Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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WASHINGTON – Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Indian Affairs Larry Echo Hawk joined Rosebud Sioux Tribe President Rodney Bordeaux and a gathering of students and community members on September 27 at a groundbreaking ceremony for the Interior Department's 4,000th project funded by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) at the St. Francis Indian School, a Bureau of Indian Education funded school on the Rosebud Sioux Reservation in South Dakota. ARRA funds will be used to build a new gymnasium and food service kitchen for students in grades 7-12 as well as a bus barn for school vehicles.

"By ensuring that St. Francis students have facilities that address their nutrition and fitness needs, this new gymnasium and kitchen/dining complex will be an important foundation for their academic progress," Echo Hawk said. "Children are our most precious resource. We must do everything in our power to help Indian Country nurture its next generation of tribal leaders, professionals and community members."

In a warm welcome to the Assistant Secretary on behalf of the Rosebud Sioux community, President Bordeaux said, "It's not often we get people from Washington, D.C., here. It's good that he came to see Indian Country and it's good that he came to see us, the Sicangu Oyate Lakota."

Echo Hawk met with tribal officials before the ceremony, where he was accompanied by his policy advisor, Wizipan Garriott, himself a Rosebud tribal member and a St. Francis graduate, and Jack Rever, Director of the Indian Affairs Office of Facilities, Environmental and Cultural Resources. OFECR's Office of Facilities Management and Construction is responsible for all Indian Affairs school construction, improvements and repairs, including those funded by the recovery act. Also in attendance were OFMC Director Emerson Eskeets and Brian Drapeaux, Chief of Staff to the Director of the Bureau of Indian Education.

Garriott recalled his time spent at St. Francis while sending a message of commitment and hope. He encouraged attendees to make their communities better by working harder and putting children and families first. And he drew upon personal experience as a lesson in perseverance: "I've been told many times that I could not achieve what I've been able to do. Don't let anyone tell you that you cannot go someplace or achieve your goals."

The St. Francis Indian School is a K-12 school located in St. Francis, a small town on the Rosebud Indian Reservation located in Todd County and one of the poorest reservations in the nation. While a replacement middle/high school was built in 2007, no funding was available for the school's gymnasium and food service kitchen. Middle and high school students currently must walk outside to reach the elementary school 150 yards away to eat meals, which is especially difficult in inclement South Dakota weather. This has resulted in long lunch periods and rushed service. The existing gym was built in 1960 and at 50 years old has outlived its expected 25-to-30-year useful life. An existing bus barn will be replaced with one that can house vehicles and permit maintenance to be done in all weather conditions.

The new facilities are being designed using Leadership in Environment Energy and Design (LEED)

guidelines and green building products, and to the greatest extent possible, will conserve water and energy resources. The recovery act investment will contribute to a safer, healthier and more productive environment for the building's users and provide an economical, functional and efficient facility for the Rosebud tribal community.

Joining the Assistant Secretary and President Bordeaux in the groundbreaking were Rosebud hereditary chief John Spotted Tail and St. Francis Indian School Superintendent Gorgeous Paulhamus. St. Francis students were among the community members who witnessed the event. The program included songs by St. Francis High School's Akicita Luta drum group.

Indian Affairs is investing $500 million in recovery act funding nationwide, including projects to build new homes for nearly 200 American Indian and Alaska Native families and provide employment opportunities for On-the-Job Workforce training programs to more than 300 tribal members. More than 18,000 BIE students will benefit from improved or new schools due to recovery act investments that include construction of three news schools and provide major additions to others.

Through aggressive management of the recovery act's large construction projects, Indian Affairs has saved $33 million, or 11 percent, of its construction allocation under the act. It has used these savings to undertake three school construction projects in addition to those originally planned, including the St. Francis Indian School, putting more people to work in ways that will also benefit students and Indian Country communities. In total, the Interior Department has saved over $200 million on recovery act projects, which it has directed towards completing additional high-priority projects and putting more people to work.

The recovery act is an important component of the President's plan to jumpstart the economy and put a down payment on addressing long-neglected challenges so the country can thrive in the 21st century. Under the recovery act, Indian Affairs is making an investment in conserving Indian Country's timeless treasures of culture and heritage while helping American Indian and Alaska Native families and their communities prosper.

Secretary Salazar has pledged unprecedented levels of transparency and accountability in the implementation of the Department's economic recovery projects. The public has been able to follow the progress of each project on www.recovery.gov and on www.interior.gov/recovery. Secretary Salazar has appointed a Senior Advisor for Economic Recovery, Chris Henderson, and an Interior Economic Recovery Task Force who has worked closely with Interior's Inspector General to ensure the recovery program is meeting the high standards for accountability, responsibility and transparency set by President Obama.