



Municipality of Anchorage

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Assembly Chair

January 5, 2025

The Honorable Christopher Constant, Chair
Anchorage Assembly
PO Box 196650
Anchorage AK 99519-6650

The Honorable Bryan Newland
Assistant Secretary Bureau of Indian Affairs
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20240

Letter of Support for Proposed Eklutna Gaming Hall (DOI-BIA-AK-61628)

Dear Assistant Secretary Newland,

I write to support Eklutna Native Village Gaming Facility Project, (DOI-BIA-AK-61628), Native Village of Eklutna's (NVE) proposed development of a modest gaming hall on tribal land within the Municipality of Anchorage. This initiative has the potential to improve historic environmental justice harms by bringing much-needed revenue to the Tribe and generating significant economic opportunities for its members and the Municipality of Anchorage.

With poverty and unemployment rates far higher than the municipal average, NVE members (and the community as a whole) stand to benefit profoundly from this project through improved infrastructure, better employment opportunities, stronger economic activity in general, as well as increased health outcomes and longevity for tribal members. This project will promote self-sufficiency, self-determination, and economic development for the Eklutna Dena'ina people.

I write to you as the presiding officer of the Anchorage Assembly, the Chair. But I need to explicitly state that this opinion is my own and should not be construed as the position of the Assembly as a body. There are differences of opinion among the members, but no official action has been before the body, so the Assembly currently has no opinion. That said, I have shared these comments and discussed this matter with Anchorage Mayor Suzanne LaFrance, and find we are in close alignment. With those caveats, please consider my detailed comments.

The history of the Dena'ina people, the ancestors of NVE, is deeply intertwined with the region now known as Anchorage. When the United States acquired Alaska as a territory, the Dena'ina were the predominant population in the area, numbering in the thousands, since time immemorial. However, events such as the construction of the Alaska Railroad, which established Anchorage as a hub at the Knik River, and the devastation of two pandemics, a boarding school sited in the village that systematically stripped culture, language, and heritage

from Native children¹, and a massive wave of immigrant settlers that dispossessed them of their traditional lands; their population has been reduced to mere scores of people.

An exceptional and detailed description of this history is available in a report titled “*Overview of Dena’ina Athabascan Uses of sites on and near Elmendorf Air Force Base,*”² part of an environmental assessment conducted during a waste removal project on Elmendorf Air Force Base in the early 2000s. It is a very interesting and informative read that I highly recommend.

These historical upheavals mark the origin of the socio-economic challenges that continue to affect the community to this day. Like many Native communities across the United States, NVE faces systemic issues such as poverty, addiction, and limited economic opportunities. It is important to note though that these conditions currently exist broadly in Anchorage today across many demographics and geographic boundaries, not just among the disparately impacted Native peoples of Anchorage.

The Native Village of Eklutna doesn’t have its head in the sand about these current conditions in Anchorage. To tackle some of these challenges, NVE has proactively supported the creation of a community health clinic offering high quality healthcare at the village site³ They have also partnered to create a residential drug and alcohol treatment center on their land in close proximity to the proposed project location.⁴ They have been working for generations to mitigate these harms and in providing solutions for their members, they have provided opportunities for the community at-large through generous land grants for public facilities like Anchorage schools and local parks for example.⁵ Now they seek to operate a gaming hall on their tribal land, and I support them.

Interestingly, research shows that Native communities with gaming establishments experience transformative benefits. Tribes operating their own gaming facilities report higher rates of employment, improved community infrastructure, and better health outcomes, including reduced early morbidity and increased life expectancy.⁶ For NVE, this proposed gaming hall represents more than an economic opportunity; it is a chance to revitalize the community and ensure the long-term survival of the Eklutna Dena’ina people.

So what qualifies me to assert this opinion?

As I stated above, I am the presiding officer of the Anchorage Assembly, and I have served in elected office for nearly 8 years and have studied and overseen the infrastructure, public

¹ https://iseralaska.org/static/legacy_publication_links/boardingschoolfinal.pdf

² Debris Removal Actions at LF04 Elmendorf AFP, Alaska, Final Report, April 10, 2023 (Pages 46-104) https://dec.alaska.gov/Applications/SPAR/PublicMVC/CSP/Download?documentID=36472&fileName=1804_20030410%20Debris%20Removal%20Actions.pdf

³ <https://www.southcentralfoundation.com/services/primary-care-clinics/eklutna-village-clinic/>

⁴ <https://www.ciri.com/shareholder-news/new-ernie-turner-center-opens/>

⁵ https://cdn.ancgis.com/documents/landrecords/landagreements/nala/NALA_19830120_Amendments.pdf

⁶ <https://www.nber.org/brd/20241/mortality-effects-casinos-native-americans>

health, economics, and financial wellbeing of our city closely. I sit on a number of Assembly committees including:

- Community & Economic Development Committee
- Transportation Committee
- Budget and Finance
- Infrastructure, Enterprise & Utility Oversight Committee

And in my professional life, I have spent a career serving as a substance use disorder treatment professional in Anchorage. I present this broad background to demonstrate that I understand the profound impacts this project may have on our community, both positive and negative.

As a legislator, one of my finest acts was to fund, draft, and enact Anchorage Ordinance AO 2020-137(S), establishing in our code that the Municipality of Anchorage formally recognizes the sovereignty of all 229 federally recognized Alaska tribes and establishes a direct government to government relationship with Native Village of Eklutna.⁷ NVE enjoys unique status as the only federally-recognized Tribe whose homelands and historic territories are within the Municipality of Anchorage. It is through this frame that I recognize the proposed gaming hall project as an important exercise of self-determination by the Tribe.

As described in the *Eklutna Native Village Gaming Facility Project Environmental Assessment*⁸, this project is expected to create approximately 230 direct jobs and 420 total jobs, adding an estimated \$67.6 million in value to the local economy. The proposal will create a gaming hall to operate Class II games, as defined by National Indian Gaming Commission which oversees the implementation of the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act (IGRA).⁹ It is worth noting that Class II gaming already exists broadly across Alaska and in Anchorage, specifically. The only difference is that NVE is proposing to use electronic pulltabs rather than traditional paper game pieces, which is not currently allowed under State law, but is allowed under IGRA on Indian land. It is anticipated that the operation will create a number of economic benefits. And those benefits will extend beyond the tribe who owns the hall or the people who employed there. It will provide a ripple effect of economic growth throughout Anchorage.

According to the Alaska Charitable Gaming Alliance, the industry already generates annual gross receipts more than \$375,000,000, with 66% derived in the Anchorage area. This amounts to more than \$250,000,000 of direct economic activity annually in the Municipality. That doesn't even begin to scratch the surface of total economic activity by this industry. It's important to understand the scope of the gross receipts because it clearly demonstrates that gaming currently exists and is a deeply embedded economic activity in Anchorage. I also note that Alaska gaming laws allow operators to pay expenses before net proceeds to charities; thus, according to Alliance statistics, the highly profitable industry is able to pay itself nearly twice what it pays out to beneficiaries. The main point is that this industry is not new to Anchorage

⁷ <https://www.muni.org/Departments/Assembly/Pages/Native-Village-of-Eklutna.aspx>

⁸ <https://eklutnaea.com/>

⁹ <https://www.nigc.gov/commission/faqs-detail/what-is-the-difference-between-class-ii-and-class-iii-gaming>

and is highly profitable.¹⁰ And yet the Alliance opposes NVEs proposal and has for years.¹¹ What would drive opposition?

The currently existing gaming halls are operations owned by a handful of powerful families and corporations. What is the real difference between their operations and NVE's proposal? Well, this project would be Alaska Native/American Indian owned and operated to the benefit of their tribal members. According to a recent study published by The Center for Gaming Research, "Indian gaming is governmental gaming...To paint a negative picture of Indian gaming is another attempt to undermine Indian self-determination and self-sufficiency."¹²

That said, it is important to grapple with the issues that have been raised. The objections I have heard in the community come in three flavors.

One domain of concern is that the operation will bring too much traffic, noise, and water impacts for residents of the area.¹³ These arguments are specious, at best. The proposed location is directly adjacent to a general aviation airfield and two outdoor shooting ranges: The project site borders the Birchwood Airport (PABV), the Anchorage Police Department Shooting Range, and the Birchwood Recreation and Shooting Range—all of which generate substantial noise.¹⁴ Furthermore, the Municipality has long committed to improving water infrastructure for the area to improve housing opportunities.¹⁵ So in the long run, if water concerns prove substantiated, there is a plan for that.

Second, at least one member of the Anchorage Assembly has reasonably stated opposition to the proposal, presenting two studies opposing gaming generally on public health grounds.^{16 17} These social concerns are important to grapple with. As a municipal government, we certainly do face challenges relating to addiction, mental health, and crime, head on. But as previously described, NVE has been confronting these issues directly for years through improvements in healthcare and substance use treatment infrastructure. And as previously discussed, long-term studies indicate a counterintuitive effect of Indian gaming. When tribes operate gaming facilities, tribal members live longer! The people of the Native Village of Eklutna don't need lectures about the social ills tied to poverty—they live it, generation after generation. They understand these challenges intimately and are working tirelessly to create opportunities that break the cycle and uplift their community, infant to elder. This proposal is one strategy NVE is implementing toward that goal. As it stands currently, with these games allowed throughout

¹⁰ <https://alaskacharitablegamingalliance.org/statistics/>

¹¹ <https://alaskacharitablegamingalliance.com/media/>

¹² https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1043&context=occ_papers

¹³ <https://www.alaskasnewsresource.com/2024/12/19/lawsuit-over-proposed-eklutna-casino-filed-over-fears-alleged-noise-water-impacts-chugiak-neighborhood/>

¹⁴ Interestingly, in a Birchwood Airport Master Plan Update currently under FAA review, only one line of an 18-page public comment table mentioned noise as a concern, despite the presence of these facilities. <https://dot.alaska.gov/creg/birchwoodamp/docs/Draft-BCV-AMP-022324-Public-Review.pdf>

¹⁵ <https://www.adn.com/business-economy/2023/11/12/large-housing-development-may-be-coming-to-eagle-river-after-deal-between-city-and-eklutna-inc/>

¹⁶ <https://www.networkforphl.org/news-insights/the-often-unrecognized-public-health-impact-of-gambling/>

¹⁷ <https://www.nbcnews.com/health/health-news/gambling-industry-growth-threat-public-health-report-rcna175356>

the municipality, no rational basis exists to lock out NVE from receiving any of the financial benefits that could enable them to better address these. It is in the Municipality's interest to support it.

The third concern I have heard is the most absurd of them all. The so-called Alaska Charitable Gaming Alliance has opposed the Native Village of Eklutna's now proposed gaming operation for many years. Over that time, concerns have shifted from protecting charities, to reducing addiction, crime, drugs, and abuse caused by gambling to, at one point stating their main concern was that the threat would be "gaming floors...filled to bursting with beeping and blinking class II machines."¹⁸ While fear of bursting and beeping noises is an absurd argument, if their concerns about the harms of gambling are true, the gaming operations currently underway by their members are currently creating those harms. Do they really mean to suggest it is fair for their members to generate those harmful impacts because of the social good they create, but not Native Village of Eklutna? There is a name for that type of standard.

It is my opinion that their ever-changing carousel of concerns all boil down to the protection of huge profits generated through a monopolistic hold on gaming halls. Self-interested concerns can and should be dismissed outright.

In sum, Eklutna's strong commitment to its community's health and the protection of its natural resources ensures that the project is designed to eliminate any significant adverse environmental impacts. Having worked closely with NVE, I know the Tribe will be a strong partner with the Municipality as this project unfolds. I look forward to further collaborating, if and when appropriate.

The resilience and perseverance of the Eklutna Dena'ina people have brought them to this point. They survive as a people. But now, it's time to help them thrive. This gaming hall represents a critical lifeline for cultural preservation and community revitalization. By improving economic opportunities, enhancing quality of life, and fostering cultural resilience, this initiative will have a transformative impact on the environment and the community as a whole. As a practice of self-reliance, self-determination, and economic development, the people of the Native Village of Eklutna propose a gaming hall. I support them.

I urge the Department of the Interior to issue the necessary approvals to allow the Native Village of Eklutna to move forward with this project with all due haste.

Respectfully,



Christopher Constant, Chair
Anchorage Assembly

¹⁸ <https://alaskacharitablegamingalliance.com/media/>