INTRODUCTION

The Twenty-First New Mexico First Town Hall convened in Albuquerque on June 4, 1998, to explore the state of relations between Indians and their non-Indian neighbors, and to identify ways to overcome challenges to achieving better relations.

The Town Hall recognized that while there are many obstacles to better relations, many opportunities exist for developing more productive, positive relations between Indians and non-Indians. Moreover, the Town Hall demonstrated a willingness among New Mexico’s tribal leaders and non-Indians alike to take steps to turn opportunities into successes.

PERCEPTIONS AND BELIEFS

The history of relationships between Indian and non-Indian people in New Mexico is long and complex. Much of the current relationship is the result of ignorance, broken promises and violent conflict. Today, among both Indians and non-Indians, there remains ignorance, fear, mistrust and disrespect, misconceptions and misunderstandings. This history and atmosphere of mistrust and misunderstanding is responsible for many present conflicts. Sometimes, actions taken by non-Indian governments threaten tribal sovereignty, the right of tribes to govern themselves, or are perceived to be threats. Sometimes, actions taken by tribes in defense of their
sovereignty are perceived as threats, or at least inconveniences, to the non-Indian public. Both may be true and both may result from misunderstanding and lack of communication.

The Town Hall acknowledged that non-Indians hold certain stereotypes and generalizations about Indians, which interfere with the establishment of better relations. In non-Indian society there are views that Indians do not provide sufficiently for their own well-being through lack of qualifications and laziness, and that they are dependent on and “taken care of” by the federal government since they don’t contribute to their support and don’t pay taxes. In fact, Indians contribute significantly to the economy of New Mexico, particularly in communities near the pueblos and reservations.

Inaccurate and unfair generalizations fail to take into account that Indian people have faced many challenges as a result of their unique history. Education for Indians is often below non-Indian school standards. Indians who live off-reservation in urban areas have special needs that are often not met by either public, private or nonprofit services. Moreover, Indians struggle constantly to uphold deeply held spiritual and familial traditions while attempting to adjust to non-Indian business, education and social systems.

The Town Hall strongly urges non-Indians to be much more sensitive to the interests and concerns of Indian people, and to become more educated about issues of concern to Indians and how they affect all New Mexicans. The Town Hall made some general observations about how Indians and non-Indians could expand their understanding of each other.

A constant effort of increasing non-Indians’ sensitivity to Indian issues can begin at the earliest ages. Young Indian and non-Indian people can be encouraged to form relationships with their neighbors through organized personal interaction in schools and sports and through school curriculum that strengthens the accurate history and appreciation of the various Indian cultures.
The Town Hall also recognized that Indian tribes can do more themselves to expose their activities and culture to the non-Indian world. Among the tactics is more effective use of the media, from the drafting of textbooks focusing on Indian history, to establishing newspapers and Internet websites to spread the word about Indian culture and accomplishments.

Non-Indians could take some relatively simple steps to include tribal governments in public affairs of the outside world. As suggested by Town Hall keynote speaker Kevin Gover, simply incorporating the Indian pueblos near Albuquerque into the Middle Rio Grande Council of Governments would be an effective way to build state/tribal relations in central New Mexico in issues of water and land use planning.

Non-Indians also must recognize that all Indians are not alike. There are there 22 unique tribes and pueblos in New Mexico, comprised of families, chapters and bands, each with distinct customs, values and practices. This fact is central to problems non-Indians face when attempting to establish business or service relationships with Indian tribes.

It is sometimes better to work cooperatively on issues where there is common ground. This means that when issues arise that are too difficult to resolve, those should not prevent discussion and resolution of other issues. With a positive approach, irreconcilable issues can be left unresolved while progress occurs on other issues.

The adversity of the past cannot be ignored, however it must not dictate efforts to take positive action in the present.

FINANCING AND DELIVERY OF SERVICES

Health care, education, government business regulation and taxation all affect the quality of life on Indian reservations and in surrounding communities. The Town Hall recognized a clear
need for improved coordination among tribal government entities to improve delivery of all
services, increased funding in certain areas, and greater participation by individuals and groups
who are the beneficiaries of health care and education funding.

The Town Hall consensus is that dual taxation - tribal and state taxation of identical
activities - hurts the tribes by discouraging business development on tribal land. The Town Hall
recommends that tribes engage the state in dialog to resolve the dual taxation issues. Many
options were considered for resolving the problem, from the elimination of state taxation on
Indian land to comprehensive evaluation of state government expenditures for programs
benefiting Indians compared with the state tax revenues generated from Indian land.

Moreover, the Town Hall recognized a need for state and tribal governments to recognize
each others’ regulatory and enforcement authority. Expanded use of joint powers agreements
could do much to establish formal government-to-government relations among Indian tribes and
pueblos and state and local governments.

Health care funding and delivery is evolving nationwide and on Indian reservations.
There is great uncertainty among Indian leaders about how financing decisions are made, how
funding is controlled, and whether Indians’ health care needs are the primary interest being
served. The Town Hall recommended the formation of a state-level Indian Health Care
Commission to explore state and federal funding mechanisms and make recommendations for
improving health care delivery to Indian people. Programs should exist to encourage Indians to
enter the health professions.

The Town Hall also recommended that the role of the Indian Health Service be
restructured so that it may provide health care pursuant to new regulations governing health
maintenance organizations.
Indians are no less concerned about acquiring quality education for their children than any other parents. The Town Hall recommended that individuals become more active, organize themselves as parents and communities, and run for elective office on school boards to make the greatest possible impact on education services in their communities. Of specific focus are programs that help young people: in preparation for competency exams, as well as to help them make the transition from small reservation schools to university settings.

The Town Hall recommended that teacher compensation, training and recruiting all be improved for reservation schools. Of special importance is the desirability of educating teachers in diversity and Indian culture. Tribes could be called upon to dedicate new revenues to education, particularly in the areas of transportation and capital improvements.

The Town Hall recommended that tribal and state leaders examine state funding for public schools and whether equalization factors are necessary for schools in the reservations.

A VISION OF NEW MEXICO

The Town Hall expressed its vision of New Mexico clearly and eloquently. In its vision of New Mexico: People of all cultures treat each other with respect and understanding; multiculturalism is celebrated for the differences it displays and for the strength it provides; Indian communities are allowed to govern themselves without threat from their neighbors; disadvantaged communities are provided the tools to improve their economic wealth, and opportunities for economic prosperity are shared; religions are recognized and respected; health care and housing are universally available; land and resources are used responsibly and for the benefit of the community as a whole; Indians and non-Indians reach out in a spirit of partnership to prevent and resolve disagreements.
Following are some excerpts from vision statements drafted by the eight panels of the 21st Town Hall:

“A place where individuals, communities, institutions, their values, beliefs and traditions are respected, valued and honored; a place where future generations of New Mexicans have a forum where each can dialogue and create avenues for compromise, enabling individuals and communities to maximize their potential while respecting the differences within each group”

“A New Mexico where:

- All citizens and legislators understand the special issues involved in Native American education;
- Tribal sovereignty is mutually understood and respected;
- All parties are included in the processes so that our diversity can be our strength;
- The media accurately reflect Native American issues;
- The quality of life for all New Mexicans is a level playing field;
- Barriers to economic development are eliminated, while maintaining our cultures and preserving what is unique about New Mexico.”

“The special community known as New Mexico increasingly will require its resident Indians and their non-Indian neighbors to pursue common solutions while recognizing each others’ inherent differences and desire for independence.”

“Where all people recognize that the diverse and interlocking nature of New Mexico’s cultures is dependent on cooperation and respect.”

“A future in which sovereignty is not a defense of land base threats to tribes, where sovereignty is an inherent right to govern ourselves and allow tribes to continue to educate themselves about what ‘sovereignty’ is.”
“A partnership of cultures rather than a ‘melting pot’ approach.”

“A genuine respect for our environment and a conscious effort by all parties to prudently use non-renewable resources.”

“A healthy community, in body and soul that inspires hope for people not only here but as a national whole and as members of the human family. A vision that the state does not view the Indian culture as a historical relic but as a thriving and healthy, contributing culture that adds to our lives as residents and the nation as a whole.”

“Health care and education that is affordable and accessible to all communities, focusing on prevention as well as treatment.”

“Acting as role models for our youth.”

The Town Hall recognized many examples of programs that will help New Mexico achieve its vision: the most ideal future that can be described. The success stories

ACHIEVING THE VISION

CONCLUSION
Following are some of the projects and programs cited during the 21st Town Hall as success stories that can be emulated to foster better relations between New Mexico’s Indians and non-Indians.