

Economic Development in Western Alaska

Good morning/afternoon. My name is George Smith from Scammon Bay and I'm the regional manager for the CVRF shops and facilities in 18 communities

I'm your basic K-8 BIA educated kid from Scammon Bay. It all started with BIA's carpentry apprenticeship program right out of the 8th grade at age 13. 3 summers and 3,000 hours later, I received my journeyman card. In 1973 I went to Bethel Regional High School and graduated with honors. I joined the service and served 8 years as a Wheeled Vehicle/Power Generator Mechanic getting my training at Ft Jackson, South Carolina. That's my formal education in a nutshell. The stuff I learned that matters the most to me came from my parents.

Other than my time in service, my whole work experience has been building houses, schools, water treatment plants and commercial buildings, repair and maintenance on small engines, generators, and heavy equipment, running heavy equipment and laying water and sewer.

I've served in the Scammon Bay City Council and as Mayor for many years, the Scammon Bay Traditional Council as the current vice President and as the tribal administrator for 7 years, Askinuk Corporation board and am currently the Chairman of the Board, I am still on the Lower Yukon School District Board of Education and serving as the Chairman until my term is up in 2026. I've been with Coastal Villages Fishing Cooperative since it was incorporated as a for profit CDQ group as a Board member since 1992 and with the CVRF Board after we dissolved CVFC after a long challenging early years trying to exist as a for profit entity. I've been with CVRF for 12 years as a regional manager with CVE running the operations of the mechanic shops in the region.

Thru my public service in those organizations, I learned the organizational and business side of the villages and region. Everything is related.

"do the right things the right way for the right reasons". I was raised by strong character people.

As far as a cash economy in my young life it was nonexistent. There was an old trading post that operated a mile west of Scammon Bay where dad would trade fur from fox, mink, muskrats, and otter for basic household items like coffee, tea, sugar and salt and ammo for his shotgun and rifle. We didn't need much more to be happy. We didn't need money.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs came out after the missionaries and built churches and schools. With the help of BIA, Tribal and IRA councils were formed.

With BIA schools in all communities, barge service came to supply the schools for the upcoming winter. A teacher helped the Tribal Council build a store to be owned by the Council. We needed cash then.

By then, commercial fishing had taken a foothold on the Yukon and with it came cash for people to buy outboards, food, ammunition, boats.. you name it. Cash became king. Without cash to fuel boats, motors and eventually help heat our homes. A resident named John Amukon partnered with a guy named Alf Larson to buy Yukon Salmon at the Black River to make and with that income, he built the store with the supplies such as flour, sugar, coffee, tea, Shasta soda, candy, fresh fruit, guns, ammunition all came for him on the North Star on their yearly run to bring supplies for the school and by them, the community to the store

Some people and families were left out such as my dad and a few others, They did the only thing he knew what to do best. He trapped mink, otter and fox to be able to supply our basic household needs and bartered.

HE Goldberg Fur Company started coming out to our region to buy fur. Dad saved enough money to get our first outboard motor and wood boat. That was the beginning of cash economy in my dad's life until wildlife activists came out crying foul. We were killing our fur bearing animals inhumanly and with it, killed my dad's only form of cash income.

These are a few examples of the early beginnings of the cash economy. Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, AVCP Inc, AVCP Housing, YKHC, REAA Schools were all formed after and with them came limited job creation in our communities.

In recent memory, residents and community leaders saw economic disparity among people living along the coast and those living along the Yukon and Kuskokwim Rivers rich with commercial salmon fisheries and processing jobs, and home to the headquarters of the Tribal housing, health and social programs. CDQ groups were formed to tap into the multi million dollar pollock fishery in the Bering Sea.

Coastal Villages is one of those groups where I manage 18 community Service Center and Mechanic Shops. The mechanic welder program better known as Coastal Villages Enterprise (CVE) has 42 highly trained mechanic welders servicing snowmobiles, outboards, ATV's, Toyo Stoves, repair aluminum boats and customize boats with walk thru windshields, build aluminum sleds with tow bars and everyone's favorite, the steam bath stove complete with a water holding tank to splash the rocks on the stove.

In December 2020, 18 mechanics flew to the Honda ATV and offroad training center at Stockton, California and trained on everything from power train, engine to electronics and really impressed on the trainers with the knowledge they possessed on the Honda products. That led to Scammon Bay, Eek and Kipnuk shops to become the first Authorized

Honda Service Centers in our region. The mechanics performed their first warranty work for Honda ATVs for 50 or so recalled fuel pumps on ATV's right here in our region with out having to send them back to the dealers saving the residents thousands of dollars in shipping.

We just received a product update for certain 2018-2020 TRX 420/500/520 atv's to update the fuel pump. Thru the Service Center's, we are able to find the owners and locations to order the updated fuel pump and replace it without cost to the owner. I have received several calls from such owners that received their notices from Honda, and we are working now to do the fuel pump update in the owners home village which was unheard of in the past.

With ownership of Coastal Powersports formerly known as All Seasons Honda at Homer, we provided several warranty replacements of faulty Voltage Regulators, fuel pumps and even complete engines in our communities and even from people up and down the Yukon with the most recent one being from Mountain Village so our program reaches far beyond our communities. We've had customers from as far upriver as Pilot Station and as far north as Kotlik and on the Kuskokwim, Napaskiak Shop has had customers from as far up the Kuskokwim as Kwethluk and many customers from the hub village of Bethel which had a population of 6325 residents in 2010. The mechanics received a positive review from Kuskokwim 300 and Iditarod Champion Pete Kaizer who runs a site seeing charter boat out of Bethel when his boat needed emergency repair on one of his trip with clients which shows our program supports other economic sectors in our region.

In May 2024, several of our board members and management team went to Japan and met with the corporate leaders of Honda who were very impressed with our program and supported the weeklong ATV and Honda Outboard training in Scammon in August. We have corporate Honda's attention in our region. Who would have thought? Just like when COVID was in our communities and despite many warnings and lockdowns and mandates, remote learning, Scammon Bay and Hooper Bay played high school basketball despite health warnings not to and look where we are now? I still have the Tee Shirt from that tournament with the teams on the bleacher all wearing masks and the holding up a long sign that read "who would have thought." We have the attention of a World Wide Company that provides the most sought-out product in our region, the Honda ATV. Who would have thought?

The CDQ program started in 1992, and I was the youngest board member at 33 years old. I carry the words of one of my mentors and one of the founding fathers of the CDQ program, Joe Paniyak. He wrote in his resignation letter from the CVFC board ; " It is very important for the CVFC to work closely together, and put its plan carefully on the companies that you

select and make sure our staff put their plans careful of how they can create employment and training for our member villages.

Since 1979, I have been involved with commercial fisheries, and have testified before the State board of fisheries, North Pacific Fishery Management Council..... It is important to convince the State how this is important for our people because of the high unemployment rate in our area.

Why did Congressman Don Young call this the Harold Sparck Community development Quota Program? Because he knows this is coming from him. And Harold did this because of very limited resources in the Coastal Villages area..... Harold had a lot of help from Henry and Don Mitchell and Lord knows who is trusted friends were and look at this now, how much money its generating. Tens and tens of millions of dollars annually, from Norton Sound down to the Aleutian Chain. So Board members, look up and remember where you are coming from and be proud of it because you were a part of this too.

Harold Sparck always ends all his letters with the words-

PEACE.

Joe Paniyak”

From holding the CVRF Incorporation meeting on a cold November/December day in the late Joe Paniyaks house at Chevak, holding our quarterly meetings at the USFWS Building at Bethel to owning 711 H Street and Seattle property;

From negotiating royalties for our quota to owning our own vessels, harvesting and processing our own quota;

From a handful of “employment coaches” to being one of the biggest and most recognizable employer in the region;

From renting office space for our employees to working in our own facilities in our region;

From the dream of a handful of people, our founding fathers to becoming the biggest Alaskan Native owned fishing company.

Coastal Villages Region Fund has become more than just a “KEY PLAYER IN THE BERING SEA.”

Who would have thought?

George Smith

