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## PRESIDENT CLINTON ILLUMINATES THE NEED FOR INVESTMENT IN NATIVE AMERICAN COMMUNITIES\*

Jackie Barone\*\*

Accompanied by corporate executives and economic development leaders, President Clinton visited the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, South Dakota, on July 7, 1999, in effort to highlight the need and potential for new investments in Native American Communities. He is the first sitting President to visit a reservation since Franklin Roosevelt. While visiting the home of the Oglala Sioux Nation, the President spoke with residents, visited a housing construction site, participated in a Presidential proclamation signing ceremony in recognition of the Pine Ridge Oglala Sioux Empowerment Zone, and spoke to the people of the Oglala Sioux Nation.

The purpose of the President's visit was to focus attention on the infrastructure needs and investment potential of Native American Communities. The Oglala Sioux Empowerment Zone, created in January 1999, was the first such zone on Indian tribal land. Empowerment zones receive federal funding, technical assistance, and employer tax breaks.

The need for economic development in many Indian communities, such as Pine Ridge, is evident. In 1997, the Bureau of Indian Affairs reported that the unemployment rate for the Oglala Sioux on Pine Ridge was seventy-three percent, a great deal higher than the total figure of fifty percent for Native Americans nationwide. On Pine Ridge, sixty-three of the population lives below the poverty line. In addition, the 38,000 people who live on the reservation suffer from poor health.

With those staggering statistics in mind, the President wished to reinforce his commitment to supporting economic development in tribal communities. His appearance at Pine Ridge coincided with the launching of the New Markets Initiative and mobilizing corporate America to recognize the potential of Native American communities. To that end, the President was joined by various high ranking officials from entities such as: Fannie Mae, PMI Mortgage Foundation, the Federal Housing Finance Board, and Countrywide Home Loans, among others. Fannie Mae has entered into an agreement with the Oglala Sioux and Norwest Mortgage, committing to invest up to \$3 million over the next five years through its American Communities Fund. Norwest is providing \$1.4 million in loans and will also provide mortgage counseling. The Enterprise Foundation is involved in an effort to create the

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\*The introductory materials outlining the President's visit to the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation and his comments to the Oglala Sioux Nation were provided to the *American Indian Law Review* by the White House Press Office.

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nonprofit Oglala Sioux Tribe Partnership for Homeownership, providing financial assistance, private-sector low-cost financing, down-payment assistance, and home ownership counseling. Various entities have committed to similar home ownership initiatives, while others have offered assistance to tribal colleges. For instance, Gateway Computer Company has agreed commit \$50,000 to the Oglala Lakota Community College in order to develop a curriculum and to teach Indian students data processing and computer programming. Finally, various federal agencies have set forth comprehensive plans and strategies to address the infrastructure needs of Native American communities, in general. Participating agencies include the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Federal Communications Commission, and the Department of Agriculture.

While the outcome of these initiatives remains to be seen, presidential support and recognition of the potential offered by Native American communities is a step in the right direction. For far too long, Native American communities have been ignored as a potential source of skilled human resources. The naming of the Pine Ridge Reservation as an Empowerment Zone is a sign that such communities have been recognized as having the potential to make a positive contribution toward not only their own well being and success, and the well being and success of the nation. Native American communities such as Pine Ridge have, in the past, not shared in the nation's economic prosperity. Let's hope the initiatives and contributions by our corporate and economic development leaders provide an impetus toward equal prosperity in our Indian communities.