Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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WASHINGTON — Yesterday, U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs Tara Sweeney and Gila River Indian Community (Community) Governor Stephen Lewis signed a lease for the Gila Crossing Community School, the Community's Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) K-8 school located in District 6 on the Reservation. An innovative partnership between DOI and the Community resulted in the first-of-its-kind lease in Indian Country that will educate and empower future generations of Community children.

"With Secretary Bernhardt's leadership, it has been a great honor to partner with the Gila River Indian Community to think outside the box and develop a modern solution to the construction problem in the BIE school context. We hope this is a model that other tribes will be able to follow," **said Assistant Secretary Tara Sweeney.**

"Our students deserve a quality education – so it was incumbent upon us to think creatively to bring new solutions to long-term problems. Through this partnership we have created a learning environment that will ensure our students can thrive in a state-of-the-art facility and importantly, our Akimel and Pee-Posh traditions and values are apparent throughout the school," **said Gila River Indian Community Governor Stephen Lewis.**

"This is a great partnership between the Gila River Indian Community and the Department of Interior. I spoke to Secretary Bernhardt directly on the importance of this lease and I am glad to see him take action. I hope the federal government can learn from this great Arizona example and utilize this to meet tribal education needs across the United States," **said Arizona U.S. Senator Martha McSally.**

"Our goal was to work with the Department of the Interior to construct a new school where our children would be able to walk through the halls of a new, safe and clean school that they can be proud of as we provide them with an appropriate education to equip them for careers and higher education. Anyone that visits the Gila Crossing School will quickly discover that we succeeded in accomplishing our goals," **said Gila River Indian Community Councilman and Chairman of the Gila Crossing Community School Construction Owner's Team Anthony Villareal Sr.**

BIE faces a significant construction replacement backlog that continues to grow with outdated school structures that are often over 100 years old. DOI and the Community worked collaboratively to address this pervasive problem across Indian Country by proposing a school construction leaseback program to break the school construction backlog to replace the Gila Crossing Community School.

Under a new program, the Community financed the construction costs to replace the Gila Crossing Community School and will lease back the facility to the BIE through a commercial lease. Congress appropriated funding in the FY2019 budget to begin this pilot program to enable DOI to make the necessary lease payments.

The Community broke ground in June of 2018 on the Gila Crossing School and completed construction of the school earlier this month. Over 500 students will be in the new school on August 1, 2019. The

students and entire Community were involved in the design and construction process – providing input on the design and layout of the school to ensure the school was constructed in a way that aligns with the Community's culture.

A Grand Opening and Ribbon-Cutting is scheduled for July 27, 2019 from 8:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. to celebrate this historic moment where the Community will be joined by Federal, Congressional, State and Tribal dignitaries, as well as the Gila Crossing School Administration, teachers, incoming students and their families.

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