

United States Senate  
Senate Committee on Indian Affairs  
Nomination hearing for the  
Assistant Secretary of Indian Affairs  
Department of the Interior  
Statement by  
Tara Sweeney  
May 9, 2018

Chairman Hoeven, Vice Chairman Udall, and distinguished members of the committee. My name is Tara Sweeney, and I am honored to be here today as you consider my nomination to be Assistant Secretary of Indian Affairs at the Department of Interior.

I am an Iñupiaq Eskimo from Alaska's North Slope, raised in the era following congressional enactment of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971 (ANCSA). As this committee is aware, ANCSA was essentially an experiment by our federal government, to address the age old question of how best to address the needs of America's Native people that pre-existed the United States Constitution. ANCSA eliminated the 7 reservations in Alaska at the time, one of which was located in my hometown of Utqiagvik, and replaced them with a historic land claims settlement that deeded 12 percent of Alaska's lands in fee simple title to be held by Native corporations. As you know, the more than 200 Alaska Native Corporations created by Congress exist side by side but are autonomous from the more than 200 federally recognized tribal governments in Alaska.

I was raised in rural Alaska, educated at Cornell University, mentored and employed during this post-ANCSA era. I have witnessed our village leadership, including my own mother and others, focus their efforts on the corporate structures Congress created, while trying to balance the sovereignty and the role of our tribal organizations for the well-being of the Iñupiaq people.

As Alaska Natives, like our American Indian counterparts, we are reaching for the same future, with very similar tools – tribal governments to govern our respective social needs and traditional and cultural ways, and tribal corporations, to engage in the economic opportunities of our great country.

This reality has meant, and still means, that the Department of Interior is very much a part of our past, our lives today, and will be in the future of the generations yet born. The DOI is a reality with which every Native American lives. I am honored to leave my homeland for a short time to engage in public service, but perhaps most important, to support tribal nations, tribal corporations, and our tribal people all across the country.

The mission of Indian Affairs at DOI is *"to engage in a robust government to government relationship with federally recognized Indian Nations and to collaborate with Indian organizations and corporations to support socially, culturally and economically self-sufficient Indian peoples"*.

Members of the Committee, this mission statement is one that both Secretary Zinke and I believe in. With the administration's support, I would like to bring the vast talent of Native leaders around the country to help move our collective tribal and corporate interests forward.

I am both a product and a witness to the work of Native leaders to address the challenges that each of our communities face – including social services to protect our most vulnerable, the perpetuation of our languages and cultural practices, investments in education, housing and other infrastructure, and capacity building to develop economic opportunities at home and across the country.

My life experiences throughout rural Alaska positioned me to watch our community leaders overhaul the Bureau of Indian Affairs school in my village. Previously, this school had only served my mother's generation through the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Native leadership led the conversion of the school to a pre-K through 12<sup>th</sup> grade school system with a local school board. This act of courage and partnership with the DOI changed the trajectory of every generation that followed. Students no longer had to leave home 10 months of every year to achieve a high school diploma. Today, we have a locally governed school district, and we also successfully operate the only accredited tribal college in Alaska, providing degrees in higher education and vocational skills to our young adults.

The Arctic is the most remote region in the United States. No roads connect our communities, the cost of living is extremely high, our people face significant social challenges and our region is plagued with insufficient sanitation facilities. Unfortunately, this is akin to the realities faced throughout the rest of Indian Country. To address these needs, we accessed the resources of bond markets, local taxing authority, and business investments to build a city water and sewer system, a system that most Americans take for granted. The work is far from done but we continue to push solutions forward. I will utilize that same solutions-oriented perspective to serve all of Indian Country.

My expertise is in business, government relations, and policy development that facilitates good business practices. However, business is but one facet of the well-being of Native peoples. It is one tool that is intricately connected to our social and cultural well-being. I know that the collective knowledge of our tribal leaders must be my top priority to serve the mission of Indian Affairs and Tribal Nations.

With that in mind, if confirmed, I plan to spend my first 180 days listening to tribal leaders and the Congressional Committees of jurisdiction to hear the top priorities and establish a clear and comprehensive Action Plan.

As a Native impacted by DOI, I understand that one appointment, my appointment, is not a universal remedy. However, for improved and effective service delivery, Indian Country needs a clear framework from the Department, grounded in tribal consultation. This engagement will give my tenure as Assistant Secretary the clear vision that is needed to advance the priorities of Interior and our tribal nations.

I expect these consultations will produce a myriad of priorities. Across this great country, from the southwest to the northeast, one cannot paint Indian country with a single stroke. Indian country is not a homogenous community. There are some stark and subtle differences that make each tribe unique. I have great familiarity with energy development, education, housing, telecommunications, and business development issues, particularly within the context of rural and geographical isolation; however, others will be new to me. As I have been taught by my elders when taking on new ventures, in order to achieve success I must be guided by the principles focused on a humility to hear, to be taught, to contemplate and to act.

In closing, during any tenure this body may grant me, I fully intend to make decisions in consultation, and to act on the best ideas that moves Indian Affairs and the decision making of tribes forward, not backwards. Should I be confirmed, your guidance and expertise will be both expected and appreciated.

Quyanaqpak. Thank you for the opportunity to come before this committee. I am happy to answer any questions you may have for me today.