

THE Durango HERALD

The next step for Utes

New Growth Fund headquarters shows Southern Utes' successes

By **Mary Shinn** Herald staff writer



Along Colorado Highway 172 just outside Ignacio, the new headquarters of the Southern Ute Indian Tribe Growth Fund stands as new evidence of the tribe's success.

Wednesday, the Growth Fund's leadership and Southern Ute tribal councilors welcomed the public into the new \$16 million building.



Shaun Stanley/Durango Herald photos

A crowd gathers Wednesday for the dedication of the Southern Ute Growth Fund's new headquarters on Colorado Highway 172. The 48,000-square-foot building will be home to the conglomerate's executives and several departments.

"We look at this building as really a piece of who we are today," said Mike Olguin, treasurer of the Tribal Council.

The modern, three-story building just south of the Sky Ute Casino Resort will house about 140 employees, including the Growth Fund board of directors, the fund's Department of Energy compliance division, human resources, private equity and information technology departments among others, said Bob Zahradnik, operating director of the Growth Fund.

The Growth Fund is fully owned by the tribe, and it manages seven companies, including several oil- and gas-focused companies, a real estate division and private-equity division, he said.

The multi-billion dollar conglomerate is one of the largest employers in the county. It also supports about 1,450 tribal members through community investments and dividend payments based on the Growth Fund's annual profits.

Employees began moving into the building about two months ago, and it allows the Colorado employees of the Growth Fund's Red Willow Production Co. to be centralized in one building across the plaza from the new building, Zahradnik said. Red Willow is invested in about 1,500 wells.

"It's a tangible and visual representation of some of the ground we've covered," he said.

It is also important symbolically to the tribal members to bring the executive offices back to Ignacio from Durango, said Tribal Councilor Amy Barry.

The Growth Fund is the culmination of former Southern Ute Tribal Chairman Leonard Burch's vision in the 1980s for the tribe to manage its own natural-gas wells.

The council took time to acknowledge Burch and the influence of former councils.



Shaun Stanley/Durango Herald

"The goal here is to set up something that is going to withstand time," said Bruce Valdez the executive director of the Growth Fund, during Wednesday's dedication of the new Southern Ute Growth Fund's headquarters.



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Bruce Valdez, executive director of the Southern Ute Growth Fund, center, joins members of the Yellow Jacket drumming group during Wednesday's dedication of the Growth Fund's new building. The last new Growth Fund building in Ignacio opened in 2005.

"His visions have come true many times over," Olguin said.

In many cases, the Bureau of Indian Affairs manages natural resources for Native American tribes.

Burch also pushed for the tribe to invest in businesses interests outside the reservation. Now, 80 percent of the Growth Fund's revenue comes from outside investments, Zahradnik said.

Marvin Cook was part of the Department of Energy in 1980s when the effort to take over well-management began. Standing in the new building's airy lobby, Cook said he was glad to see the Southern Ute Indian Tribe become a leader among all those tribes with energy resources independent of the federal government.

"I am just really happy and proud," he said.

The lobby features a model of a deep-sea oil rig. The tribe has invested in drilling off the coast of Mexico, and this type of drilling is likely the best opportunity for the Growth Fund's expansion over the next 10 years, Zahradnik said.

One of the rigs the tribe invested in can produce about 100,000 barrels of oil a day.

The real estate division, which owns and develops property across the United States, is also doing well. Some of its current projects include Durango's Three Springs development, 22 blocks of commercial space in the Denver suburb of Lakewood and a hotel in California, he said.

As the company seeks to expand further, the council emphasized the opportunity the Growth Fund offers to tribal members, especially young people who want to major in engineering, real estate, information technology and private equity, Olguin said.

"It's an opportunity we want them to seek," he said.

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