



THE HARVARD PROJECT ON AMERICAN INDIAN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

John F. Kennedy School of Government • Harvard University

HONORING NATIONS: 2008 HONOREE

Community Council Task Force Ak-Chin Indian Community

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Over the past few years, the citizens of the Ak-Chin Indian Community, located south of Phoenix, Arizona, have witnessed the land surrounding their reservation rapidly transform from fields into housing subdivisions. Worried about the impact on the reservation, the Ak-Chin Indian Community established its Community Council Task Force. The Task Force reviews all development plans for the lands surrounding the reservation to determine their resulting influence on the Community's quality of life, and works with developers and neighboring governments to lessen any potential harm.

Surrounded by Construction

For millennia, farming has been an essential part of the culture and economy of the O'odham people of the Ak-Chin Indian Community. Located in the northwest portion of Pinal County about 36 miles south of Phoenix, much of the reservation's 21,840 acres of land is dedicated to agriculture. Until very recently, the reservation was surrounded by open space and farmland, but the expansion of metropolitan Phoenix is quickly changing the area's character. With a 150% increase in population from 2004 to 2007, Pinal County was the fastest growing region in Arizona, itself one of the fastest growing states in the U.S. In 2003, the lands to the north of the Ak-Chin territory were incorporated as the new City of Maricopa, and by 2004 more than 35,000 people resided within its city limits. Since then, twenty-one new subdivisions have been proposed for Pinal County, aimed at attracting an additional 130,000 new residents.

In response to these large and explosive developments, the citizens of the Ak-Chin Community became increasingly concerned about protecting their environment. With a small reservation population of just 837, the Community fought to find a way to have its voice heard. Particularly important to the Community was preserving the four seasonal floodplains, or dry washes, which cross through the reservation and bring water to the arid land during monsoon season. Critical to the health and cultural sustainability of Ak-Chin, these floodplains also give the Community its name, an O'odham word which means "a place where the wash loses itself in the sand or ground."

The Community's Point of Contact

To stand up for its interests and sovereignty, the Ak-Chin Community Council decided that the Community needed a formal point of contact for the county, the city, and the developers. Organized in 2006, the Community Council Task Force was composed of appointees from the Community's offices, including the Cultural Resources, Environmental Protection, and Planning Departments. Armed with diverse technical, cultural, and legal backgrounds, Task

Force members have a well-honed capacity to make knowledgeable assessments of the many dimensions of proposed construction projects.

Typically, when the Community receives notice from the city or county about a new development, the Task Force examines the plans to identify any troubling elements. Members carefully review requests for actions such as modifications to washes, flood mitigation, widening of highways, or agricultural land re-zoning, critically assessing whether there are any potentially adverse cultural, economic, or environmental impacts on the Community. When called for, the Task Force then meets with the developer and neighboring governments to exchange studies and clarify areas in question.

Asserting its role as a sovereign government, Ak-Chin's Task Force is diligent in its efforts to inform the general public and county officials about the effects of off-reservation projects on the Community. They routinely present at public hearings and planning meetings to insure that the Community and its neighbors are fully involved in any local development process. The Task Force presses and insists on recognition of the issues that developers must keep in mind and follow. These include proper treatment of archeological items, environmental protection, and State of Arizona consultation guidelines. The Task Force is active in recommending and designing changes that can mitigate impacts and improve environmental enforcement.

The Task Force also helps organize the Community's response when there is a problem with an off-reservation project. In one telling instance, for example, a regional wastewater plant was proposed by a local utility within a few miles of the reservation's border. While the Community did not oppose the construction of the wastewater plant, they strongly objected to the utility's initial plans, which called for possible wastewater discharges into the washes that run through the Ak-Chin reservation. The Task Force mounted an information campaign, sending Community members to public hearings to speak about the cultural importance of the washes. The Task Force also enlisted the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality to uphold the Community's water quality standards. As one tribal elder puts it, "the wash was not meant to be messed with." In the end, the developer worked with the Community and an acceptable alternative plan was found. The facility now hosts an educational kiosk developed by Ak-Chin Community citizens for utility customers.

Partnering Across Borders

Ecosystems do not stop at borders. Since reservation territories are often limited in size or are mixed with non-Indian land, protecting the health of the land, air, and water of Native nations requires inter-governmental cooperation. Yet, while town and county governments typically have rules for public consultation with their own residents, they rarely have routine processes for seeking advice from neighboring Native governments. Too often, this leads to misunderstandings, controversy, and even law suits.

Through the Task Force, the Ak-Chin Indian Community has created a straightforward way to consult with the tribe. And, by building a Task Force that brings together cultural, technical, and political expertise, the Community has created a respected point of interface for neighboring governments and the private sector. Developers, as well as city and county officials know who they should talk to and what to expect. Task Force reviews are professional, consistent and fair, with set procedures and timelines. Through its professionalism, the Task Force demonstrates to non-Native corporations and governments that the Community can develop a constructive, official position on permit applications. Ak-Chin has made it clear that it is not drawing an arbitrary line in the sand against development, but rather that it is serious about protecting its resources.

The Community Council's creation of the Community Task Force to review off-reservation development has resulted in remarkable changes. Neighboring communities that once barely considered the effects of their plans on the reservation's lands now treat the Ak-Chin as a respected partner. In many cases, developers are required to get Ak-Chin input before approval is granted. One developer openly shared that he had treated Ak-Chin with "arrogance and aggressiveness," but after working with the Community he "turned around 180 degrees and is now a good ally of Ak-Chin." The tireless efforts of the Task Force to educate and work with developers, as well as state, county, and local officials, have given these neighbors a new awareness of the Ak-Chin Indian Community, its status as a sovereign authority, its people, and its way of life. Ak-Chin is an essential player; it will not be overlooked in the future.

Bringing the Lessons Home

Preserving the cultural and natural resources of the Ak-Chin reservation is of utmost importance to the Community's future. In the words of a Task Force member, the Community is "ensuring our O'Odham Him-Dak (Way of Life) as we move toward an everlasting future." Using the Task Force as a knowledgeable point of contact on development, Ak-Chin communicates its interests to off-reservation developers, coordinates with surrounding governments, and cooperates with neighbors. The Ak-Chin Community has found a way for a small Native nation to make a positive difference in what goes on in the larger world that surrounds them. In the process, its neighbors are compelled to recognize the competence, concerns, and sovereignty of an Indian nation.

Lessons in Nation Building:

- Consistent assertions of a nation's voice ensure outcomes that preserve resources, cultural assets, and lifeways for future generations.
- Tribes strengthen and protect sovereignty by employing formal processes for consultation and cooperation with other governments.
- A nation can ensure responsible neighboring development through the active assertion of its voice in the protection of its cultural and natural resources.

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