

Bill returns Gallup Intertribal Indian Ceremonial to local control

Written by By Holly J. Wagner Sun Correspondent
Friday, 31 March 2023 04:10



A bill awaiting Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham's signature will return the Gallup Intertribal Indian Ceremonial to local control after two years of tense collaboration with the state Department of Tourism.

House Bill 161, which moves the ceremonial out of the state's tourism budget and under the local government division of the Department of Finance and Administration, passed the state House on a 58-0 vote, and the Senate voted 39-0.

Rep. D. Wonda Johnson, D-N.M., sponsored the bill, which drew no opposition. Her office

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didn't respond to requests for comment, but GIICA Coordinator Dudley Byerley sang her praises.

"I know that Rep. Johnson went way above and beyond to get this bill done," he said. "I've worked harder on that than any other bill. If we get it signed it's going to be well worth it."

The association has run the event for much of its century-long history. When Lujan Grisham was elected she made a commitment to bring agencies into compliance with their authorizing legislation, so in 2020 the Department of Tourism got involved and created the Intertribal Ceremonial Office.

Blending the two organizations proved to be a challenge, as their missions sometimes seemed to work at cross-purposes. The state office was more focused on growing the event with online and TV exposure, while the association has remained committed to the unique local flavor and history of the event.

Working more on parallel tracks than as one unit, "We were still able to produce a pretty good 100th that the community enjoyed," GIICA president Kyle Tom said, despite having to rebound from COVID-19 and a scary incident at the opening parade.

This year's event, themed *A New Beginning*, will run Aug. 4-13 and will return to the old schedule, with the opening parade Thursday night. Last year it was moved to accommodate the One World Beat show.

"This new arrangement will really just give us full control," Tom said. "We're just excited to move forward and see what possibilities are there to bring our best."

One big advantage will be not having to wait for approval from Santa Fe for every expenditure. "We can work on it year round now," Tom said. He's previously mentioned that many of the acts book well in advance.

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This year the ceremonial will invest more in talent and spend less on TV production and air time, which Tom said took a bite out of last year's budget. Tom is proud of the ceremonial funds going back into the community and of the multiplier effect it has when visitors spend money at local restaurants and businesses.

“When you are investing in the event you are investing in the people,” he said. “I help the economy here and that makes me so happy. When I look at our event and how people are spending their money here...It's a win-win-win-win when we can have people come in and spend their money.”

The ceremonial had some management issues in the early 2000s, Tom noted, but more recently the county had been more involved in the financial management so the organization and the event were bouncing back despite obstacles.

«This new arrangement really just gave us full control»

– Kyle Tom, Gallup Intertribal Indian Ceremonial President

“When McKinley County did it they were really strict, but in a good way....it was sometimes a hassle but it made us a better organization,” Tom said. “In 2012 it started to turn around. A lot of that came from how McKinley County worked with us to be in [accounting and audit] compliance.”

HB 161 roughly follows a law that's been in place since 1978. It still provides for a nine-member ceremonial association board appointed by the McKinley County Commission, with the current

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board's term ending July 1 and new members beginning five-year terms July 2. The chairperson is an ex-officio, or non-voting member. There are no term limits, but incumbents are not guaranteed reappointment.

"I expect many of these same members to be reappointed. I think there will be a lot of collaboration between the new executive director and who that will be," Byerley said.

Byerley said he's rooting for Tom as the executive director, and said Tom will need a lot of fundraising support to keep the event fresh and successful.

"Some of the board appointments that may not get renewed would be great volunteers. The ceremonial board would love to have them," Byerley said. "It takes a lot of money to put these things together and if you've got nine board members, every one of them needs to be out there beating the streets."

The current legislative session ends March 31, and Lujan Grisham has 30 days after that to sign or veto this year's bills. Any unsigned legislation does not take effect.

Even when HB 161 is signed, another key element is in HB 2, the state budget legislation. A provision in HB 161 that provided an annual \$300,000 allocation was scratched, but there's a \$328,000 item in HB 2 for this year.

The county is also waiting on state approval for about \$5.5 million in funding for maintenance and upgrades at Red Rock Park.

County Manager Anthony Dimas said the first priority will probably be the leaky main building roof, with improvements to campgrounds close behind. A dilapidated building needs to be demolished. But those decisions will depend on the money coming through.

"We're just eager to see how this goes," Tom said. "It goes with the whole New Beginning

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