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Jurrius: Leaving a better argument at Northern Ute, and on to Native American Resource

Partners

By Jerry Reynolds / Indian Country Today

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Part two

WASHINGTON - On June 19, John Jurrius kept a scheduled appointment for an interview with Indian Country Today. The session had been scheduled 10 days to two weeks in advance, and an offhand offer from a Jurrius associate to schedule it earlier had fallen by the wayside due to conflicting prior commitments.

By June 19, Jurrius and the associate had spent weeks and more planning and scheduling meetings on Capitol Hill with lawmakers, within the presidential administration with federal agency officials, and around Washington with private sector and government-invested financiers. The point for Jurrius was to continue laying the groundwork and seeking commitments for Native American Resource Partners, a venture capital firm he has founded.

On June 16, Jurrius said later in a follow-up conversation to the June 19 interview, he attended a friendly meeting that he had been invited to by allottee citizens of the Northern Ute Indian Tribe on the Uintah and Ouray reservation in Utah. Accounts vary and a copy of the resolution familiar to ICT is undated, but shortly after June 16, the tribal council passed a resolution barring Jurrius from the reservation as, essentially, a divisive presence. Jurrius said he did not learn of the resolution banning him until after his June 19 interview with ICT, and repeated hearings of the taped interview transcript offer no ready indication to the contrary.

Jurrius, a many-hatted financial manager and energy development adviser to the tribe from 2001 through August 2007, and previously in a reduced capacity, considers his banishment politically motivated.

Northern Ute Chairman Curtis Cesspooch has not responded to telephone messages and detailed e-mail questions about his administration and Jurrius. He is on record in the Utah press insisting that Jurrius simply reshuffled the tribe's assets, an allegation Jurrius denied. Among the questions Cesspooch and the Northern Ute business committee have not responded to are what unethical or unlawful acts by Jurrius, if any, do they know of now that they didn't know of in 2006, when the tribe embraced and distributed a detailed, glowing account of Jurrius' tenure with the Northern Ute that appeared in the Deseret (Utah) News; whether Jurrius' estimate that businesses he had been engaged by the tribe to run brought forward more than 150 resolutions, all of which carried; and if the count of 150 is within a crow's flight of accurate, then who was reshuffling assets exactly - Jurrius or the business committee?

The transcript of the ICT interview with Jurrius also reveals that in the last analysis, it came about in the first place for only two primary reasons: the energy development vision of the late Leonard Burch, the longtime Southern Ute leader who Jurrius credits with guiding him throughout his tenure in Indian country; and the concept of tribal sovereignty.

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Jurrius encountered Indian country in 1987, he said, coming up through the financial ranks of an oil- and gas-producing company. With tribal energy interests at issue in the San Juan Basin, "Someone mentioned sovereignty. My family had assets abroad. Because at least I could spell sovereignty, they said, 'Tag, you're it.'"

Jurrius made something of that assignment and learned a great deal more about tribal sovereignty than how to spell it. No one had to tell him June 19 that one tribal administration's sovereign decisions are not necessarily binding on another, or that tribal sovereignty encompasses the authority to ban non-citizens from its borders.

That doesn't mean he approves the Northern Ute resolution against him. "If I had a background where I left with more money than my tribal clients," said the unabashed capitalist, "I could understand the concern. But that's not the case. What I've helped to leave, riddled throughout Indian country - regardless of whether somebody likes me or doesn't like me - is success. Broadening of an economic institution within their community. They learn more about their financials and their resources. ...

"You know, a lot of tribes where I've started, they were - when I got there - fighting about control and who was in charge. When I leave, it's a better argument. They're discussing how to use the money and who has control of it, and that's just a better argument all the way around."

It's an argument we'll hear more often if he has anything to say about it. Jurrius believes the times are hot for striking in tribal energy development - however briefly - and the iron at hand is Native American Resource Partners. At both the Southern and Northern Ute tribes, he said June 19 (before he said he knew of the Northern Ute banishment resolution directed against him), the embryo of a larger, pan-tribal business model got its start.

"I certainly can't be credited with all the success of the Southern Ute since 2001. They've had a great team there, and quite honestly have exceeded any expectation I ever had for the tribe. At Northern Ute I take great pride, because we built that from the ground up. Now they're a respected participant within the development on their lands, and before quite frankly they weren't even acknowledged. They had poor trades, poor performance; and they have now emerged into a very sophisticated developer of their own resources, and they have built an energy company that while it's years behind Southern Ute, it's already surpassed the tens of millions [in revenues] into the hundreds, and so they've done well."

After stepping aside from his position with the Northern Ute, he said, while considering a plethora of other options in the fall of 2007, "as I reflected back on an experience I didn't expect to have [with both Ute tribes], it was obvious to me that our business model would work for a lot of resource tribes. And second, the most difficult part of managing the business model was - every time I generate a project for the tribe, I had to go out and raise the capital, find a capital partner, a joint venture partner, as well as raise the tribe's capital. I certainly learned over that period of time that there was no readily available access to capital for tribes."

All of this made it obvious to Jurrius: create a company that had all that access. That's where Native American Resource Partners began.

"There's an immense amount of capital in the energy sector. But when you take a look at where that capital's going ... what you don't see is any capital that's been targeting Indian country.

"It seemed to me to be an obvious void. Make a long story short, we [Native American Resource Partners] were very successful in going into the financial markets. ... We got a great response."

Responses lead to competition for projects, then the search for capital. In most cases, the capital available is only for short-term capital.

"They want to be on a three- to five-year cycle. And in Indian country it doesn't work that way because there's no infrastructure. A lot of times, you know, you go on reservations, they don't have gas-gathering systems. Roads. Renewing [permits] with the oversight of the BIA ... the [Minerals Management Service], you know, documents take longer.

"We were successful not only at having the market respond favorably, but actually identifying longer-term capital that was willing to target Indian country."



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