

Discussion delves into tribal economies

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A tribal listening session near the Capitol on Monday homed in on tourism as part of a larger discussion about economic development. But conversation also branched into topics ranging from family life to tribal history in a session that united experienced leaders with young tribal members just beginning their work.

The three-hour round-table discussion took place in the Joe Foss Building as part of the state's first Tribal Relations Day. More than 50 people participated in the listening session, including a swath of state government officials, tribal leaders and people working on projects within the state's tribes.

A traditional dance at the at the Capitol Rotunda followed, accompanied by speeches from Gov. Dennis Daugaard and other officials.

J.R. LaPlante, secretary of the South Dakota Department of Tribal Relations, presided over the listening session, and James D. Hagen, the state's secretary of tourism, delivered some opening remarks. Before long, the very concept of tourism fell under examination.

"There's a mix of feelings," said Joyce Country, tribal counsel with the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate Tribe "Some people feel, 'Why should we develop tourism for other people to look at us?'"

Others contended that assembling a firm program would enable native people to take control of a phenomenon that is happening anyway. One approach noted by Tanya Fiddler was for tribes to delineate what can be shared – and what must remain private.

Fiddler chairs the South Dakota Indian Business Alliance, and she's the executive director of Four Bands Community Fund, a nonprofit founded especially to assist entrepreneurs of the Cheyenne River Indian Reservation. She said people at Cheyenne River have already developed some policies surrounding tourism.

"In regulating we created corridors of where people could go and where they could not go," she said.

Some people who attended the meeting talked about the difficulty of playing many roles at the same time in trying to promote economic development. It's the sort of overwork that create huge burdens and make it tough for programs to carry on once the initial leaders are no longer there.

"A lot of times programs get started because you have these really big personalities," said LaPlante. "How do you create sustainable programs that continue on without the person that started it?"

Among those who shared thoughts was Michael B. Jandreau, who has served as the chairman of the

Lower Brule Sioux Tribe for 33 years.

“Whether we like it or not, whether we admit it or not, in our state we don’t have equity,” he said.

Jandreau said the discussion he heard on Monday reminded him of talks he’d listened to decades ago.

“I closed my eyes and it was 40 years ago,” he said. “I heard the same talk. I also heard the same enthusiasm. I heard the same idealism.”

He offered a kind of challenge to native and non-native people.

“We’re not at war anymore,” he said. “We live right side by side. But we look at each other and still resent the advancement that happens on either side.”

Fiddler said economic movement has occurred – and that it’s borne out by the data. She mentioned research revealing economic progress in places where investments have been made. She and LaPlante noted the importance of thorough research in charting future plans.

“Part of changing the conversation is coming up with (research) that’s more than anecdotal,” LaPlante said.

Robert Shepherd, chairman of the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate Tribe, acknowledged that ideas in the past had not been acted upon, but he said this may be the “implementation era.” Speaking of tourism, he agreed that tribes could create their own codes to decide what needs to be kept private, and what can be accessible to the public. He also suggested that the state create a task force to work with each tribe.

Some of the discussion crept into familial issues. Emily Iron Cloud-Koenen, executive director of Lakota Oyate Wakanyeja Owicakiyapi, said more support is needed for native families working to keep their children together.

“We don’t get adequate funding for help to the families,” she said.

Iron Cloud-Koenen said LOWO is a culturally based child welfare agency.

After the meeting, LaPlante highlighted the importance of tribes’ developing their own plans around economic and other issues.

“It’s really about tribes taking charge and finding their own voice and telling their own story,” he said, “as opposed to letting somebody else tell it for them.”