

Fort Defiance Chapter awaits LGA certification for upcoming year

Written by By Chrissy Largo Gallup Sun Correspondent
Thursday, 31 December 2015 04:51



With a current population of over 6,000 community members and a status of approximately 3,000 registered voters, the Fort Defiance Chapter officials and community members will have a reason to celebrate as they look forward to obtaining their Local Governance Act certification on Jan.15.

The certification celebration will take place at the Fort Defiance Chapter House at 10 am along with the Resources and Development Committee's regularly scheduled meeting, pending approval of legislation that will call for certification of the chapter.

"We couldn't have done this without the community and we couldn't have come this far without opening our doors to the community and saying, 'come in'" Chapter Coordinator Tony K. Watchman said. "We should have done this a long time ago. But, you know that is not going to dampen our outlook on certification."

Fort Defiance Chapter will be among the 43 chapters that have achieved LGA certification. It has been something that they have been waiting for since the days of Albert Hale's administration in 1987, and when Title 26 was enacted.

"The chapter has a lot to look forward to," he said. "What we as chapter officials and staff have realized and determined, from probably way before our time, is Fort Defiance has a lot of potential. It has a lot of room to grow in various areas, not in the Navajo Nation government but also economically. The possibilities are endless."

Watchman says the biggest hurdle was getting the Five Management System in order, and the

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process it took in standardizing the FMS manual. He learned that just handling the budget, sticking to their policies and making sure that all their documentation was in place, was the best way to go.

The five management system, which included the “accounting, procurement, filing, personnel and property” aspect was implemented by the LGA, set in place by the Navajo Nation Council in 1988. This initially allowed the evaluation and measurement of the effectiveness of Chapter operations.

“I think our community has grown with the chapter up to this point and they realized that they have to be self-sufficient,” he said. “And not look at the chapter and say, ‘well, the chapter will provide.’ The chapter will not be able to provide 100 percent.”

Other chapter officials such as Chapter Secretary Brenda Wauneka can honestly say that certification did not come easy. About three years ago, when a whole new administration came into office at the chapter, she says that it has always been one of their main goals to work towards certification.

“It took a lot of work, effort, and reconciling,” she said. “Especially going back to the budget, due to mismanagement and misuse of chapter funds from the previous administration.”

Chapter Vice President, Lorraine Nelson agreed and she feels that community members have changed because they were used to handouts because the previous administrations did not follow policies.

“But I think they are figuring out that we mean business and we are going to follow policies, like we are supposed to, so there is no question to who we help,” she said. “I think a lot of people consider that when they come in and start demanding, there’s a set of policies. That is what we have to go by.”

Once the chapter is certified, the chapter officials agree that their goal is to develop Fort Defiance by looking into the possibility of opening a restaurant and hotel right across from the

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Fort Defiance Hospital. They discussed the option of building a three-story office complex and putting in solar street lights that are self-sufficient.

Zondra Bitsuie, who has been the chapter president since 2012, says that they are looking forward to deciding as a community in how they want their government formed and how they are entitled to the sales tax within the Fort Defiance Chapter boundaries.

“We can use that money towards for more projects instead of looking towards government for funding and start really modeling on how we want to run our government,” she said.

She continues by stating that it is really important that the people look at who they vote in to continue to follow policies and procedures. She adds that part of her platform was achieving certification, accountability, and transparency.

“I’d like to acknowledge the staff and officials for working together because I think working together as a team was really important in moving forward with this administration and getting the chapter certified,” she said. “They really worked hard.”