

SANTA YNEZ VALLEY NEWS

Tribal Government 101

March 16, 2006

By Vincent Armenta, Tribal Chairman, Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians

We recognize that it is often difficult to understand the complexities of tribal gaming and Native American tribes in general. The subtleties of the various differences between a tribe and a business can be confusing for those who don't live it every day, so we believe it's important to invest time explaining.

In fact, one of the most common misperceptions regarding the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians is mistaking us a business. True, we do have a successful business enterprise, the Chumash Casino Resort, but our tribe is a government – and therein rests the major difference.

When a politician is quoted comparing us to businesses, we know that the concept of tribes as governments isn't reaching the general public. The point is that we are different than Marriott or Hilton or Trump in that the federal government recognizes the political status of a tribe as a government.

Incidentally, contrary to popular belief, we do follow regulations – those that are set up by the federal government. And as for taxes, governments don't pay taxes, but its citizens do.

Native American tribes were independent, self-governing communities long before the arrival of the European nations. The government-to-government relationship between tribal governments and the federal government has existed since the formation of the United States. The U.S. Constitution, Article I, Section 8, Clause 3 states: To regulate Commerce with foreign Nations, and among the several States, and with the Indian Tribes.

The federal government deals with Native American tribes as governments – not as special interest groups, not as individuals, and not as other entities. In the same manner as the U.S. deals with states as governments, it also deals with Native American tribes as governments.

Tribes are also set up internally as governments with tribal government leaders elected into office by tribal members of voting age. At our tribe, five individuals are elected into office to serve on the tribe's Business Committee, which includes the Tribal Chairman, Vice Chairman, Secretary/Treasurer and two Business Committee members at large. Tribal elections are held every two years.

Throughout the nation, tribal governments are organized to work with local, state and federal governments by building government-to-government relationships. Tribal leaders take great pride in the relationships they have developed with government agencies on a federal, state and local level.

With all of this in mind, it is puzzling to me when individuals in the community criticize us for not behaving like a business. One individual approached me at a Board of Supervisors meeting last year and said, “Until your tribe starts acting like a business, we will always oppose you.”

Unfortunately, it will be pretty difficult for us to change our behavior to that of a business – since we’re a government.

Our business enterprise, the Chumash Casino Resort, behaves like the successful business that it is, but as a tribe, we are a sovereign government. That is something that has historical and traditional significance for tribes across the nation.

Vincent Armenta is the Tribal Chairman of the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians.