Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

Action eliminates a barrier to tribe's ability to address its housing needs and increase its economic self-sufficiency

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WASHINGTON – Assistant Secretary – Indian Affairs Tara Mac Lean Sweeney today announced she has approved the Fort Belknap Indian Community of the Fort Belknap Reservation in Montana's regulations under the Helping Expedite and Advance Responsible Tribal Homeownership (HEARTH) Act. The Act establishes the authority of federally recognized tribes to develop and implement their own laws governing the long-term leasing of Indian lands for residential, business, renewable energy, and other purposes.

Today's announcement means the Community now has the ability to lease its tribal trust property or tribally restricted lands using its own leasing regulations, and can begin moving forward on addressing the acute lack of housing on its reservation.

"I'm pleased to announce that the Fort Belknap Indian Community has received approval of its HEARTH Act residential leasing regulations, which eliminates a barrier to building up its housing stock and raising its level of economic self-reliance," said **Assistant Secretary Sweeney**. "Housing is an elemental need for families and an anchor for communities that is painfully lacking throughout Indian Country. Given its critical housing shortage, I'm pleased that the Fort Belknap Indian Community can now move forward on meeting its members' housing needs."

"The Fort Belknap Indian Community is heartened by the Department's approval of our Residential Leasing Act because it is an important first step in letting us help ourselves by providing the option to take charge of our own residential leases, reduce bureaucratic burdens and thereby foster a reservation environment better suited to mortgage lending and private investment to offer our Tribal members a real chance at the American dream of home ownership," said **Fort Belknap Indian Community Council President Andrew Werk, Jr**. "The Department's approval today clears the way for us to streamline processes and enjoy the access to the private market long absent from our reservation, with private lenders deterred by the length and complexity of federal leasing and loan guarantee processes. Assistant Secretary Sweeney's approval offers us a fresh start to address persistent, difficult issues."

"Today's announcement is great news for the Fort Belknap Indian Community in Montana," said **U.S. Senator Steve Daines**. "Implementation of the HEARTH Act is about cutting red tape and getting the folks of Fort Belknap the resources needed to address homelessness and the housing needs of the tribal community."

Upon one-time approval of their regulations by the Department, tribes gain the authority to process land leases without Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) approval, thereby greatly expediting leasing approval for homes and small businesses in Indian Country. With today's announcement, the number of tribes whose land leasing regulations have been approved now stands at 50.

The Fort Belknap Indian Community requested the Department's approval last September of its Residential Leasing Act which it submitted for review and approval under the HEARTH Act to meet its housing needs.

"We have suffered in a housing crisis for many years, with overcrowded conditions where often 13-18 people live in a two-bedroom house, with our housing waitlist hundreds of families and years long, with no housing inventory and no new construction since 1995, and virtually no access to the private mortgage market – just like many of our sister tribes in the Rocky Mountains and Great Plains," **President Werk continued**. "That we are first among those tribes, and the first large land base tribe to have a HEARTH ordinance approved is an honor. I hope we can be an example for our sister tribes as to how the HEARTH Act puts us in control of our residential/housing destiny and truly supports our self-determination."

Councilman Warren Morin, Chair of the Fort Belknap Indian Community Council Land Committee and Mountain Gros Ventre Representative, also praised Assistant Secretary Sweeney's leadership on supporting Fort Belknap's self-determination and housing efforts: "I was privileged to attend Assistant Secretary Sweeney's confirmation hearing and I told her then that housing was one of the most critical issues facing our people and that numerous federal hurdles added to those burdens. She pledged to work with us and she did, with her team participating with our Council, Tribal staff, Senator Daines' office, and Housing and Urban Development leadership and staff to work together on a vision that opens the door for us to restore the dignity of housing for our people, so that every Fort Belknap child can feel safe and secure in their own home, with their own bed and knowing that their Tribal community is able to be nimble and responsive to meet the needs our people because we are in the driver's seat to make our own residential leasing and housing choices."

The Helping Expedite and Advance Responsible Tribal Homeownership, or HEARTH, Act, which Congress passed with overwhelming bipartisan support, was signed on July 30, 2012. For more information and a list of tribes with HEARTH Act leasing regulations approved prior to today's announcement, visit the Indian Affairs HEARTH Act web page.

*The **Assistant Secretary – Indian Affairs** advises the Secretary of the Interior on Indian Affairs policy issues, communicates policy to and oversees the programs of the BIA and the BIE, provides leadership in consultations with tribes, and serves as the DOI official for intra- and inter-departmental coordination and liaison within the Executive Branch on Indian matters.*

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