

Taos Pueblo officials spell out plans for 2016

By Rick Romancito

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It's a steep learning curve once you get named. At least for new Taos Pueblo Gov. Benito M. Sandoval there was precedence. His late father, Joe C. Sandoval, served as tribal war chief in 1979, lieutenant governor in 1983 and governor of the tribe in 1985. At one point in his youth, he said his father told him, "Being a tribal leader is in your blood. Sooner or later, you'll be called."

For Richard Archuleta, his experience on the war chief's staff is not new. Having served as a staff member previously, he is familiar with duties involving the complexities of care and preservation for the tribe's land and resources.

"It's a pretty important and awesome responsibility to be selected by the elders that see fit for you to serve," Archuleta, who is also the president and founding member of the Taos Pueblo Powwow Committee, said.

For both, the first month of their one-year term is a marathon of meetings with various department heads and individual tribal members to find out what issues will be on their respective tables for the coming year. In many respects, Sandoval said, it's also about maintaining a certain forward momentum leading from the past administration to what a succeeding one will face.

This year, the governor said his office will be looking at a possible hot-button issue involving child welfare. "We're trying to protect the children here," he said.

Some tribal children have been taken from families, some allege needlessly, as the result of a variety of state-involved legal motions. In many of these cases, he said, children do not have an advocate working for their interests. "It seems like they don't have much rights," he said. "We're trying to work on something that we can set up for the future, for the kids."

What exactly the tribe is planning is still being hammered out and will be disclosed at a later date.

Other issues he's looking at involve financial matters and economic development, though he is not at liberty to talk specifics right now. Sandoval, who also owns the Tiwa Kitchen restaurant, did say he and his staff will be looking at ways to improve the Taos Mountain Casino toward creating more profit for the tribe.

Both the governor and war chief will share one item that involves tribal housing. “He has the land issues, and I have the housing issues, so we’re both involved in that area ... hopefully, now there might be some funding coming in.”

Archuleta said, “We’re going to be identifying a parcel of land for housing development.”

This is not new. He said this is an ongoing part of a master plan, the first phase of which involves designating the land to be used. This will be addressed by tribal council within a few weeks. The area being looked at is a 20-acre parcel along One Tree Road on the south side of the reservation, near the existing forestry and housing offices. Nothing moves quickly, he said, but this year “we’re hoping to put a little more oil on the cogs.”

Archuleta said the War Chief’s Office will also be moving toward establishing the Merino Land into trust status. The tribe also has its “sheep hunts” going, as well as elk-hunting opportunities, “including bison as well.”

Livestock and wildlife are among the war chief’s main concerns. Because of heavy snows in the mountains, Archuleta said wildlife has moved down to lower elevations, causing some elk herds to mass in some unwanted areas. “We’ve just [got] to make sure they are protected.” He said the tribe is also looking at moving its bison herd to the Tract B area, but that may take a while. He added that bighorn sheep on tribal land along the R’o Grande Gorge need protection. Some have been hit by vehicles along U.S. 64, possibly attracted by well-meaning people who have been feeding them. He said one idea being proposed is the erection of a fence.

“Right now, I think we’re on the right path,” Sandoval said.

For information, contact the tribal governor’s office at (575) 758-9593 or the war chief ’s office at 758-3883.



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