

TWENTY-FIRST NEW MEXICO FIRST TOWN HALL

**AMERICAN INDIANS IN NEW MEXICO AND THEIR NEIGHBORS:
BUILDING BRIDGES OF UNDERSTANDING**

**Albuquerque, New Mexico
June 4-7, 1998**

1 **INTRODUCTION**

2 The Twenty-First New Mexico First Town Hall convened in Albuquerque on June 4,
3 1998, to explore the state of relations between Indians and their non-Indian neighbors, and to
4 identify ways to overcome challenges to achieving better relations.

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

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11 **PERCEPTIONS AND BELIEFS**

12 The history of relationships between Indian and non-Indian people in New Mexico is
13 long and complex. Much of the current relationship is the result of ignorance, broken promises
14 and violent conflict. Today, among both Indians and non-Indians, there remains ignorance, fear,
15 mistrust and disrespect, misconceptions and misunderstandings. This history and atmosphere of
16 mistrust and misunderstanding is responsible for many present conflicts. Sometimes, actions
17 taken by non-Indian governments threaten tribal sovereignty, the right of tribes to govern
18 themselves, or are perceived to be threats. Sometimes, actions taken by tribes in defense of their

1 sovereignty are perceived as threats, or at least inconveniences, to the non-Indian public. Both
2 may be true and both may result from misunderstanding and lack of communication.

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

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

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

20 A constant effort of increasing non-Indians’ sensitivity to Indian issues can begin at the
21 earliest ages. Young Indian and non-Indian people can be encouraged to form relationships with
22 their neighbors through organized personal interaction in schools and sports and through school
23 curriculum that strengthens the accurate history and appreciation of the various Indian cultures.

1 The Town Hall also recognized that Indian tribes can do more themselves to expose their
2 activities and culture to the non-Indian world. Among the tactics is more effective use of the
3 media, from the drafting of textbooks focusing on Indian history, to establishing newspapers and
4 Internet websites to spread the word about Indian culture and accomplishments.

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

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

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

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

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21 **FINANCING AND DELIVERY OF SERVICES**

22 Health care, education, government business regulation and taxation all affect the quality
23 of life on Indian reservations and in surrounding communities. The Town Hall recognized a clear

1 need for improved coordination among tribal government entities to improve delivery of all
2 services, increased funding in certain areas, and greater participation by individuals and groups
3 who are the beneficiaries of health care and education funding.

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

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

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

21 The Town Hall also recommended that the role of the Indian Health Service be
22 restructured so that it may provide health care pursuant to new regulations governing health
23 maintenance organizations.

1 Indians are no less concerned about acquiring quality education for their children than
2 any other parents. The Town Hall recommended that individuals become more active, organize
3 themselves as parents and communities, and run for elective office on school boards to make the
4 greatest possible impact on education services in their communities. Of specific focus are
5 programs that help young people: in preparation for competency exams, as well as to help them
6 make the transition from small reservation schools to university settings.

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

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

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14 **A VISION OF NEW MEXICO**

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

1 Following are some excerpts from vision statements drafted by the eight panels of the
2 21st Town Hall:

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

7 “A New Mexico where:

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

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

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

21 “A future in which sovereignty is not a defense of land base threats to tribes, where
22 sovereignty is an inherent right to govern ourselves and allow tribes to continue to educate
23 themselves about what ‘sovereignty’ is.”

1 “A partnership of cultures rather than a ‘melting pot’ approach.”

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

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

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

10 “Acting as role models for our youth.”

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

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14 **ACHIEVING THE VISION**

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20 **CONCLUSION**

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APPENDIX

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

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