

Governor delivers State of Community Address

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Sacaton- Last month Gov. William R. Rhodes delivered his State of the Community Address before the second regular council meeting. On Jan. 20, 2010 Rhodes informed tribal employees, honored guests and Community members about the five most significant areas concerning tribal government. Rhodes detailed the impact of the budget, housing, transportation, water and per capita in his 40 min. address. The 2010 Fiscal Year budget required an extension of the 2009 Fiscal Year budget; tribal funds have initiated the construction of 408 new homes in 2009; improvement of Community roads remains a priority; legal battles continue for water rights well after the Arizona Water Settlement Act was signed in 2004; and the first per capita payment was distributed to 15,771 enrolled members.

Budget

The Community endured a downtrodden economy in 2009. The effects of the recession have rippled nation and state wide leaving the GRIC in a similar predicament of cost cutting and balancing a budget under the duress of a shaken economy. "The income normally enjoyed by our gaming and business enterprises dropped off considerably, and the tribal government was forced to endure much fiscal belt tightening and cost cutting," said Rhodes. A hiring freeze was temporarily implemented in mid-2009 along with elimination of employee travel and training. The 2010 Fiscal Year operating budget is \$207 million, which is an increase from 2009. The increase stems from funds set aside for per capita and income placed in a Community savings plan. Each Community department was advised to reduce their budgets by 13.1 percent. Holiday bonuses were stricken and capital projects were reduced by over \$20 million. A Community-wide reduction in forces was subsequently curtailed by the budgetary cuts and measures adjusted to restrain spending.

Rhodes noted that 8 percent of gaming revenue will be placed in to a savings plan, and that a "Balanced Budget Process" will provide "better use of our resources, improve strategic planning, and improve monitoring of our income and our spending," said Rhodes.

In order to provide better business opportunities, Rhodes said a goal of the 2010 Fiscal Year budget is to establish a plan to create a local lending institution to increase opportunities for local business.

Housing

Rhodes raised the issue of housing in his address by noting that 350 homes were built in 2009 and 58 more will be finished in two months. These homes were built with tribal dollars and not from federal housing programs. The average cost of these homes was marked at \$160,000. Rhodes said the future of housing is downcast by the suspension of tribal revenues in the construction of new homes. The measure was done "because of the findings of a program audit of our tribe's Residential Housing Improvement Program."

The audit covered the period between Apr. 2008 and Mar. 2009 and revealed that “people with more income that could qualify as low income were being assigned new homes. And many new homes were also being assigned to younger people, not elders.”

The RHIP’s main purpose is to provide adequate housing for elders, disabled and special needs. Rhodes will propose to raise the qualifying age returned to 62 years, a seven year increase from the current qualifying age of 55.

The audit also suggested that “there should be more concerted effort to find other sources of revenue to build new homes in our community.” In light of these findings the funding will be supplemented by the Native American Housing Assistance Self-Determination Act (NAHASDA). “The proposal is to use more of the \$7 million pool of NAHASDA funds to build new homes.”

Transportation

The improvement of GRIC roads has been a slow process, admitted Rhodes and that most of the traffic across the Community is by “our off- reservation neighbors.” In order to better supervise our roads the Community is working with the Federal Highways Administration to administer the Indian Reservation Roads program. BIA funding is not adequate to considerably improve roads. The Indian Reservation Roads program helps to improve roads but the cost to build one mile of new road is around \$1,000,000. There is the “Gila River Indian Community Study” that currently is analyzing transportation needs while researching grants and supplemental highway funds.

The Arizona Department of Transportation (ADOT) has implemented the South Mountain Freeway Study to explore the possibilities of an alternative alignment of the Pecos Road freeway (202). In these discussions, GRIC is represented by the Transportation Technical Team. The team is collecting information and listening to ADOT proposals. “This freeway alignment along the northern boundary of the Community is an issue that has been a point of contention for years between Gila River, the Arizona Department of Transportation, and nearby municipalities,” admitted Rhodes who is in favor of putting the matter to vote in the upcoming polls.

Water

One of the longest-running civil court cases in history began in 1979 when GRIC launched it’s legal fight for water rights. The Community obtained the rights to 653,500 acre feet of water in 2004 under the Arizona Water Settlement Act. The tribe won the rights now they are defending them. “We now face legal claims almost every month that challenge some aspect of the Settlement Act or lay some claim to water rights,” said Rhodes.

The San Carlos Apache Tribe challenged the settlement in a case that reached the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco. The court sided with the Community affirming the agreement in Jun. 2009. Groups large and small are lining up to challenge the water rights, “and next month we start what likely will be a marathon legal fight with 419 upper valley water users who have filed applications to sever and transfer Gila River water rights,” according to Rhodes’ speech.

The Law Office has a team in place filing objections and protecting the Community’s water supply. “We lost our water once before, we won’t let it happen again,” said Rhodes. Rhodes recalled the \$36.2 million awarded to the tribe from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. The money will be used along with funds from the Arizona Water Settlement Act to build a water delivery system through tribal lands.

Per Cap

On Nov. 2, 2009 the first per capita payment was allocated to members who completed the application. “A total of \$4.7 million of tribal government funds was distributed to our tribal members. These funds are from the profits of our casino

gaming enterprise and other tribal business ventures,” stated Rhodes.

Among the 15,711 members who received approximately \$300, there were 9,130 adults and 6,641 minors and members under guardianship. Payment by check was favored by 60 percent, direct deposit was used by 19 percent and a pay card was preferred by 21 percent. Rhodes gave his thoughts on issue by further stating that the disbursement process is costly to the Community’s finances and that it is equally “taking a toll on the independence of our individual members.”

Closing

Aside from the stated issues Rhodes informed in his speech that there is a major constitutional revision forthcoming that will entail the separation of powers in the tribal government. At the conclusion of his speech Rhodes asked for the cooperation of all members and employees during the recession and he was thankful for the blessings bestowed upon the Community and pledged that his administration “will continue to work for our people.”

<http://www.gilariver.org/index.php/news/105-february-2010-gila-river-indian-newspaper/947-governor-delivers-state-of-community-address>