

TESTIMONY
OF
VAL R. PANTEAH, GOVERNOR OF THE PUEBLO OF ZUNI
BEFORE THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON INDIAN, INSULAR, AND ALASKA NATIVE AFFAIRS
ON H.R. 1028:
“RETURN OF CERTAIN LANDS AT FORT WINGATE TO THE ORIGINAL INHABITANTS
ACT”

July 15, 2015

Good afternoon Chairman Young, Ranking Member Ruiz, and respected members of the Subcommittee. I am Val Panteah, the Governor of Zuni Pueblo, and I am joined today by Lieutenant Governor Birdena Sanchez. Lieutenant Governor Sanchez and I both took office on January 1st of this year and we were elected to serve 4 year terms. On behalf of the people of Zuni Pueblo, I sincerely want to thank you for holding this hearing. I also want to extend sincere thanks to our Congressional Representative, Steve Pearce, for introducing H.R. 1028 and his continuing efforts to resolve this matter.

I am not here to recount or debate history, to argue over who has the closest or longest ties to the Fort Wingate lands, who needs them the most, or what division is the most equitable. Those arguments have been exhaustively put forth by both tribes for the past twenty plus years. During this period both sides have expended enormous amounts of time and resources trying to bolster and justify

their positions. There have also been numerous meetings between the tribes countless internal meetings, proposals and counterproposals exchanged, negotiating committees established and disbanded, public meetings/hearings held, and so on. Suffice it to say, the issue of the appropriate division of former Fort Wingate lands between Zuni Pueblo and Navajo Nation has dragged on for far too long.

Mr. Chairman, you, along with Representatives Pearce and Lujan, recognized this fact almost exactly three years ago when you brought the leaders of Zuni and Navajo together and encouraged, prodded and pushed both tribes to work out an agreement on the division of the lands. At that time both tribes were told that any agreement had to fulfill the following three requirements:

- 1.) The lands needed to be divided equitably;
- 2.) Individual land parcels were not to be divided in a checker-board fashion; and
- 3.) The final division needed to provide both tribes with meaningful access to I-40 for economic development purposes.

The discussions and negotiations that day were positive and constructive. At the end of the day they resulted in a agreement on a proposed allocation of the Fort Wingate land parcels between the two tribes, with the exception of Parcel 3, which is to remain under U.S. Army ownership for the indefinite future because of

contamination. The tribal leaders did, however, agree that “any [future] legislative division of land in Parcel 3 should establish right-of-ways for both Tribes to access sacred and cultural sites in the parcel.”

Though the July 8, 2013 agreement acknowledged that the respective tribal leaders “had to take this document back to their Council for review, it also provided that “the Representatives will move forward to draft legislation in accordance with the attached document.” H.R. 1028 follows through on this understanding. It would legislate the compromise that the two tribes agreed to in 2013, and finally resolve this long-standing matter.

And the agreement embodied in H.R. 1028 is just that – a compromise. It does not give either tribe everything it wants or believes it is entitled to. However, it adheres to the principles that you and Congressmen Pearce and Lujan laid down, and that both tribes agreed to. It was also the product of good faith, candid, give-and-take negotiations.

Though I was not the Governor who negotiated this agreement, nor did any of our current Tribal Council members participate in the July 2013 negotiations, our predecessors agreed to the process and the governing principles for any agreement. We do not feel free to second-guess their decisions, their judgments, or the deal they negotiated. To the contrary, we feel that we are obligated to honor

what they agreed to and to implement that agreement, even though we may have sought to negotiate a different division of the parcels.

Put simply, this is not a time to reopen negotiations again. Doing so would be costly, time-consuming, frustrating, divisive, and ultimately unsuccessful. Rather, this is the time to finally, after 20 some years, resolve this matter, to put our arguments and differences behind us, and to celebrate the fact that substantial areas of a former U.S. Army facility have and will be cleaned-up, and will to be returned to their original owners. Viewed in this context, it is a win for both tribes and both should be happy about what each stands to gain, not what the other is receiving.

I also want to briefly mention the enormous importance of this land transfer to Zuni Pueblo. The parcels that Zuni is to receive contain invaluable archeological and sacred sites. The lands also contain certain natural resources that we continue to use today in our cultural activities. And while Zuni's culture has, no doubt, benefitted by our relative isolation, our economy has not. The division of the Fort Wingate parcels that was negotiated splits, almost evenly, the economically valuable I-40 frontage lands. These lands also have access to BNSF Railroad's major east-west line, as well as to electric transmission and natural gas lines. Well-planned, market-driven, economic development of these lands will

enable our tribe to begin to address our huge unemployment problem, as well as providing our tribal government with much-needed revenues.

In conclusion, this matter has gone on long enough and we cannot let our personal views, political concerns, or our views of history and the equities, push us to extreme positions and re-open old wounds. While the Zuni and Navajo may have been historic enemies, we need to realize that our common interests far outweigh our differences, and look at ways that we can mutually benefit by cooperating as neighbors. We can start that cooperation by implementing the agreement our predecessors worked out three years ago and building on that.

I strongly encourage you to act quickly to move this bill out of the subcommittee and to support its prompt passage by the House of Representatives.

Thank you again for holding this hearing and I will be happy to answer any questions that subcommittee members may have.