

Panel: Tribes benefit state economy

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NORMAN – Oklahoma’s relationship with the Native American tribes inside its borders coupled with tribal economic development efforts helped insulate the state from the recession, a panel of experts said Tuesday.

“I don’t believe Oklahoma would prosper without the tribal nations,” said state Commerce and Tourism Secretary Natalie Shirley. “Tribal nations are vital to Oklahoma.”

Speaking at a morning presentation at the Indian Country Business Summit, Shirley said tribal economic development efforts were one of the reasons Oklahoma’s economy didn’t suffer as much as the rest of the nation.

“About three or four years ago we took a look at what was happening on the coast and knew that it would roll inward,” she said. “We knew that Oklahoma, itself, would begin to struggle.”

To fight those problems, Shirley said Commerce officials and state lawmakers developed an incentive package for business and industry.

“We developed incentives,” she said. “Then we turned to the entrepreneurs.”

Those entrepreneurs included the state’s 16,000 Native American-owned businesses.

Echoing Shirley, former state Transportation Secretary Neal McCaleb said the state’s 39 Native American tribes have reinvented themselves over the past 150 years.

“Oklahoma has a unique relationship with the tribes,” he said. “The Legislature passed a number of pieces of legislation designed to specifically strengthen its relationship with tribes. Oklahoma is unique.”

With tribal business having an economic impact in Oklahoma of more than \$15 billion, McCaleb called on state leaders to strengthen their relationship with tribal leaders.

“In the case of the Department of Transportation we established a tribal advisory board as an adjunct to the Transportation Commission,” he said. “We should expand that program to other large departments.”

And while McCaleb acknowledged there had been push-back between the tribes and state government, he said many of those issues had been resolved.

“There was push-back, that was the case for most of Oklahoma’s history,” he said. “Then the tribes won a lawsuit in the Supreme Court and the court said they didn’t have to pay fuel taxes.”

After the court fight, he said, things got rosier.

“The state realized these are sovereign nations and they needed to be treated as such,” he said.

McCaleb, who also served as assistant director of the Interior and as head of the Oklahoma Turnpike Authority, said collectively, tribal enterprises are the state’s third-largest employer.

“The federal government is the largest employer, and the State of Oklahoma is second,” he said. “But the tribes are right behind that.”

And tribal headquarters, he said, will never move.

“These are corporate headquarters, too. And they will never, ever leave Oklahoma,” he said.

Leveraging federal and state legislation that gave them more freedom, McCaleb said the state’s

Native Americans pushed to control their own affairs.

"The tribes arrived at the conclusion that depending on the Bureau of Indian Affairs was never going to work," he said. "So they had to develop and an economic base."

Following passage of the Indian Gaming Act and the state's lottery, tribal leaders were able to embrace entertainment and gaming as a way to create jobs and revenue for their members.

"The lottery was the second boom for the tribes," he said. "And it's resulted in more than \$118 million generated for the state in tribal gaming fees."

Yet, while gaming revenue and tribal compacts contribute millions to the state's bottom line, a bigger portion of the state's budget is composed of federal funds earmarked for the tribes, he said.

"The amount of federal money coming into the state on behalf of the tribes is significant," he said. "It's more than 10 percent of the state's budget."

With neighboring states such as Texas considering major changes in their gaming laws, McCaleb said tribal officials are working aggressively to diversify their economic development efforts.

"Tribal leaders are making significant changes," he said. "And that benefits everyone."

Askins: State needs continued partnerships with tribes

Oklahoma needs the Native American nations to help make the state strong, Lt. Gov. Jari Askins said Tuesday.

Speaking at the Indian Country Business Summit, a two-day conference designed to bring tribal business representatives and non-native representatives together, Askins told a lunchtime crowd of about 300 that that Native American economic development efforts reminded her of her own family's efforts to grow its business.

"Exactly what you're doing is exactly what my family did in our small business in Oklahoma," she said.

Askins, the Democratic nominee for governor, said the success of state job growth efforts didn't lie just with non-natives.

"Native American economic development has a \$15 billion economic impact," she said. "If we took that \$15 billion out of our economy it would have a significant impact."

And while Askins acknowledged state and tribal relations have, at times, been difficult, she said the past five years have brought dramatic change to all portions of the state.

"We've seen major improvements to roads and bridges due to partnerships with the tribes," she said. "And we have seen an increase in health care in many rural areas of Oklahoma mostly through Native American leadership."

Those efforts, Askins said, need to continue.

"Native American money has helped make things happen here," she said. "For a long time, I have understood the value of having a relationship with our tribes and their leaders. Success in the past and the in the future depends on the strength of this partnership."

A major component of that relationship, she said, is the tribes' investment in the entertainment industry. She said tribal leaders were "looking down the road to see what they can do to have an even greater impact on the entertainment industry."

Addressing the tribal leaders in the audience, Askins said their success would benefit the entire state.

"The better you succeed, the better we all do."

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