

CEREMONIAL 2021

Written by By Beth Blakeman Managing Editor
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Lots of reassurances, few clear answers

It's hard to know whose signature is on Gallup's signature event.

To listen to New Mexico Tourism Department Secretary Jen Schroer and the Intertribal Ceremonial Office Executive Director Melissa Sanchez tell it to the Gallup City Council April 27, the ICO is inclusive, with a task force Sanchez describes as "comprised of some of the local Ceremonial office members, as well as event coordinators, special events people who have worked at other special events ... and also Ceremonial volunteers."

But not everybody listening came away with a warm, fuzzy feeling.

Kyle Tom, president of the Gallup Inter-Tribal Indian Ceremonial, said the meeting held no surprises for him.

It "sounded exactly what I thought it would be, which means, they did anything they could to cover their a-s and deflect any of the hard-hitting issues that needed to be brought up," he said.

The direction the tourism department is taking emphasizes promotion, wraparound services for marketing support, and the introduction of new revenue.

Schroer also told the council about a new tourism event investment impact calculator, designed to forecast how many room-nights an event generates.

But Tom wasn't impressed with speculative resources.

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“They want to bring in their Santa Fe expertise. Gallup is not Santa Fe,” he said. “There’s way more differences between Gallup and Santa Fe than there are similarities.”

When asked what the state’s participation means in terms of his involvement in the 2021 Ceremonial, Tom said he didn’t know.

Sanchez didn’t offer a clear picture, either. She said the opinions of the association members have always been welcome, but they haven’t responded to her efforts to reach out.

THE BUDGET FOR CEREMONIAL

When asked about finances for the 2021 virtual Ceremonial, Sanchez said pricing is still in negotiation. She was unwilling to share a ballpark figure.

“It might be misinterpreted,” she said

Sanchez was willing to talk about Fiscal Year 2022. She said that the legislature had appropriated \$159,000 (which reflects a 5 percent overall agency decrease) for the base budget and direct event expenses for Ceremonial, as the event requires year-round preparation.

Mayor Louis Bonaguidi said in the days when he was Ceremonial president, it cost an estimated \$400,000 to put on the live event, and most of that was raised by volunteers.

WHERE IS THE CEREMONIAL OFFICE?

Tom, who is recognized by the City of Gallup as the president of the local Gallup Inter-Tribal Association, said that the office was closed after the state sent a notice that the lease for the building which housed the Ceremonial Office, was being effectively terminated on Feb. 28.

“There’s no Ceremonial Office open now,” Tom said. “The sign is still above the door. [But] it is a state-owned building.”

Palochak brought up the closed office at the council meeting.

“We have a building [in] downtown Gallup that remains empty with no staff. So if people are coming to buy T-shirts for Ceremonial, they can’t get in there,” Palochak said. “If they want to know if there’s a Ceremonial, they can’t get in there. They don’t know where to call.

“This is a Gallup event,” she emphasized, “So we need this person here, or somebody paid to be here to answer all these questions, and that’s not being done.”

Sanchez said the office would be reopened. But she could not tell the *Sun* when that would happen or who would staff it.

THE TALK AROUND TOWN

Palochak said she’s hearing from her constituents and they don’t sound happy about the state’s plans for the 2021 Ceremonial.

“I believe from all the comments I’ve gotten from the community, they feel that they have been slighted, that our Inter-Tribal Ceremonial Association is not a part of this,” she said. “They have been kind of shoved to the side.”

Palochak pointed out that in the past when Ceremonial had a state director, that person was housed in Gallup and worked to develop relationships within the community, attracting volunteers. That, she said, is not being done with the current tourism department model.

Sanchez is keeping her cards close to her vest about how she envisions this year's event.

She said she is in talks with a television network for a feature program, but she won't identify the media outlet.

She also said there could be live webcasts for events such as pageants, but the platform hasn't been decided on yet.

For Tom, these answers leave a lot of uncertainty.

"We're trying to move forward," he said. "But there are so many things beyond our control that we can't move, because it comes down to other organizations.

"We're still trying to figure it out," Tom said. "We're hoping an agreement gets reached soon."

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