

**Testimony of Chief/Chairman PJ Simon
Tanana Chiefs Conference
May 5, 2021**

**House Subcommittee on Indigenous Peoples of the United States
Oversight Hearing
“Infrastructure in Indigenous Communities: Priorities for American Jobs Plan”
Hearing Held on April 21, 2021**

Chairwoman Leger Fernandez, Ranking Member Young, and members of the Subcommittee on Indigenous Peoples of the United States, I am submitting this testimony on behalf of the Tanana Chiefs Conference (“TCC”) for the record of the Subcommittee’s April 21, 2021 Oversight Hearing on “Infrastructure in Indigenous Communities: Priorities for American Jobs Plan.”

The Tanana Chiefs Conference is a non-profit intertribal consortium of 37 federally recognized tribes and 41 communities located across Alaska’s vast interior. Headquartered in Fairbanks, Alaska, TCC serves approximately 18,000 tribal members in Fairbanks and in rural villages across the interior. TCC aims to meet the health and social service needs of tribes and tribal members throughout the region, which is nearly the size of Texas. The majority of our communities are off the road system and only accessible by plane or boat.

TCC was encouraged by the American Jobs Plan’s proposed investments in tribal communities and their inclusion throughout the entire plan. Repairing roads and bridges, investing in sanitation and clean water access, building high-speed broadband infrastructure, addressing housing, and creating jobs in rural tribal communities would drastically improve the daily lives of our tribal communities and their members. What follows are some of the specific needs of TCC’s villages:

Broadband Infrastructure

TCC applauds the American Jobs Plan’s goal to “bring affordable, reliable, high-speed broadband to every American, including the more than 35 percent of rural Americans who lack access to broadband at minimally accepted speeds.” Tribes in the TCC region can pay as much as \$350 a month for substandard internet; schools in tribal communities can pay tens of thousands of dollars per month for internet; health clinics in our region pay \$735 thousand for inadequate service; and 70 percent of our communities polled require better internet access for basic business communications.

Water & Sewer Infrastructure

The TCC region desperately needs funding for water and sewer infrastructure. We have 13 unserved communities, with an estimated total of 500 unserved homes. The estimated cost to meet all sanitation needs (water/sewer/solid waste) is approximately \$480 million. Examples of some of the sanitation projects that still need funding and have not yet been approved for the design phase include:

- Galena - \$6,739,000, including \$3,291,000 for a supplemental ground water source, and \$3,448,000 for a water main extension and first water and sewer service for 16 homes.
- Huslia - \$786,350 for erosion mitigation measures/water main jumper lines.
- Birch Creek - \$1,029,000 for first service water/sewer for six homes.
- Beaver - \$3,345,850 for washateria upgrades/modular washateria
- Alatna - \$1,930,950 for a sewage lagoon update.
- Circle - \$3,259,812 for a water treatment plant and washateria upgrades.

Transportation Infrastructure

Transportation infrastructure is greatly needed across Alaska and especially in TCC’s tribal communities. Our member villages generally have to rely on grants to meet their transportation needs because they lack a tax base. Unfortunately, grant assistance is never guaranteed and we still have massive unmet transportation funding needs.

- Alatna - \$69,295 is needed for an airboat to cross the Koyukuk river during spring break-up and fall freeze-up to reach the Allakaket airport for medivacs that are not available in Alatna.
- Rampart - \$13 million is needed to finish the road that connects the village to Eureka. This project is for safety purposes as the enclosed geographical area impedes the visibility needed for medivacs. A road was started in 2004 but it ran out of funding 13 miles short of reaching the village. The last stretch has an estimated cost of a million dollars per mile.
- Circle - \$550,000 is needed for road maintenance equipment, including a dump truck, water truck, grader, and a garage to house Tribal Transportation Program (“TTP”) equipment and a clinic ambulance.
- Healy Lake - \$100,000 is needed for a garage to house TTP equipment.
- Birch Creek - \$50,000 is needed for brush-cutting/dust control, including two 4-wheelers, two water tanks, and two trailers. This equipment will maintain the village’s rural road network.
- McGrath - \$87,000 is needed for transportation safety shelters. The community has lost several people on the connecting roads. The shelters would provide safety to anyone caught in bad weather or whose vehicle broke down.

Climate Resilience

TCC applauds the American Jobs Plan’s commitment to “make our infrastructure more resilient” and “defend vulnerable communities” from the impacts of climate change. Our communities are on the front line of coping with climate change, especially when it comes to erosion and permafrost instability.

- Koyukuk - There is an ongoing effort to relocate the village further back from the riverbank due to the erosion occurring.
- Tetlin - Erosion and flooding along a slough of the Tanana River required reorientation of the village.

- Northway – Erosion and flooding have changed the environment of Mark Creek flats from freshwater to silt-laden waters of the Chisana and Nabesna Rivers.
- Tanacross - Erosion and flooding has affected the old village across from Tanacross, including the cemetery.
- Beaver – This village is impacted by major river shifting near the community.
- McGrath – The river was lined with rip-rap several years ago, but erosion remains a problem and more needs to be done to stabilize the shores.
- Ft. Yukon, Loudon, and McGrath - These villages were identified in a 2005 U.S. Senate Appropriations report as needing assistance to address erosion, but little has been done to offer assistance.

Further, erosion has caused houses to be abandoned in Alatna, Chalkyitsik, and Healy Lake. Soon, erosion will damage Nikolai’s airport runway, tank farm, and dumpsite, as well as Stevens Village’s power plant, main power grid, cemetery, and well house.

Energy Infrastructure

Most of the infrastructure in our villages was built in the 1970s and 1980s when oil was less than \$1 per gallon. Today, the villages are still operating with the same infrastructure, and energy cost that are now nearly 10 times the original amount. We are paying some of the nation’s highest cost for electricity and energy with over \$1 per kilowatt hour for electricity in some villages and more than \$10 per gallon for heating fuel.

Capacity in our rural communities is a major challenge. Rural utilities have very small populations and building or repairing energy/electrical infrastructure increases the already high monthly costs for tribal communities. While renewable energy and battery systems are often explored to help reduce costs, these systems are far more complicated to operate compared to a traditional diesel system.

- Venetie - \$3-\$5 million is needed for the construction of a new powerhouse.
- Chalkyitsik - \$2-\$3 million is needed for upgrades and new switchgear for the powerhouse.
- Northway/Tok - \$12-\$15 million is needed for a transmission line, which would cut energy costs in Northway by 40 percent.
- Tok - \$100-\$150 million is needed for a transmission line from Fairbanks to Tok, which has the ability to cut energy costs in Tok/Tetlin/Tanacross/Dot Lake by approximately 50 percent.
- Galena - \$3 million is needed to support their planned 1.2 MW Solar PV-battery project.
- Huslia - \$2 million is needed to support a proposed 600 kw Solar PV project.
- Arctic Village - \$2.5 million is needed to support a Solar PV-battery project.

Housing Needs

In 2015, TCC surveyed 30 interior communities regarding housing needs and found that there are housing shortages for 277 tribal families, 204 tribal members, and 21 tribal veterans. In addition, approximately 23% of tribal households in our region were dealing with overcrowded

living conditions. In 2019, we conducted another housing survey and found that the need rapidly grew to 462 homes. Further, if we account for our growing population, we would have to build 173 homes every year. At the current rate, this would cost \$85.6 million annually. Overall, we need \$228 million to meet our current needs and an additional \$77 million to keep up with growth.

In closing, the Tanana Chiefs Conference would like to thank the Subcommittee for the opportunity to outline our priorities for the American Jobs Plan. We look forward to working with the Subcommittee, Congress, and the Administration to ensure that tribal priorities are included in the final legislative text of the American Jobs Plan.