

# DIALOGUE ALASKA

## 2010 ACTIVITY REPORT TO ALASKA COMMON GROUND

By A. W. "Bill" Hall

Alaska Common Ground has a long history of providing public forums in Alaska. In 2006 we entered into an agreement with the Kettering Foundation, supporter of the National Issues Forum (NIF), to begin forming what they call a Public Policy Institute (PPI) in Alaska ("Centers for Public Life"). We are now part of over 50 similar organizations that constitute the NIF network, most of which have adopted names more appropriate to their role in promoting civic dialogue and deliberative democracy. We are calling ours Dialogue Alaska. Kettering provides financial assistance to PPIs in the form of what they call research contracts in which organizations propose a research plan in the form of questions relating to their work in creating and operating PPIs. The program offers up to three annual contracts at \$5,000 per year. We did not use all of the funds from our first year contract and have a carry over for use in our second year. Kettering also pays the costs of travel to attend two meetings a year at their campus in Dayton, Ohio and for volunteers to attend training workshops provided by other PPIs.

In our first year of operation, we hosted two organizational conversations around the NIF issue book: *Democracy's Challenge*, and conducted a facilitator training for 20 Alaskans in Anchorage. With Kettering support three of our volunteers received training in facilitation and framing at NIF locations outside. Meetings and discussion were held in an effort to create an active advisory committee that would form the organizational basis for our public policy institute – with limited success. Creating a PPI as an organization requires the active involvement of individuals committed to its purpose of supporting and promoting public dialog. This remains an unmet and continuing obligation in our relationship with the Kettering Foundation.

Although Dialogue Alaska is one of a few PPIs in the NIF network that is not formally affiliated with a university, it has benefited from the support of the University of Alaska Cooperative Extension Service through the work of their Engagement and Outreach Coordinator, Bill Hall, who is also the lead organizer behind Dialogue Alaska.

We are now working on our second year contract with Kettering which is focused on creating a collaborative relationship with the Alaska Library Association (AKLA). This opportunity was presented to us by June Pinnell-Stevens, a retired librarian in Fairbanks who is active in both AKLA and the American Library Association (AMA). With June's help we formulated the following research questions which were accepted by Kettering and incorporated into our second year research agreement with them.

1. What are we learning about how partnerships and collaborations (e.g., Cooperative Extension, Library Association) increase our capacity to convene, frame, and deliver forums? How do these partners view their role in relation to the role of citizens?
2. What are we learning about how a program of public dialogue on Alaska's Fiscal Future can facilitate the public learning necessary for informed deliberation on potential changes in public policy?
3. What are we learning about how an educational dialogue can lead to changes in public policy?
4. What are we learning about how moderators understand their role in the politics of their community, or in Alaska?
5. How have we and our partners reflected together on our work? What changes have these reflections yielded in our practice or in the institute?

Our goal is to work with the Alaska Library Association to create a statewide program in support of community dialogue. We have learned that promoting citizen dialogue and deliberation involves three interrelated but distinct components: 1) convening, 2) framing & designing and, 3) facilitating.

We initiated this effort with a collaborative proposal submitted to the AKLA board last May. They responded by inviting us to make presentation at their annual membership meeting in March of 2010 in Anchorage which is attended by most librarians from across the state. We prepared for this event by presenting a demonstration forum at the Seward Public Library with the help of their Director, Patricia Linville, in February 2010. Building on this, and with the help of Mrs. Linville, we presented one workshop at the AKLA Conference in March to describe and discuss the possibilities of a library based program of community dialogue. This was followed by a demonstration forum using a discussion guide titled "Who do I Trust to Protect My Privacy?" produced by the AMA. Participants at both events were enthusiastic about the possibilities. So, we are in the process of a creating a steering committee of interested librarians to consider the following development possibilities:

- Develop a local library dialogue plan in support of community dialogues with at least 3 options: convening, designing/framing and facilitating to be used as an introductory proposal
- All options should be organized around a local community conversations committee of at least 3 individuals who might represent different aspects of the community such as the school system, local government, chamber of commerce – OR NOT? Check out the Island Institute in Sitka for a model: <http://home.gci.net/~island/>
- Select four communities to begin working with ASAP; possibly Haines, Seward, Anchorage, & Fairbanks.
- Create a development committee of AKLA, Alaska Common Ground, and CES representatives – not too large.
- Investigate possible grant funding from Rasmussen Foundation
- Develop an introductory workshop for librarians
- Survey Libraries to determine potential level of interest
- Organize and deliver facilitator/moderator training workshops
- Convene and frame the dialogues, which would make the programs feasible throughout the state.

Our ability to accomplish the foregoing will require the further development of a Dialogue Alaska Organization or an Alaskan Center for Public life into an active working organization. We will need leaders and members who can contribute their time, energy, passion, and talent to the mission and purposes of the organization. This is our greatest challenge at this time.