



THE NAVAJO NATION

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT & VICE PRESIDENT

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

MARCH 12, 2008

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Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley, Jr., pleased with findings from Inspector General's inquiry into NIEA Hawaii conference

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. – Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley, Jr., said he was pleased with the findings of the Interior Department's Inspector General's office that the Navajo Nation's participation at an education conference in Hawaii last October was reasonable, appropriate for the size of the tribe, and did not misuse federal funding.

"All along I said I don't think they (the Farmington Daily Times) have anything, believing and having confidence in the leadership of the different school boards that are in place on Navajoland," President Shirley said Wednesday. "My position has been that everything is right on cue. The different school boards have authority to send staff, or they can attend conferences like the National Indian Education Association conference in Hawaii."

Inspector General Earl E. Devaney's inquiry into Navajo Nation use of federal funds for attendance at the National Indian Education Association conference was prompted by a Nov. 16, 2007, letter from U.S. Sen. Pete Domenici who, in turn, had been asked to seek an investigation of misuse of federal funds by the Farmington Daily Times.

"I appreciate the Inspector General's findings, and accept his decision that the Navajo Nation was within reasonable boundaries in sending their delegation to the conference," Senator Domenici said today in a news release. "I also appreciate President Shirley's cooperation with this official review, which I hope answers some of the concerns raised about the Navajos participation in the education conference."

On Nov. 3, 2007, and several times afterward, the Daily Times inaccurately reported that the Navajo Nation had sent 362 participants "claiming ties to the Navajo Nation" who had each paid the \$400 pre-registration cost to the conference.

"We concluded that the Navajo Nation's number and background of representatives at the conference were not unreasonable and that the conference content met a wide-range of training needs."

– Interior Department Inspector General Earl E. Devaney

However, at no time over the last four months through numerous follow-up stories, commentaries and editorials has the newspaper defined or clarified what it meant by "claiming ties to the Navajo Nation," leaving readers to mistakenly assume that hundreds of participants were tribal employees – which they were not – and that the Navajo government paid for them – which it did not – rather than enrolled Navajo Nation tribal members who traveled to the conference from across the country and the Navajo Nation.

This information was explained to a Daily Times reporter during a December interview with Navajo Nation Interim Education Superintendent Eddie Biakeddy but the interview was never published.

The newspaper inaccurately reported that requests for interviews with President Shirley had been refused. At no time after publication on Nov. 3 did any Daily Times reporter or editor contact OPVP Communications Director George Hardeen regarding this story or to request an interview with President Shirley.

The paper also inaccurately reported that "the number (of Navajo Nation attendees) is more than five times the representation of any other Indian tribe." However, according to the Inspector General's findings, "other tribes had a larger percentage of attendees per capita."

“As a result,” Mr. Devany said, “we concluded that the Navajo Nation’s participation was, in fact, not among the top 10 tribes per capita.”

“The Navajo Nation is the biggest Native American tribe in the western hemisphere,” President Shirley said. “It’s not anything alarming when many Navajos show up at a conference like the NIEA conference in Hawaii.”

Mr. Devany cited information provided by President Shirley that the Navajo Nation had sent 61 participants to the conference. These included Navajo Nation Council delegates, legislative branch staff, President and Mrs. Shirley, and executive branch staff including 15 from Navajo Head Start – the only ones from the Navajo Nation government to use federal funding for travel, registration and lodging.

“Costs for the remaining government employees and elected officials to attend the conference were paid using general (tribal) funds,” Mr. Devaney wrote to Sen. Domenici on March 7. “The Navajo Nation has the authority to use its own funds as it deems appropriate and it is the responsibility of tribal members to ascertain the appropriateness of tribal fund expenditures.”

Mr. Devaney said the conference agenda was extensive, geared toward a wide range of people, featured various keynote speakers, and included more than 200 workshops.

“The conference was promoted by both U.S. Senator Daniel K. Akaka and Congressman Neil Abercrombie,” Mr. Devaney said. “NIEA’s goal was to bring in the highest attendance ever, and about 3,000 people attended, compared to about 2,000 at the prior year’s conference in Alaska.”

Mr. Devaney wrote that the Bureau of Indian Education is responsible for 65 Navajo schools of which 14 sent two-to-three people to the conference. Of those, only five schools used federal funding.

“Because the Navajo Nation has no jurisdiction over the (195) public schools and the 32 other schools governed by the elected boards, we would have had to contact each school directly to request information, an exercise which proved unnecessary once we evaluated the NIEA attendance and conference information,” Mr. Devaney said.

“Based on attendance, funding, and conference information obtained from the NIEA, the Navajo Nation, and the Bureau

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– Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley, Jr.

of Indian Education (BIE),” Mr. Devaney said, “we concluded that the Navajo Nation’s number and background of representatives at the conference were not unreasonable when compared to the attendance per capita levels of other Indian tribes and that the conference content met a wide-range of training needs.”

President Shirley said he was disappointed in the quality of the Daily Times reporting and editorial opinion, given that it had not confirmed facts it reported over a four month period while accusing Navajo Nation leaders of a lack of accountability.

“For a newspaper like the Farmington Daily Times to come down with accusations that we’re not doing it right, that so many Navajos should not have gone, to me it’s off the wall,” President Shirley said. “They never talked to me about it. I don’t believe they ever spoke to the other leadership about it, but now that they’ve been proven wrong, I appreciate that. As leaders, teachers, school board members, we’re doing everything we can to bring home knowledge for the teaching of our children.”

In his letter to the President last November regarding the Inspector General’s inquiry, Senator Domenici called for accountability on the part of the Navajo Nation, should it be found to have misused federal funds, or on the part of the newspaper.

“Senator Domenici should take a very serious look at that,” President Shirley said. “It wasted a lot of our time, certainly a lot of my time, and some of the board members’ who attended the NIEA conference. So I hope the Senator does right by us and does something about what the Daily Times has done. They had malice in mind to do what they did, and I hope Sen. Domenici does something about it.”

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