



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: First Cross-Tribal Governor Candidate Forum on Native American Issues Attracts Nine Hopefuls To Bemidji

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Bemidji, MN – The American Indian Resource Center on the Bemidji State University campus was the scene of the first ever, cross-tribal Governor candidate forum on Native American issues. The forum attracted nine of the gubernatorial candidates running to succeed Tim Pawlenty, and was co-sponsored by Native Vote Alliance of Minnesota, the ACLU-MN, Wellstone Action Fund's Native American Leadership Program and TakeAction Minnesota's reNEW Minnesota campaign.

The meeting began at 5:30pm with a social hour and supper of Indian tacos. Following that, the two-hour candidate forum opened with an invocation by Mike Smith, a member of the Leech Lake reservation. Co-chairs of the event were Elizabeth Towle, Chair of the Native Vote Alliance of Minnesota (a member of the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe) and Peggy Flanagan, Director of Wellstone Action's Native American Leadership Project (and a member of the White Earth Band of Ojibwe).

Towle said she was excited about the level of candidate, and tribal member participation, as the forum was the first big project she was leading as Chair of Native Vote Alliance. "Native Americans around the state are organizing, getting engaged in the political process early, and building real power together. That's what tonight's candidate forum is about. As Chairwoman, I'm very excited to show the community, elected officials, and Governor candidates what Native Vote Alliance is all about and what a unique organization NVAM is with representation from the eleven federally recognized tribes in Minnesota."

Over the past decade, Native Americans have increased their political involvement in Minnesota, impacting elections in state legislative districts from Red Lake to Mille Lacs, as well as the 2008 U.S. Senate Election between Al Franken and Norm Coleman. At the same time, Native Americans have become engaged in the 2010 elections earlier than ever, with so much at stake. Key issues discussed during the evening centered on tribal school funding, cuts to health care, and the controversial issue of Indian gaming.

Members of the Fond du Lac, Leech Lake, Mille Lacs, Prairie Island, Red Lake, and White Earth tribal communities were present to ask questions and gain responses from the nine gubernatorial candidates. The Governor candidates attending, who answered questions from chairs placed in nine circles around the room, included DFLers Margaret Anderson Kelliher, Tom Bakk, Mark Dayton, Matt Entenza, Steve Kelley, John Marty, Tom Rukavina, R.T. Rybak, and Paul Thissen. Republican candidates had been invited but declined to attend.

Kathryn “Jody” Beaulieu, Secretary of the Red Lake Band of Ojibwe, said it was “no secret that members of Red Lake and other tribal communities around the state have been struggling for years with a lack of living wage jobs, access to good health care, and attacks on tribal sovereignty. We’re encouraged that nine of the Governor candidates came to Bemidji tonight to discuss these issues. It’s an important first step toward improving the lives of Native Americans in Minnesota.”

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