“Leaseback” Financing Model a First for Indian Country; Sets Precedent for Tribes Nationwide

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SACATON, Ariz. – A crowd nearly 1,000 strong came out on Saturday, July 27, 2019, to help the Gila River Indian Community (the Community) and the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) commemorate an important milestone for Community members, DOI and Indian Country: The ribbon-cutting and grand opening of the Gila Crossing Community School, a state-of-the-art, newly constructed Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) school meant to serve over 500 K-8 students on the Gila River Indian Reservation.

The Gila Crossing Community School replaces a century-old, crumbling and overcrowded BIE school that the Community had been working for decades to replace. The new school is notable not only for its tribal design and American Indian artwork – which align closely with the Community’s history and Akimel O’odham (Pima) culture – but also for its unique financing model, which represents a first for school construction financing in Indian Country.

The Community designed and constructed the facility, then entered into a lease agreement with DOI to cover repayment of its construction costs.

“This is truly an historic day for our Community,” said Gila River Indian Community Governor Stephen Roe Lewis. “The Gila Crossing Community School, like many Bureau of Indian Education schools across the country, was overcrowded, and the original building had been built in 1899. We knew that with limited federal resources the Community had to come up with a solution. Our answer was for the Community to build this school and then lease it back to the Department of the Interior. This innovative pilot sounds simple, but it had never been done before. What we accomplished here today is historic – not just for our Community, but as a model for BIE schools across the United States.”

The Community broke ground on its new school in June of 2018 and completed construction earlier this month. Students will start their first day in the new school on August 1.

Gov. Lewis commended DOI Assistant Secretary–Indian Affairs Tara Sweeney and Deputy Assistant Secretary–Indian Affairs for Policy and Economic Development Mark Cruz for their collaboration in working with the Gila River Indian Community on its innovative approach to school construction.

Assistant Secretary Sweeney, who made the trip from Washington, D.C., accompanied by Deputy Assistant Secretary Cruz, spoke at the ribbon-cutting the event. She lauded the Community, Gov. Lewis and the Gila River Tribal Council for their vision and partnership, and observed how the Community’s approach is echoed in the Gila Crossing Community School’s motto: “Believe You Can!”

“With Interior Secretary Bernhardt’s leadership, it has been a great honor to partner with the Gila River

Indian Community in thinking outside the box and developing a modern solution to the construction financing problem so many tribes face when it comes to improving their BIE-funded schools and facilities," said Assistant Secretary Sweeney. "We hope this model is one that other tribes will study and follow."

"Thank you, everyone, for your patience, and your hard work on this historic partnership," said Deputy Assistant Secretary Cruz. "The school environment is so important to student learning and growth. I'm very happy that this tribal-federal collaboration has resulted in such a beautiful, modern and meaningful place to educate current and future generations of Gila River children."

Community Councilman Anthony Villareal Sr., who served as chairman of the Gila Crossing School Construction owner's team, stated, ""The ribbon-cutting and opening of the Gila Crossing Community School was the realization of a long-term goal for the entire Gila River Indian Community and the students of Districts 6 and 7. This is the first new Bureau of Indian Education school built on the reservation in over a century, so we wanted to make sure we got it right. Seeing the finished school and all of the Community members here today, I think we succeeded."

The celebration also included a performance by the Pee Posh Bird Singers. Afterwards, federal officials and Community members toured the new building.

Gila River Lt. Gov. Robert Stone ended the program saying, "This is a day for us to be proud. By the end of next week, our students will enter this school and they will be able to see the commitment the Community has made to their education. I wish all of the students, teachers, and administrators and parents an amazing school year, and I look forward to seeing all of the students thrive here at the new Gila Crossing Community School."

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