

Office of Indian Energy and Economic Development Helped Tigua Refuel its Economy

Can a once prosperous pueblo tribe of western Texas rebuild after their primary source of income was closed in 2002? That's exactly what is happening with the Ysleta Del Sur Pueblo, also known as the Tigua Indians, after the state shut down their casino in 2002.

With innovative economic development strategies funded by the Department of the Interior's Office of Indian Energy and Economic Development (IEED), the tribe is making positive strides toward economic recovery.

"We're rolling up our sleeves, getting our hands dirty, and moving in the right direction," says tribal council member Christopher Gomez.

The tribe, numbering about 1200 and spread over 1300 unconnected acres in El Paso, Texas - with a 70,000 acre working cattle ranch 200 miles east of the city - is taking a modern approach to economic recovery without shirking their traditional values.

The Tigua's path back to prosperity became clear after Patricia Riggs, the tribe's director of economic development began searching for other methods to generate economic activities on reservation lands. The tribe sought support from IEED. To that end, IEED funded an executive training for Tigua's tribal leaders with the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development.

The office also arranged for these leaders to visit the Winnebago Tribe's reservation, where they could observe firsthand how the Nebraska tribe became one of Indian Country's foremost economic success stories. These initiatives inspired the Tigua to develop its own commercial codes and undertake other reforms necessary for an economic resurgence. Lance Morgan Ho-Chunk Inc. CEO was also instrumental in providing strategic guidance.

In 2007, IEED helped Tigua penetrate the "digital divide" by linking it with IBM, which donated ten computers and thousands of dollars worth of software. This, along with computer and Internet instruction arranged by IEED through SeniorNet, the world's largest educator of adults on computers, enabled the Tigua to establish a computer technology center now in constant use by tribal members for job training, cultural development, nation building, and other kinds of learning.

The Tigua are using another IEED grant to develop a distance learning curriculum on nation building that can be used by other tribes to educate their members on how they, too, might achieve an economic turnaround.

"We are proud of what we have accomplished for our economy over the past several years," Riggs said. "But it all started with the phone call I made to IEED's Division of Economic Development. Their office has truly made a difference here. They provided the resources to demonstrate to Council the difference that strategic orientation and infrastructure could make, which aided our office in garnering the necessary government and community support."

Riggs sees more good things on the horizon. "We have a smoke shop that generates substantial revenue for the tribe. A large housing project is underway creating employment for tribal members,

and with money saved from past casino revenues, we have built state-of-the art medical, recreational, and day care facilities.

Another key to the pueblo's success has been the formation of Tigua Inc., a holding company with the bulk of its investment activity conducted through subsidiary corporations. Under the Tigua Inc. umbrella, several business operations are thriving or underway.

Speaking Rock Entertainment Center, formerly the Speaking Rock Casino, now operates as a video games sweepstakes center and offers a range of entertainment, including a game room with pool tables and large screen televisions featuring sporting events. However, its operations are still in litigation, therefore the tribe continues to diversify business to ensure that the tribe is supported by alternative revenues.

Tigua Inc., also includes Bear Enterprises which consists of Big Bear Oil, a supplier of fuel, lubricant engine oils, gear oils, high temperature hydraulic and conventional hydraulic oils; Big Bear Transport, a transportation company that specializes in the transportation of clear and dyed diesel and all grades of gasoline; and a tribally operated convenience store.

The tribe also operates an agricultural venture. The Chilicote Ranch, about 200 miles east of El Paso, sits on 70,000 acres of grasslands, rolling hills, canyons, and highlands. Plant life on the ranch includes mesquite, pinon, greasewood, and juniper while mule deer, bighorn sheep, collared peckery, and birds of prey are often seen. The ranch raises cattle for auction, and is available to tribal members for recreational uses.

A Will to Survive

The Tigua are a proud and peaceful agrarian people whose history, like that of many Indians, is etched in blood, land grabs, and rights denied, and who were nearly wiped out by the Spanish.

Tenacity and adaptability are two words that best describe them. Tenacity: for persevering through numerous obstacles that included wars with Spain in the 1600's, a forced march from New Mexico to Texas after the pueblo Revolt of 1680, Spanish and Texas land grabs that reduced their holdings to a mere 68 acres, and later, a long struggle for federal recognition. (recognition finally came in 1968). Adaptability: because they – unlike most tribes - live on a checkerboard, urban reservation. Once a private people, they have had to adapt to an urban setting.

Dating back to the 16th century when Spain controlled the region, the Tigua are part of the Pueblo Indians who settled in New Mexico. By the late 1600's, after several revolts with Spain, they were moved by Spain to present-day El Paso. The late 1800's and early 20th century saw them fade into obscurity.

Yet through their struggles, the small numbers that remained (approximately 500), established the pueblo farming community. In the face of extreme obstacles, the Tribe managed to maintain its traditional and cultural values.

Today they stand as a shining example of how a tribe can vault from near extinction to prosperity.

“We made the best with what we had, and with support from federal grants and funding we have identified better ways to manage our tribe and to prosper.” noted Frank Paiz, tribal governor.

Looking ahead to a greener environment and recognizing the importance of environmental stewardship, the Tigua are actively involved in a grassland restoration project on their traditional hunting lands and ranch. Funded by the U.S Fish and Wildlife Service, the goal is to restore native grasses and wildlife to the area.

Additionally, the tribe is looking at several of their properties that could undergo revitalization and be used for economic, residential, and green spaces, and they are considering wind and solar development on their lands.

To support, these projects the GIS/GPS Division of Environmental Office is currently creating a database and cataloging the Tribes property holdings to allow the tribe to make better decisions when making new land acquisitions and deciding how to best utilize tribal lands. They are also using cutting edge technology to provide accurate maps of transportation systems, analyze crime hot spots, zoning, jurisdictional zones, culturally significant areas, evacuation routes and as a cataloging system for housing and Tribal records. GPS is utilized to collect data from the ground allowing us to provide the most accurate information and/or data available.

The Tigua survival phenomenon is best summed up by Vine Deloria, Jr. in *Custer Died for Your Sins*:

Centuries passed and this little group was forgotten. The Bureau of Indian Affairs listed them as a Pueblo group ...but little was done for them ... The thought of a Tribe being able to maintain traditions, socio-political structure, and basic identity within an expanding modern American city ... [was] a preposterous idea ... Discovery of the Tiguas rocked Indian people in several respects. If, many Indian people thought, the Tiguas had survived for three centuries in the middle of El Paso, might not their own Tribe also survive somehow?