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Media Release

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NIGA Tribal Leadership Come Together at Mid Year Meetings in New Mexico



Chairman Stevens joins the Santo Domingo Disabled Veterans, of Santo Domingo, New Mexico who honored the NIGA Mid-Year event by posted the colors to open the 2009 Leadership meetings.

POJOAQUE, N.M.- September 16, 2009 - The 2009 National Indian Gaming Association Mid-Year Conference at the Buffalo Thunder Resort and Casino was held on Sept. 15-16. The conference brought together tribal leaders and leaders in the Indian gaming industry.

Over 250 people were in attendance from across the country, representing over 60 tribes. They attended training seminars on issues affecting Indian gaming and enjoyed networking opportunities with gaming industry experts and tribal leaders.

Hosting the conference was the Pojoaque Pueblo's shining achievement of gaming, the Buffalo Thunder Resort and Casino. Pojoaque Pueblo Governor George Rivera said the tribe was honored not only to host the mid-year conference, but also to unveil the monumental achievement of the resort, which was initiated back in the early 1990s.

"This development was the result of many struggles," Rivera said. "This property was dreamed about in the early 90s and completed one year ago, just to give you an idea of the challenges the tribes faced."

To realize gaming in Pojoaque took the combined efforts of tribal leadership, supporters in state legislature, friends, lobbyists and lawyers, he said. The orchestration of NIGA throughout the process was instrumental, he added. Getting the resort built was only half the battle, however.

"It's really important that now we have made big strides in gaming that we remember what it took to get there and not get relaxed," Rivera said. "It's important that you are all here to meet and talk and continue with the vision that's been developed."

NIGA Chairman Ernie Stevens, Jr. agreed with Rivera and said the purpose of the mid-year conference was for solidarity and reaffirmation of the fight for Indian sovereignty. While Indian prominence in Washington, D.C. has been revealed through the years and we continue to reenergize our visibility to keep the Indian voice prominent in the Nation's Capitol. "Thank you to all the leaders here. You are the leadership that is taking us where we need to be in Washington, D.C." Stevens said.

He said with the nation in the grips of the economic recession, Indian Country is actually doing moderately well. "While some tribes are doing well, there are many that continue to feel the strife of economic disparities, together, we continue to analyze the Indian economy and work towards vitalizing all."

Stevens continued, "This is not a new recession for us. This has been synonymous in Indian country and something we've dealt with for centuries," Stevens said. "America, welcome to our world."

Despite the economic climate, Indian gaming has been creating new jobs, not only for Indians, but non-natives as well. In that aspect, gaming has been stimulating the American economy with viable jobs in addition to the taxes states and the federal government receives through Indian gaming.

Chairman Stevens continued, “We all know the state of the economy is a real issue but tribal government gaming is a great part of the reason we continue to see enhancements in many communities throughout Indian country.”

“While we see great hope for Indian country with the new administration in Washington, D.C., we have to keep working at it. We have to continue to do our part, not only at home, but also for all the Brother and Sister tribes who need us the most. We must continue to work diligently together.”

National Congress of American Indians President Joe Garcia agreed with Stevens and recalled the struggles of the New Mexico Pueblos to bring Indian gaming into fruition on their Pueblo lands.

Garcia said the Pueblos stood their ground on the basis of Indian sovereignty and noted the federal agents never did shut down their operations. That example of asserting Indian sovereignty should be a model for tribes today, he said.

“Indian gaming has been a blessing for us and we’ve really benefited from these efforts. It all came from sacrifices, it didn’t just happen,” Garcia said. “All of the gaming facilities that exist throughout Indian Country say something about what we’ve accomplished.”

NIGA Executive Director Mark Van Norman said the network of tribes working together has been the best protection for Indian sovereignty. The vigilance must continue, along with education, he said.

“If we let them, the public would do their best to misinterpret Indian Country,” Van Norman said. “We have our detractors out there and it is our job to educate.”

The message of the 2009 NIGA Mid-Year Conference was loud and clear: Indian sovereignty must be protected at all costs. Sovereignty was the basis for the survival of Indian nations and will be the source of strength for generations to come.

Stevens said, “No matter where you go in Indian Country, it’s about building communities and providing vital services for our people, whether it is schools, hospitals, police and fire services, these are all resources that are imperative to the health and welfare of our communities. I call upon the leadership out there to join with the National Indian Gaming Association and the National Congress of American Indians.

“Let’s work together, because we are not just building our tribes and communities. We’re not just rebuilding Indian Country, but we have a role to play in helping America to recover.”

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About the National Indian Gaming Association (NIGA) - The National Indian Gaming Association is a nonprofit trade association comprised of 184 American Indian Nations and other nonvoting associate member. The mission of NIGA is to advance the lives of Indian people – economically, socially and politically. NIGA operates as a clearinghouse and educational legislative and public policy resources for tribes, policymakers and the public on Indian gaming issues and tribal community development. For more information, visit www.indiangaming.org.