Building Communities has been active with the Navajo Nation and the Hopi Tribe over the past six years. Our goal is to put the economic development planning and projects in place so that the people of these great nations can enjoy the standard of living that they desire. As an economic development professional over the past 33 years, I truly believe that both Nations have a brilliant and beautiful future.

Much of our work has focused upon two episodes of Native American/U.S. History—the Bennett Freeze and Forced Relocation. In total, there are 10 Navajo Chapters and three Hopi Villages that have been most impacted. Over the past year, Building Communities has facilitated an economic development strategic planning process yielding visionary plans for all 13 places! In September, we will create our final Plan at Upper Moenkopi Village.

The methodology for all of these plans is the same. The philosophy is that we are not looking for a “hand out,” but rather a “hand up.” That is, we are not asking the federal government to pay reparations for past damages. Rather, we are asking the federal government to invest in the brilliant future that these two Nations have despite the past injustices of federal policy that has created so much damage.

It is Time to Work Together
Up to this point, the planning efforts have been on parallel paths. That is, the work at Hopi has been under the name Joint Village Strategic Planning. The project at Navajo is known as the Navajo Thaw Implementation Plan.

While I believe that both efforts stand on their own merit, I also believe that the likelihood of generating large-scale federal funding for these communities will best be realized through a joint approach.

Although I live 1,000 miles from the land that I love, (northern Arizona), I do understand the many issues that serve to still divide these two great Nations. I respect the difference in the custom and culture. I respect the differing views related to the land. I respect the challenge of pursuing the vital access to water most critical to both Nations. And yet, despite these challenges, I truly believe that now is the time for the Great Collaboration.

Overcoming the Immediate Challenges to Collaboration
I have heard the personal stories from Navajo and Hopi people that I know and admire. These are stories of how people from “the other Tribe” took their land, burned their homes, disrespected their relatives. I know how these episodes are scars that feel impossible to overcome for many. And yet, it is my belief that if there is a real villain in all of this, it is the United States federal government, that, in it’s pursuit of manifest destiny, used illegal, and at times ruthless means to achieve its goals.

I have now dedicated my career to a remedy for this situation. Not a remedy based upon blame and fault, but a remedy based upon promise and planning and partnership and progress.
It is not about equity. It is about meeting needs and implementing strategies. It is natural to look back and say that the “other side” got the better deal. One side may think that it should be “50/50.” The other side might tend to look at the number of impacted people. These methodologies yield widely different strategies in terms of the pursuit of funding. It is my belief that moving forward based upon this mindset will not lead to the positive results that the people of both Nations deserve.

Rather, we have based our methodology on the identified needs at the community level for all 13 Chapters/Villages/Communities. In addition, our methodology is based upon economic development strategy. The economic opportunities before the Navajo Nation are gigantic. The opportunities to preserve everything great about Hopi while making significant economic gains is equally attainable. We simply must focus upon needs and strategies, not history and one’s perception of equity.

Politically, the easy thing to do is to let these voices of division win out. Unfortunately, this only leads to stagnation. Fortunately, I believe that Navajo and Hopi have the leadership today to overcome the voices that lead to stagnation. It is not always easy to work together, but it is the only recipe that has ever proved successful in human history.

Time of Opportunity
America is in crisis. We have a health crisis that has collapsed our economy. Ultimately, there will only be one path forward. This will be when the United States makes the right decisions on health policy and makes an investment on the infrastructure and technology to compete in the 21st century. I believe that this will manifest in economic stimulus and infrastructure bills as early as October 2020 and as late as March 2021.

Congressman O’Halleran and his team have been paying attention to our work at both Hopi and Navajo. In addition, both Nations have excellent lawyers/lobbyists in Washington DC that are familiar with these efforts.

In short, the stage is set for tremendous advancement—an investment of over $5 billion in the region. I believe we only get there through the collaboration.

Getting Together
Although we live in the era of the teleconference and video conference, I believe this is a matter that is deserving of a face-to-face discussion. It is my hope that we can all come together by the end of September 2020 in order to equip Congressman O’Halleran, the Arizona Delegation, and anyone positioned to bring all of this about.

My best to you, your team, and your people.

Brian Cole