonstrated to be a strong protective factor that mitigates social dysfunction. Alongside hunting, fishing, gathering and harvesting, Native cultural values, philosophies, thinking systems, languages, arts, dancing, and stories are vital components and elemental expressions of a successful life in both rural and urban Alaska. Like all Native ways of life, however, they are besieged by the state educational system, the justice system, the labor/workforce system and so on.

Alaskans require institutions responsive to cultural differences. Schools today may not be as bad as the boarding schools, but painful legacies of those schools and their repercussions remain embedded in our modern educational practices, attitudes, and outcomes. Alaska needs an education system that integrates and promotes Native cultures, history, and values, not one that perpetuates the legacy of marginalizing, shaming, and degrading Native cultures. Local school boards have the authority to implement teacher training, curriculum changes, and other measures to reform rural educational institutions into vehicles for Native empowerment, and to wash away legacies of Native oppression still lingering in Alaska schools. We are committed to ensuring all of Alaska's children, Native and non-Native, have the ability to learn in culturally diverse and culturally responsive schools, acquiring knowledge about the important indigenous backbone of this state.

Fifteen Years Later - The Messages Remain the Same

Native cultures bring a valuable non-Western viewpoint and strength to our society and government (1999 Report to Governor on Page 14). Confusion in state policy [towards tribes] has resulted in inconsistent approaches to working in rural Alaska ('99 Report to Governor on Pg 35).

Fifteen Years Later - The Messages Remain the Same

Collaborative arrangements among municipal, tribal, regional, State and federal governments, institutions and agencies provide the means for strengthened local self-governance. Increased participation in decision-making, more efficient service provision, and more effective management of environmental, land, and fish and game resources are results of cooperative efforts (1999 Report to Governor on Page 10). Expanded use of local alternative [culturally grounded] dispute resolution will require State agencies to be flexible and open to working with a variety of community-based approaches and distinct enforcement methods (1999 Report to Governor on Page 108).

- **Expand tribal compacting**

With the failure of existing state and municipal systems to meet Native and rural peoples' needs, there is a need for more compacting in all areas of tribal governance, similar to other federally obligated services, whereby tribes utilize their self-determination and self-governance to take over service and program design, delivery, and implementation authorized by federal statute and using federal funding. Tribal compacting is how the current Alaska Native health care system operates, and that system is regularly lauded as a flagship of health service delivery across the country and internationally.

We did not identify which areas might be best-suited for this kind of compacting relationship, but two options are education and justice. We acknowledged that getting these kinds of systems off the ground can be a daunting task that will require both creative thinking and diligence. Group members in these fields agreed to help tribal leadership interested in pursuing this kind of compacting in whatever way they can.

Fifteen Years Later - The Messages Remain the Same

The Commission encourages local communities to develop mechanisms (such as agreements, contracts, and guidelines among cities, boroughs, non-profits, corporations, tribal governments and regional organizations) to coordinate resources for all residents. Local communities must work together and develop the means to maximize resources. Communities should demand coordinated assistance from the State. State departments need to initiate and negotiate service delivery and management agreements with appropriate entities in rural Alaska. State agencies should

hance tribal and local governance capacity by: delegating authority to the extent permitted by law, creating service agreements, and allowing tribal governments or appropriate entities to build their capacity to deliver more services in rural Alaska (1999 Report to Governor on Page 64).

- **Native communities must accelerate the production of their own leadership pool**

Although there are changes that need to be implemented within the state governmental systems, it will require more Native people to step up to the plate to advocate for and begin implementing these changes. Native people cannot wait for the state systems to fix themselves or to get permission to begin implementing solutions already available. Some solutions are already within the scope of power and authority Alaska Natives have today, and just need to be realized.

To do that, Alaska Natives need to continue to grow culturally connected, strong, compassionate leaders, as they have for the last 10,000 years. Rural communities and tribes will need to engage residents politically, find committed leaders from both the Native and non-Native population, and work together to face these challenges and amplify the help we give each other across the state.

To effect the changes defined during the reconvening, we recognize the need to see more Native leaders run for and be elected to public office, and the need to nurture and create indigenized institutions of governance that better reflect the cultural values of rural communities. All too often, tribal governments were made to use "boiler plate" constitutions essentially forced upon them by the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) and similar laws. These constitutions may not – in fact, rarely ever – reflect the values and styles of governance of the Native society they are supposed to govern. Native systems are legitimate forms of government, and must be fortified as such, especially to bolster the paradigm shift that must occur.

Fifteen Years Later - The Messages Remain the Same

Only as Alaska Natives reassume power and responsibility for themselves and their communities will their suffering diminish and the lives of rural people improve (1999 Report to Governor on Page 23).

Ways of governing existed in Native communities long before Western contact. Councils and chiefs ruled both in settled villages and among migratory peoples, and the concept of respected elders was found in all cultures. Today, these traditional ways have strengthened and have been formalized by, among other things, federal recognition of 227 Native communities as "tribes" under federal law (1999 Report to Governor on Page 24).

Personal Commitments

In addition, participants agreed on the following broad actions:

- **Continue the discussions**
  To advance the issues brought up in this meeting, all assembled agreed that additional, as well as regionally based dialogues must be held to address the unique needs of Alaska's differing regions. There are no one-size-fits-all solutions.

- **Continue the commitment**
  Acknowledging that no single agency or organization take on these issues alone, we pledged to work together to see these commitments through.

- **Continue to press for better communication**
  As in 1999, more effective communication between the state, tribes and communities is key to empowerment.

- **Continue to share**
  We agreed that communities would benefit from sharing experiences. One possible way to do this is to develop governance "toolboxes" from the ideas generated in this and other meetings. Among other things, these "tool boxes," grounded in applied governance and written from a Native perspective, could serve as guides for anyone running for elected office. They could also be used to help retool or reimagine tribal constitutions.

To end the second and final day of the reconvening, FAI asked participants "What can you personally commit to in order to effect the changes that we've identified here today as being the most necessary to improve the lives of our Native peoples?" There were a lot of great responses, too many to capture, but here are a few powerful highlights, divided into Arenas of Action that include ideas, specific strategies, outcomes, or activities that the participants committed themselves to (paraphrased as necessary to adhere to non-attribution agreement).

Everyday Life

- Ensuring my kids know who they are from the start and speaking Inuit in the house; encouraging other parents to be healthy; use my lawyerly skills to benefit the movement and using art to bring the message.
- Continue to collect our history and stories to share with the world and each other.
- Won't be afraid to speak truth when I'm talking to others about these issues.
- Young people I work with will know they have the power to be heard and make a difference no matter their station in life or where they're from.

Educational Institutions

- [Within my position in an educational institution] I commit to helping others understand tribal issues in Alaska. I have a lot of personal learning to do yet so I can do better research; I will focus on issues in rural Alaska as the most central issue in the state. Find money for projects to research the issues discussed here.
- Publish peer-reviewed facts to contradict the prevailing, incorrect, hurtful myths that drive public perceptions of rural Alaska.
- Work towards seeing Alaska Native histories taught as a requirement to every student who goes through our university system.
- Use my subsistence experience and legal background to draft an Alaska Native subsistence constitutional amendment that will actually pass.
- Create an authentic "model Arctic Council" similar to "model UN" for high school and college students.

Tribal, Federal, State, and Local Governments

- Get tribal folks to speak at District Attorney conferences.
- Teaching and engaging with federal colleagues about Native issues; empowering Native colleagues working in federal agencies.

Tribal, Federal, State, and Local Governments (cont.)

- Fight to see more Alaska Natives elected to political office to make Alaska a better place for all Alaskans.
- Hold leaders accountable.
- Personally bring state legislators to rural Alaska to educate them about our lives.
- Get my regional corporation and borough to engage more with tribes.

Healthcare and Cultural Wellbeing

- Furthering issues in regional for-profits and in Native healthcare systems, especially historic trauma.
- Decolonization of our own people, becoming comfortable in our own skin, bring our selves everywhere we go, ensuring our songs and dances are part of everything.

Keeping the Conversation Going

- Help raise funds to pay for this reconvening [and future rural empowerment work].
- Continue to work with the organizers of this meeting to broadcast this information and these stories. All participants collaborate on a formalized paradigm shift project: even if we move the pebble just an inch, we've still moved it an inch and it's worth it.

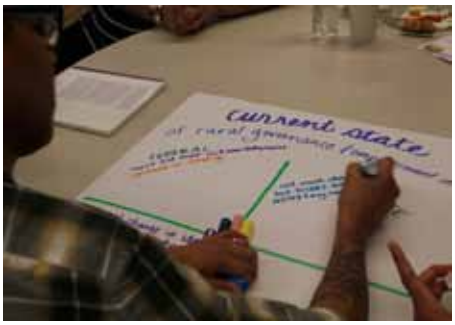
In summary, as in 1999, subsistence protections remain a top priority for Native and rural people, safety and security eludes rural Alaskans, and basic notions of trust and respect appear to be lacking between rural and urban residents, and the state and tribal governments. But the situation does not have to stay this way. Alaskans have the innovation, creativity, and dedication to come together to ensure that Alaska lives up to its promise that all future generations of Alaskans are truly empowered.

Looking – and Moving – Forward

The work did not end when the Commission adjourned. In addition to the personal commitments identified, the Alaska Native Policy Center at First Alaskans Institute has continued to advance various ideas and concepts that were already in progress and align with this work or that flow directly from this gathering. We continue to bolster Alaska Native advancement through the lens that paradigm transformation is a critical component of making Alaska truly successful. Alaska needs its Native peoples in order to remain vital, unique, and innovative. And as Native peoples, we need our cultures – inclusive of knowledge, language, ceremony, practice, clan and social structures, and relationships – in order to be truly healthy, thriving communities. As Native peoples, no matter how strong we are culturally or regionally, we must also remember to foster our statewide connectivity as our diversity is an unparalleled strength, and as a buoy for changes and challenges.

We continue to seek out partnerships and opportunities to support enhanced self-determination, decolonization, revitalization, and empowerment, while at the same time maximizing impact on indigenous empowerment. We invite others to join us in this dialogue and in partnership.

Of special note, and to serve as an invitation to interested parties, the Alaska Native Policy Center will host a collective impact project over the course of the next few years titled "Advancing Alaska Native Dialogues on Racial Equity," as well as an innovation lock-in on Protecting our Native Ways of Life for the long term. In connection with the lock-in, the ANPC will also host Alaska Native Conversations that Matter to bring people together for more opportunities to discuss where we are, where we want to be, and how to outline and implement strategies to get there.



To walk our talk, FAI is working to advance our peoples and at the same time advance our own transformation as an indigenous organization through time. Decolonizing is not easy work but necessary and goes hand in hand with indigenizing ourselves as a strengthening process. To enact the ideals discussed at this reconvening, we seek to enhance the use of Native based solutions, self-governance, and innovations as a balm for what ails our state and as a catalyzing force for growth in Alaska.

Our Appreciation

A tremendous debt of gratitude and appreciation must be given to all who participated and added their voices, thoughts, and ideas into this interactive dialogue and think tank. It is not often that we have the ability to step out of our day to day routines and step into a place of collective reflection about our future.

RGC Reconvening Participants

Megan Alvanna-Stimpfle,
Office of Senator Lisa Murkowski

John Binkley,
Alaska Cruise Association*

Arnold Brower, North Slope Borough*

Christopher Cooke, Bethel Attorney*

Lamar Cotton,
Local Government Consultant

Karen Crane, Alaska Municipal League

Valerie Davidson,
Health Policy Consultant

Kathryn Dodge,
University of Alaska Fairbanks

Dalee Sambo Dorough,
University of Alaska Anchorage/United Nations

Crystal Dushkin,
Aleutian Pribilof Islands Association

Agatha Erickson,
Office of Senator Mark Begich

Victor Fischer, ISER/UAA (Director Emeritus)
/ Elder Statesmen, Alaska Constitutional Convention*

Jean Gamache, National Park Service

Chuck Greene, NANA Regional Corporation

Elizabeth Hensley, Attorney

Diddy Hitchins,
University of Alaska Anchorage

Karlin Itchoak, Institute of the North

Jolene John, Rural Development, USDA

Marlene Johnson, State of Alaska
/ Sealaska board (retired)

Jennifer Johnston, Alaska Municipal League

Wilson Justin, Cheesh'na Tribal Council

Willie Kasayulie, Calista

Mara Kimmel, North Star Group

Gunnar Knapp, University of Alaska Anchorage/ISER

Tony Knowles, Former Alaska Governor*

Susan LaBelle, University of Alaska Anchorage (retired)

Jim LaBelle, Sr., University of Alaska
– Alaska Native Studies (retired)

Oliver Leavitt, Arctic Slope Regional Corporation (retired)

Maija Lukin, Maniilaq Association

Byron Mallott, Commission on
Rural Governance and Empowerment*

Kimberly Martus, Bristol Bay Native Association

Will Mayo, Tanana Chiefs Conference*

Liz Medicine Crow, First Alaskans Institute

Jim Nordlund, Rural Development, USDA

Jorie Paoli, First Alaskans Institute

Evon Peter, University of Alaska Fairbanks

Richard Peterson,
Central Council of the Tlingit and Haida

Lisa Rieger, Cook Inlet Tribal Council

Margaret Roberts, Kodiak Area Native Association*

AlexAnna Salmon, Village of Igiugig

Greta Schuerch, NANA Regional Corporation

Veronica Slajer, North Star Group*

PJ Simon, Tanana Chiefs Conference

Lee Stephan, Native Village of Eklutna*

Arliss Sturgulewski, Former Senator*

Bernice Tetpon, University of Alaska

Edward K Thomas, Tlingit Haida
Central Council (President Emeritus)

Stephen Trimble, Energy
/ Natural Resource Consultant

Kyle Wark, First Alaskans Institute

Kristina Woolston, Chenega Corp

Tiffany Zulkosky, Nuvista

**Original member/staff of the Commission on Rural Governance and Empowerment*

Thank You Very Much to all Participants in 20 Alaska Native Languages

Inuit-Yupik-Unangan Language Family **Igamsiqanaghhaalek**! (St. Lawrence Island Yupik / Siberian Yupik) Qa**ĝ**aasakung! (Unangax̂ / Aleut) Quyanaasinaq! (Sugpiaq / Alutiiq) Quyana cakneq! (Yup'ik & Cup'ik) Quyanaqpak / Ariga taikuu! (Iñupiaq)

Athabascan-Eyak-Tlingit Language Family
Chin'an! (Dena'ina) Dogidinh! (Deg Xinag / Deg Hitan)
Enaa baasee'! (Denaakk'e / Koyukon) Hai' / Mahsi' choo'! (Gwich'in & Hän)
Maasee! (Tanana) Mosiy' / Tsen'anh! (Denak'i / Upper Kuskokwim)
Tsen'ii! (Benhti Kenaga' / Upper Tanana) Tsin'aen! (Ahtna) Tsin'ęę! (Tanacross)
Xasagidaghisdhoot! (Holikachuk)
'Awa'ahdah! (Eyak) Gunalchéesh hó.hó / Atlein gunalchéesh! (Tlingit)

Linguistic Isolates
Háw'aa! (Haida) Nt'oyaxsism / Doykshin! (Sm'algyax / Coast Tsimshian)

Indo-European Language Family & Other
Máh-sie (Chinook Jargon) Thank you very much! (English)

Acknowledgements

Unlike the first Commission, which was State-sponsored, the reconvened Commission was privately funded and self-initiated. In addition to the time and funding provided by First Alaskans Institute and North Star Group, Alaska Municipal League, Bering Straits Native Corporation, Chenega Corporation, Koniag Inc., NANA Regional Corporation, Sealaska and Tanana Chiefs Conference generously helped support this project.

This report offers an opportunity to renew dialogue that advances strategic action areas that will truly empower rural governance in Alaska. Bringing people together from Alaska can be expensive, and consequently financial resources are an ongoing need to maintain an ongoing effort. To support this Rural Governance effort directly, contribute at: www.firstalaskans.org.

Finally, this report wouldn't have been possible without the hard work of the FAI and NSG staff who hosted the event and compiled the report. A special shout out to Drew Cason, Mara Kimmel, Liz Medicine Crow, Karl Ohls, Jorie Paoli, Veronica A. Slajer, and Kyle Wark.

For more information or to access a digital copy of the report, please visit www.ruralgov.org.

To get involved, please contact FAI at anpc@firstalaskans.org or (907) 677-1700, or NSG at info@northstargrp.com or (907) 360-2288.

First Alaskans Institute

NORTH STAR GROUP

"Ultimately, what is needed is a change in how the problems in rural Alaska, and their solutions, are thought about: a paradigm shift that transforms rural empowerment work from isolated activity into collective impact."