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AMER INDIAN LAW CTR

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PROPOSAL

April 9, 1994

I. BACKGROUND

The American Indian Listening Conference will be held in Albuquerque, New Mexico, on May 5 & 6, 1994. This meeting, called at the suggestion of Chief Wilma Mankiller of the Cherokee Nation and President Peterson Zah of the Navajo Nation, will bring together the chief elected officials of all the federally recognized Indian tribal governments and Alaska Native organizations with Attorney General Janet Reno and Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt. Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Henry Cisneros will join the conference on the second day. The meeting is historic in the sense that it is the first meeting between several cabinet officers and all tribal chief executives. It is intended to follow up the late April meeting between President Clinton and tribal representatives, and it will lay the groundwork for a continuing process of improving the federal-tribal relationship. The conference is also unique as an intergovernmental meeting because of the unique federal-tribal relationship, which is unlike that between the federal government and the states and municipalities. The Indian tribes are not only meeting with the federal government as governments, they are meeting with their trustee - Secretary Babbitt - and the trustee's lawyer - Attorney General Reno.

Despite the unique tribal-federal relationship, the Listening Conference is also comparable to a meeting between the federal government and such organizations as the National Governors Association, the National Association of Counties, and the National Conference of Mayors. Just as these state and municipal representatives would not have an important policy meeting with the federal government without advance preparation and staffing, neither should tribal governments. Like the members of any group, tribal leaders must have the opportunity to prepare their thoughts and to relate their concerns to the larger policy context. Tribal governments must have the opportunity to discuss issues among themselves and decide, among other things, which leaders will address which issues and how various tribal priorities will be accommodated.

Historically, Indian tribes have a remarkable degree of consensus on important national legal and policy issues while having diversity as to local priorities. But, due to their economic situation, tribal governments have not been able to afford the type of national representation enjoyed by state and municipal governments. The National Congress of American Indians, the only tribal-constituent national advocacy organization, has limited funding and staff resources and has consequently developed relationships with a variety of organizations such as the American Indian Law Center to utilize their specialized expertise when an opportunity such as the Listening Conference arises.