

Tribal leaders, entrepreneurs discuss solutions to building tribal economies

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Separating biz, from politics one key to success

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TWIN ARROWS, Ariz. – Building tribal economies while maintaining tribal identities were key themes of discussion during the Opening General Session for the 2016 Navajo Nation Economic Summit held at the Twin Arrows Casino Resort Apr. 12.

Lance Morgan, President and Chief Executive Officer of Ho Chunk Inc., Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska, was the session's keynote speaker.

Of the many topics in his address, Morgan talked about the importance of separating business and politics within tribal communities.

To do this, he said, the Winnebago Tribe was effective in utilizing boards while defining clear roles and responsibilities between tribal council, governing boards and the corporations.

"A politician's view is different than that of a businessman. If you're going to be serious about economic development then you need to get the political process out of the business making process."

Director of the Division of Economic Development, Crystal Deschinny said the insight Morgan presented provided encouragement for the Nation to follow in similar footsteps.

"The Winnebago tribe is completely different but if we can take away some things to help us grow our economy then I think that's what makes this conference worthwhile," she said.

In fostering economic development on the Navajo Nation, President Russell Begaye said the Nation needs to consider creating business opportunity zones where entrepreneurs can start business while receiving taxes breaks or other beneficial assistance.

President Begaye also reinforced the need to build infrastructure to support economic

development.

“We need infrastructure. We need electricity and we need waterlines. To start a business, you need adequate water and power. Our current system isn’t enough to hold up a strong economy. We need to build it up,” he said.

Professor at Northern Arizona University in Applied Indigenous Studies, Dr. Manley Begay spoke on developing tribal economies by reforming tribal governments to embrace cultural teachings but he also touched upon separating politics from business.

“Politics cannot get involved in business operation. We need to change our government to be more Navajo in essence. Our goal shouldn’t be to make more money but to protect language, culture and our land, Diné bí’ Keyah,” he said. “It should be about maintaining who we are as a people.”

Dr. Begay commended the Office of the President and Vice President for organizing and putting on the 2016 Economic Summit. He said it provided energy in thinking around the challenges that all tribes face in developing successful economies.

“Once you get the energy going, you begin to develop creative solutions to challenges,” he said. “This summit is providing the opportunity for this energy to be funneled toward creative solutions.”

On the Navajo Nation, there is a need to establish a balance between culture and economy said Vice President Jonathan Nez. This discussion is central to the 2016 Economic Summit, he said.

“We need to find ways to diversify the Navajo economy. We need to diversify local economies while keeping culture in mind,” he said. “How do we balance this? Sometimes we have to remember the teachings of our grandparents to take care of the land while also maintaining spiritual wellness.”

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The 2016 Navajo Nation Economic Summit took place at the Twin Arrows Casino and Resort through Apr. 14 with workshops, breakout session and panels revolving discussion around building tribal economies.