

Rural Alaska pioneer, 63, dies - NATIVE: Frank Ferguson influential in expanding, bettering services in Bush.

Anchorage Daily News (AK) - Thursday, June 5, 2003

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Edition: Final

Section: Alaska

Page: B1

Former Kotzebue lawmaker and Alaska Native leader Frank Ferguson, who for years quietly wielded power in the Alaska Legislature as a member of the influential Bush Caucus, died Wednesday. He was 63.

Ferguson served in the Alaska Legislature from 1971-86, serving four years in the House and nearly 12 years in the Senate, before a stroke forced him to retire.

A former Alaska Federation of Natives president, Ferguson was credited with helping create Rural Education Attendance Areas that helped rid Bush Alaska of federal education policies that required many Native children to leave home to continue school.

Ferguson was also instrumental in expanding rural court systems, public health and safety programs and improving rural telecommunications.

"He had a knack as a politician to find a compromise and knew how to close out a session and make agreements," said former lawmaker Al Adams, who was elected to Ferguson's Senate seat after he left.

Ferguson and then-Sen. John Sackett, a Republican from Galena, are credited by many with making the Bush Caucus of rural lawmakers a powerful force in the Legislature.

"It was such a tragedy when he couldn't serve in the Senate," said Willie Hensley, a childhood friend and the lawmaker appointed to replace Ferguson when he left the Senate.

Hensley called Ferguson a "selfless civil servant" who also fought to secure more funding to offset the expensive costs of providing education in rural areas.

Through a mixture of quiet diplomacy and deft political gamesmanship, Ferguson ensured that rural Alaska benefited from the oil riches that flowed into state coffers, observers say.

"More than anything else, that will be his enduring legacy," said Native leader Byron Mallott.

As former mayor of Yakutat, Mallott recalled trying to secure funding for an elementary school swimming pool in the mid-1970s. He appealed to Ferguson, who secured funding for the project as a standby firefighting water reservoir.

"Fundamentally in the legislative process, he understood the art of the deal," said Mike Scott, who served as a legislative aide for Ferguson. "People call it a powerbroker. I think today he'd call it a facilitator."

Ferguson died in Kotzebue of what his widow, Sophie, said was a stroke. Ferguson had suffered a stroke in May 2000 that left him unable to speak, she said.

Ferguson was born in Kotzebue in 1939 and attended Lathrop High School in Fairbanks. He served in the U.S. Army from 1963-65. Later in life, Ferguson ran a business consulting service and served on the board of directors for NANA Regional Corp., Scott said.

As an Inupiat, he also practiced the subsistence lifestyle and loved camping and boating, Scott said.

Ferguson was twice married and is also survived by five adult children and several grandchildren.

Gov. Frank Murkowski ordered state flags to be flown at half-staff until the day of Ferguson's memorial service. Murkowski lauded Ferguson for his work to improve living conditions in rural Alaska.

"The people of Alaska, especially in rural Alaska, owe a debt of gratitude to Senator Ferguson for his determination to improve life in the villages," Murkowski said.