

Keynote Speaker Shares Gila River Perspective

In addressing the issues of sovereignty, Alaska Natives can learn a great deal from the experiences of Lower 48 Indian tribes. The keynote speaker for the 1988 convention, William R. Rhodes, addressed several sovereignty issues from his perspective as the Lieutenant Governor for the Gila River Indian Community. Following are some of the key points he made in his address to convention delegates.

Background

The Gila River Indian Community is a 327,000 acre reservation located approximately 20 miles south of the Phoenix metropolitan area in Arizona. It is about 20 miles at its widest point and 61 miles long. The reservation has approximately 10,500 members from the Pima and Maricopa tribes.

William R. Rhodes was elected as Lt. Governor of the Gila River Indian Community in Nov. of 1987. He previously served as its Chief Judge for 15 years.

Governing Structure

As a sovereign tribe, the Gila River Indian Community is able to make its own laws and regulations and carry them out. It is governed by a Constitution which was adopted in the early 1930's. The Constitution provides for membership, elections, eligibility, etc.

The reservation is divided into seven districts with each district having its own district council and representatives to the tribal council. The tribal council has 17 members and is the major decision-making body. The reservation has a Governor, Lt. Governor and a tribal treasurer.

Tribal Court System

The Gila River tribal court system is recognized by the Bureau of Indian Affairs as a "show boat" of tribal courts. People have come from as far away as Europe and Australia to see it.

The court system has a chief judge with two associate judges who are elected to 3-year terms. There is a domestic court, misdemeanor court, traffic court and juvenile or children's court. The children's court judge is appointed by the tribal council. Visiting judges are invited to sit on the appellate court so there are no possible conflicts. The court is a five-day-a-week, 30 hours-a-week court.

Powers of Tribal Courts

The courts are perfectly capable of handling any court situation that comes before them. They perform marriages, grant divorces and adoptions.

Some tribes have limited the jurisdiction of their courts by setting limits on the size of awards that can be handled in civil cases. There are courts in Arizona with unlimited jurisdiction. The Gila River Indian Community Court has handled a couple of cases involving damages that totalled \$450,000.

Police Protection

Along with the courts is the matter of police protection. The BIA attempts to provide adequate police protection, but a recent survey shows that the federal government does not provide enough money for enough bodies to be out there to provide adequate protection. With funding cuts, there are only two officers for the reservation at one time. There



Lt. Gov. of Gila River Indian Community, William R. Rhodes. Photo by Rob Stapleton/AFN

is no way they can respond to all the calls that come in. The answer is to 638 those kind of programs and have the tribe take over the program.

Economic Development

The tribe has established a tribal employment rights office to provide equal employment opportunities. It requires a certain amount of Indian hire for all companies and contractors who do business on the reservation. The unemployment rate is 24% among the male population.

Gila River has established its own land use controls and development procedures which include ordinances to control the types of businesses that can do

business there and the areas where they can be located.

There are three industrial parks on the reservation. Tribes need to be careful when industries look to the reservation for sites because they may have been in trouble someplace else. Gila River learned this lesson the hard way when people got hurt by companies dealing with explosives and emergency flares. The companies didn't adhere to strict safety precautions and came to the reservation from other sites that had strict regulations regarding storage and production of that kind of product.

A tax ordinance is applied to members and to non-Indian businesses that do business on the reservation.