



THE NAVAJO NATION

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT & VICE PRESIDENT

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Navajo President Joe Shirley, Jr., thanks Utah Gov. Huntsman for acknowledging, working with tribes as equal sovereigns

CEDAR CITY, Utah – Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley, Jr., thanked Utah Governor Jon Huntsman and Lt. Governor Gary Herbert for recognizing Utah's tribes as equal sovereigns and for being the first Utah administration to truly reach out to tribes.

"It takes a special person to do that, a person with heart, a person with love for people, a person that has diplomacy, and I believe that these two gentlemen have that," President Shirley said during the second annual Utah Native American Summit at Southern Utah University on Sept. 11. "I do appreciate the doors being opened by the Governor, by the Lieutenant Governor."

Gov. Huntsman launched the summit by telling tribal leaders, representatives, Utah legislators and officials that tribes should be treated as sovereign equals and partners.

"There's so much we can do together," he said. "We do share land, and we do share air, and we do share borders. Perhaps the most important feature of all is trying somehow, someway, to improve the human condition. Whether the human condition is on our sovereignty or on your sovereignty, it's the same."

"This is home to Natives," President Shirley said. "It's always been home. We're not going anywhere. I know that the state of Utah is not going anywhere. I don't believe that the counties are going anywhere."

Governor Huntsman said it's a priority for his administration to visit each tribe within Utah and to speak to its tribal council. President Shirley said he was the first and only Utah governor to address the Navajo Nation Council when he visited last year.

"I really appreciate the Governor coming out the way he has in treating us as equal sovereigns," the President said. "That's just the way it should be. We have five tribes in the state of Utah that need that acknowledgement, that need that recognition."

President Shirley said the Navajo Nation needs state help for Navajo people who don't have birth certificates to be recognized as eligible for many services, and Governor Huntsman said the Utah Department of Children and Family Services is now doing just that.



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"I, for one, am a little bit tired of hearing about issues that are 25 years old that are unresolved," Governor Huntsman said. "Now why is it that we can't fashion a system that does a little bit better for our people than carrying these issues perpetually into the future without somehow resolving them?"

President Shirley told the summit that he recently heard on the news that the federal government was expressing alarm that the polar bear population is falling and that the bear's continued survival may be threatened. But he said Native Americans have much longer experienced threats to their existence without raising similar alarm.

"I consider my nation as endangered. I consider Native American nations as endangered," he said. "I want to continue to be a Navajo person. I'd like my Nation to continue to be Navajo in culture and language. Once we lose the language, I think that's it. I don't really know what we're going to do, to tell you the truth. Once we lose the language, we lose the sacred stories. We lose the sacred songs. We lose the ceremonies, which is what makes us Navajo, which is what makes us Native. That's why I say we're an endangered species."

Among the topics discussed at the summit were education and economic development. President Shirley said education remains a top priority for the Navajo Nation because it is the foundation of success for both individuals and the Nation.

He said the Diné Sovereignty in Education Act, which he signed into law in July 2005, has Navajo language and culture as its core principle. The law is designed to elevate the new Department of Dine' Education to a level similar to that of a state department of education.

In addition, it created an 11-member Board of Education with six appointed members and five elected members. The department is currently working on the second of three memoranda of understanding with the three states that border the Navajo Nation to enable the states to share data and information regarding state standards.

"We are very fortunate and appreciative to New Mexico and Utah entering into an MOA in reference to Navajo Culture Competency Testing and Certification," President Shirley said. "In fact, the heart of the Navajo Sovereignty in Education Act of 2005 is the Navajo language and culture. This is the promise of yesterday of our traditional people to keep our tradition vibrant and passed it on to our progeny."

The President also said that the Navajo Nation recently began a joint venture with Utah Valley State University of Orem to develop the Dine' Virtual High School, a program to help youth who have dropped out of school obtain their high school diploma online.

Regarding economic development, the President said the Navajo Nation will soon establish casinos with projections to raise \$100 million per year, build the Desert Rock Energy Project to raise another \$50 million per year, and several other revenue-generating projects to bring in another \$200 million per year.

Utah Gov. Jon Huntsman told tribal leaders that tribes should be treated as equal sovereigns and partners.



"This is all going into trying to do for ourselves," he said. "Once upon a time, the Navajo Nation was a very independent Nation, very fierce and very proud. Somewhere along the way that was taken away. Now we're trying to get back to standing on our own two feet. We don't want to be dependent on anybody. Not the U.S. government, not the state of Utah, not anybody. The Creator endowed us with an intelligent mind, the wherewithal to stand on our own."

The Utah portion of the Navajo Nation alone, which consists of four chapters, produces \$33.2 million per year through wages, salaries, oil and gas, and transfer payments, he said. Unfortunately for the Navajo economy, a substantial portion of this income flows to towns bordering the Navajo Nation, such as Page, Flagstaff, Cortez, Blanding, Monticello, Farmington and Gallup, he said.

"Our objective is to keep more of this money on the Navajo Nation," he said. "After a century-and-a-half of policies that helped economies develop on our borders all around us, the Navajo Nation must begin to take part in this prosperity or risk losing everything – its language, its culture, its way of life, and, mostly, its people."

"Navajos want to live on their own homeland," he said. "So our government is doing everything it can to make that a possibility, a reality. But we can't do it alone. We need our neighbors as partners."

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