

Remarks to the Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN) Convention
Fairbanks, Alaska
By George J. Canelos
Federal Co-Chair, Denali Commission
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(Julie Kitka, President of AFN, had just honored Jeffrey Staser, former Federal Co-Chair of the Denali Commission)

Thank you to Julie & the AFN Board of Directors for your kind introduction and for this brief opportunity to speak. I've been given 15 minutes on your agenda, but I assure you, I'll take less time than that.

I also want to salute Jeff Staser. He built the Denali Commission from scratch into the powerful organization it is today. Here is a resolution, passed two days ago, unanimously by the seven members of the Denali Commission:

A RESOLUTION HONORING FORMER FEDERAL CO-CHAIR JEFFREY STASER

WHEREAS Jeffrey Staser was the first Federal Co-Chair of the Denali Commission and pioneered new ground with this unique agency; and

WHEREAS Mr. Staser envisioned a flexible, innovative agency that would work in collaboration with other State, Federal, tribal and local organizations; and

WHEREAS Mr. Staser's charisma and energy led to the synergistic partnerships called for by the Denali Commission Act of 1998; and

WHEREAS during Mr. Staser's seven-year tenure as the Federal Co-Chair, he led the Commission in developing programs and projects that will serve Alaska's communities well into the future; and

WHEREAS under Mr. Staser's leadership the Commission successfully invested half a billion dollars in infrastructure construction, training and economic development across the State of Alaska; and

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the members of the Denali Commission hereby recognize and honor the outstanding service of Jeffrey Staser and wish him well in his future endeavors.

Today is our birthday – the Denali Commission Act of 1998, envisioned, nurtured and sponsored by Senator Ted Stevens, was signed into law on October 21st, 8 years ago.

The mission of the Denali Commission is to deliver the services of the federal government in the most cost effective manner by reducing overhead costs; to provide job training; and to promote rural development by providing needed basic infrastructure.

The magic of the commission, of course, lies in its ability to partner with other agencies and organizations to move dollars quickly, to leverage limited funding and to get projects done. And I want to thank all of our special federal, state, tribal, local and private sector partners for working together for a common cause.

Over the past eight years, the commission has invested over \$567 million into rural Alaska. \$275 million has been invested into new or upgraded bulk fuel facilities for the villages. 74 projects are completed; another 67 are underway. \$148 million has been invested in Health Care projects resulting in 60 primary care facilities with another 104 projects underway. \$19 million has been invested to train over 3,100 rural residents in skills needed to work in, operate and maintain community infrastructure projects.

Jeff, you've done a magnificent job, and I join AFN in saluting your accomplishments.

I've been on the job now less than 3 weeks. I spent my first week meeting my great staff, the second week building relationships in Washington DC, and my third week here in Fairbanks with the commission (for our quarterly meeting) and with AFN. My next task is to meet all the program partners, and then begin traveling to the villages to see our projects and better understand the role the Denali Commission can and should play in finding overall solutions. I've accepted an invitation from Maniilaq to visit communities in their region as soon as I can.

I want to thank Senator Stevens for his trust and confidence in recommending me to the Secretary of Commerce. This is a very special privilege for me because I believe so deeply in our mission and in the causes being fought for by Senator Stevens and by AFN.

One of the joys of this job is in meeting old friends, and in meeting new ones, and I thank all of you for the goodwill I've received in the past 3 weeks.

I need to speak briefly on energy. The State Co-Chair for the Denali Commission, Governor Frank Murkowski, made an important gesture yesterday, when he pledged to request the legislature to match the \$50 million authorized to the Denali Commission in the 2005 Energy Policy Act. The amount is actually \$55 million, and it can be used for:

- Energy generation from alternative sources, such as fuel cells, hydro, solar, wind, wave and tidal energy,
- Construction of energy transmission, including interties
- Replacement and cleanup of fuel tanks; and
- Significantly, power cost equalization.

The problem is the \$55 million is not yet appropriated. In plain language, we don't have it yet. If funded by the federal government and matched by state government, \$110

million would go a long way towards helping with this year's immediate energy cost shortfalls, and I thank Governor Murkowski for his efforts.

I've been asked what my vision is for the Denali Commission. My answer at this point is I don't know – except that it will focus on performance and accountability. That I don't know more surprises my Anglo friends, but I don't think it will surprise you. I intend to follow what I know of the Native Ways of Knowing – I'm going to listen, I'm going to learn, I'm going to reflect, and I'm going to work together with you to form a renewed vision for the Denali Commission, and with your help, take this powerful concept to the next level.

I need to make four points.

First, strategically, are we doing the right things to carry out our mission? How can we work together better to leverage precious dollars and resources? What should our goals be for the next five years? And is the structure of our organization right to get there? I'll be asking these questions of you, and to our partners.

Second, our procedures and our processes must be completely open and transparent. We already have one of the best websites in government, where anyone can find details about each project. But we need to do much better in terms of outcomes – can we demonstrate we truly are making a difference in the lives of people, and that we're improving life in rural Alaska for the long run. I'm impressed with the work I've seen from RuralCAP, from the 1st Alaskans institute, and from Cheryl Frasca in the Governor's office, and I hope to partner more closely with such experts who are already thinking about performance measures and outcomes.

Third, I'm concerned that we don't have all the voices at the table. There is no way to say this delicately except to say it – I believe that all organizations should ethnically reflect the clients they serve to the fullest extent possible. We currently have no Alaska Natives on staff at the Denali Commission, and if it wasn't for my good friend Nelson Angapak representing AFN and the ANCSA CEO's at the commission, we would have none at all. I do know that in the coming weeks, we will have two senior level positions open at the commission. Once I have job descriptions and work through my commission, I will be advertising these positions. I need your voices at the table.

Fourth, I need help in targeting our message to Washington DC. As the head of a federal agency, I can't lobby. But I can darn sure communicate and pass information. I was encouraged by remarks yesterday by Trudy Anderson of the Alaska Native Health Board – she is focused on this issue, and we all should be working together to educate our constituents on the needs of rural Alaska.

I've had the privilege now of living and working in Alaska for over 30 years. One of the wise leaders I met along the way was Harold Sparks from Bethel. Harold, many of you will recall, was a strong early advocate for village people. I remember a paper he wrote called "The Gift Givers" back around 1980. He argued that local people don't have to

accept whatever the government wants to give them...that local people should be able to determine what's best for them – that they shouldn't be burdened with facilities and projects that are too expensive or that are inappropriate, or that can't be sustained over the long run – and only then can infrastructure be an effective tool for positive change.

I've tried to apply Harold's lessons over the years. As we go from here, I pledge to you my very best to work with you in respect and collaboration to advance the legacy of the Denali Commission for the benefit of this generation and those to come.

Let's begin. Thank you.