

Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians: Unity is Key to Tribe's Success



The Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians Business Committee, 2011. L-R: David Dominguez, Richard Gomez, Vincent Armenta, Gary Pace and Kenneth Kahn.

Governments – whether city, county, state, federal or tribal – are often hindered by the constant turnover in elected roles that makes it difficult, if not impossible, to accomplish longer term goals. However, that is not the case with the tribal government of the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians.

When the results of the tribal election were announced in early March, the outcome was no surprise to anyone – especially to the 140 members of this California tribe. For the seventh tribal election in a row, Vincent Armenta was voted in as Tribal Chairman. In addition, the entire Business Committee was re-elected back into office – a leadership team that has been in office together as a group for nearly five years.

The election results demonstrate a tribe that is united – in its trust of tribal leadership, in its confidence that the tribal officials can continue to make significant progress, and in the direction its leaders have taken the tribe.

“By re-electing the same tribal government officials, our tribal membership has sent a clear message to the community that they are pleased with the job our leadership team has done,” said Chairman Armenta. “We have worked together as a board overseeing the legal and business affairs of our tribe, while providing for the economic well being of tribal members. We are all looking forward to building on the momentum and synergy we have created over the past several years.”

From Dirt Roads to Pay Dirt

It wasn't that long ago that the Santa Ynez Reservation, located in Santa Barbara County, was a dusty parcel of land

where the establishment of indoor plumbing didn't take place until the 1960s. The first Housing and Urban Development low-income housing arrived on the reservation in the late 1970s.

Like many other Native American tribes, the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians entered the gaming industry in the 1980s with a bingo hall. When they first opened the doors to their casino in 1994, they began a venture that promised a brighter future. In 2001, Santa Ynez Chumash tribal members made a decision that would forever change their course. With a state compact agreement in place and the passage of Proposition 1A, which officially allowed gaming on federally recognized reservations, the tribe knew it had to step up and become a more competitive player in this new arena. Tribal members voted to consolidate their hodgepodge of buildings and trailers scattered throughout their property and build a high-end resort.

Chairman Armenta, who had just been elected to his role in 1999, set out on a road show in 2001 to raise funds for the tribe's casino consolidation construction project. This trip represented a giant step on the tribe's road to economic self sufficiency. He spent time talking to institutional investors across the country. At the end of his trip, Banc of America Securities committed \$150 million to the tribe, marking the first high yield bond financing deal for a California tribe.

New Resort, New Era

After the first phase of the casino consolidation project was completed and the doors to the new gaming facility opened in 2003, it was clear that the tribe made the right decision. One

“Collectively, the team has more than five decades of experience in tribal government.”

year later, the second phase was completed and the tribe opened its hotel. The hotel received an AAA Four Diamond Award of Excellence from the Automobile Club of Southern California just a few months after it opened.

“Our Chumash Casino Resort quickly became one of the most popular entertainment destinations in the region,” said Chairman Armenta. “On a busy holiday weekend, we receive as many as 30,000 guests.”

Economic Diversity

With the new resort up and running, the tribal leadership team was able to set their sights on looking at ways to continue to build a solid economic foundation. Over the course of the next several years, the tribe purchased and refurbished a hotel and restaurant in the nearby town of Solvang. The tribe completely remodeled the 25-year-old building, bringing it back to its original glory and making it a jewel in the community once again. To bring the restaurant up to Chumash standards, the tribe hired celebrity chef Bradley Ogden to create a restaurant that would attract locals and visitors alike. Both the hotel and the restaurant were rebranded and re-introduced as Hotel Corque and Root 246.

The tribe also purchased two gas stations in Santa Ynez and bought a building in the neighboring town of Buellton. That building was refurbished and is now used as the tribe’s human resources center.

Beyond Financial Success

While building a solid economic foundation has been a priority for the tribal leadership team, the leaders have also played a significant role in preserving and highlighting the tribe’s cultural heritage. Under the current leadership team, the tribe revitalized its native language – Samala – by developing a language apprentice program and also publishing a comprehensive dictionary with more than 4,000 entries.

Tribal members also participate in an annual tomol (canoe) crossing where descendants from various Chumash nations cross the Santa Barbara Channel using this traditional mode of Chumash transportation. The tribe recently built a new tomol to carry paddlers on future journeys across the channel.

One of the proudest and most significant milestones in the tribe’s recent cultural history was when the California Legislature passed Assembly Concurrent Resolution (ACR) No. 75 in September 2007, which designated Highway 154 the “Chumash Highway.”

The tribe also honors its ancestors and carries on its legacy of giving by reaching out to the community. Chumash ancestors had a word for generosity: ‘amuyich. Through its foundation, the tribe practices ‘amuyich on a regular basis and over the years has donated millions of dollars to the community.

The Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians Business Committee

Since he was first elected to the role of Tribal Chairman in 1999, **Vincent Armenta** has participated in the tribe’s significant success in its business enterprises, along with its success in cultural preservation. From developing and operating a popular destination resort to resurrecting its native language, the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians has taken significant steps forward under the leadership of Chairman Armenta.

Richard Gomez has served his tribal community for decades by being involved on various committees and holding a variety of elected tribal positions. He brings significant wisdom and heart to his role on the tribal leadership team and makes every decision with both his ancestors and future generations in mind. Last year he was selected as an award recipient of the 2010 American Indian Heritage Month Local Leadership Awards, which recognizes Native Americans who provide great leadership and have made significant contributions to enrich our community.

Kenneth Kahn was just 25 years old when he was first elected to serve on the Business Committee in 2003. He comes from a family of strong tribal leaders, including both of his grandparents as well as his parents. His mother currently serves on the tribe’s Education Committee. One of his main objectives has been to balance the traditions of our tribe with the needs of the future. He has also been a strong advocate of community involvement and currently sits on several local non-profit organization boards.

For nearly a decade in the 1990s, **David Dominguez** served his tribe as Tribal Chairman. It was a time of great change for tribes throughout the state of California and his leadership during that time period was admirable. He helped organize supporters of Proposition 5 and later Proposition 1A, which allowed gaming on Native American reservations. Today, he continues to be a strong leader who relies on his insight into the political arena to help his tribe navigate through the various paths toward building stronger government-to-government relationships.

Gary Pace was elected to the Business Committee in late 2004 when he ran in a special election for a seat that had been vacated. Since he was elected, he has dedicated his time to ensuring that his tribe is successful in its business enterprises, political endeavors, cultural preservation projects and also in the tribe's work in the community. He is the type of leader who always stays positive while working toward a collective goal and remains calm in the face of adversity.

Leading to Success

Successful businesses, governments, teams or groups are only as successful as their leaders. Leading to success takes perseverance, commitment and dedication to a collective goal.

An example in the tribal world is Chairman Armenta. The fact that he ran unopposed in this recent tribal election confirms that his tribe believes in his ability as a solid leader with an excellent track record. However, he is quick to give credit to the entire Business Committee.

"Our work as a team assured tribal members that re-electing

us was in the best interest of the tribe and our future," said Chairman Armenta.

Collectively, the team has more than five decades of experience in tribal government. The diversity of their experience provides a range of expertise that helps them address the many issues they face in leading one of the most successful tribes in the state. "They balance each other out and work in a collaborative way for our tribe," said a tribal elder. "Each Business Committee member brings a unique set of skills to their role and together they make one dynamic team."

The words "collaborative," "united," and "universal" are not often words used to describe a tribe – particularly in today's modern tribal world where multi-million dollar business enterprises are involved. But in this case, those words portray the Santa Ynez Chumash tribe perfectly.

"We are excited about moving forward with new projects on the horizon," said Chairman Armenta. "We can work toward a common goal with the assurance that our tribal members fully support us." ♣

For more information about the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians, visit www.santaynezchumash.org.

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