

Native American Code Officials

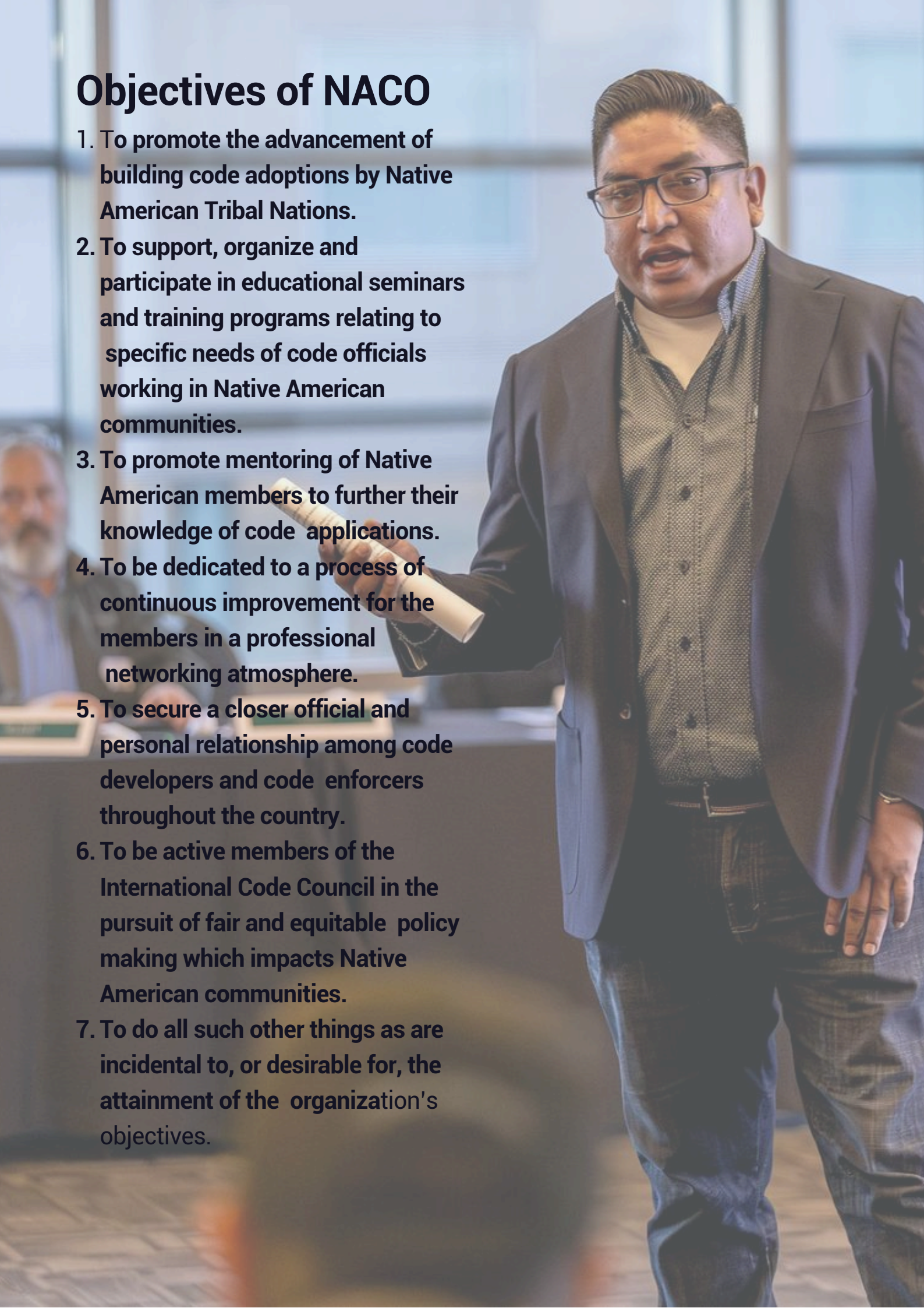
December 2024



Join us in growing a Native-led community of building and fire code officials dedicated to Tribal Nations and Indian Country! Membership is open to all interested in promoting Tribal Sovereignty, Tribal Health and Safety, and Tribal Economic and Workforce Development. This is a Native-led organization and membership in the ICC or other model code organization is not required. Join us in advocating for Indian Country and serving as a resource for Tribal Nations looking to implement building and fire codes that are customized to their tribal needs and traditions

Objectives of NACO

1. To promote the advancement of building code adoptions by Native American Tribal Nations.
2. To support, organize and participate in educational seminars and training programs relating to specific needs of code officials working in Native American communities.
3. To promote mentoring of Native American members to further their knowledge of code applications.
4. To be dedicated to a process of continuous improvement for the members in a professional networking atmosphere.
5. To secure a closer official and personal relationship among code developers and code enforcers throughout the country.
6. To be active members of the International Code Council in the pursuit of fair and equitable policy making which impacts Native American communities.
7. To do all such other things as are incidental to, or desirable for, the attainment of the organization's objectives.



On December 4-5, 2024, the Native American Code Officials (NACO) Joinnaco.com and attendees consisting of citizens of 19 sovereign tribal nations from coast-to-coast and supporters gathered to discuss if and how building codes can support Tribal sovereignty, health and safety, and economic and workforce development in Indian Country. NACO was formed by Native Americans in December of 2023 and has grown to 62 members including citizens from 18 tribal nations.



Unlike traditional building code summits which focus on technical structural and mechanical materials and systems, the attendees from Indian Country focused on the sovereign empowerment, health, safety, housing, economic development, workforce development and other issues specific to Indian Country. The vital importance of our elders being allowed to age in place in their own homes and keeping our community and especially our youth connected to our elders came up in every discussion in the Circle. The Circle discussions were also very frank about the justifiable historic concerns about non-Natives encouraging tribes to adopt any "code" from outside Indian Country. That is a valid concern and was discussed openly and head-on.



For most attendees, this summit was unlike anything they were used to. The Circle discussions were entirely community focused – how could codes improve physical and mental health, adult and youth career opportunities, investment in the community, housing and business, and especially retaining traditions and stay connected to our elders.



Health was a primary discussion. Drafts, leaks, mold, improper piping, inadequate insulation, and undersized ventilation all negatively impact health. Pre-COVID studies found that most people now spend up to 22 hours indoors – be it at home, work, or school. Our building indoor environment is now our near-exclusive physical environment and indoor air, including recirculated air, is our primary source of the air we breathe.

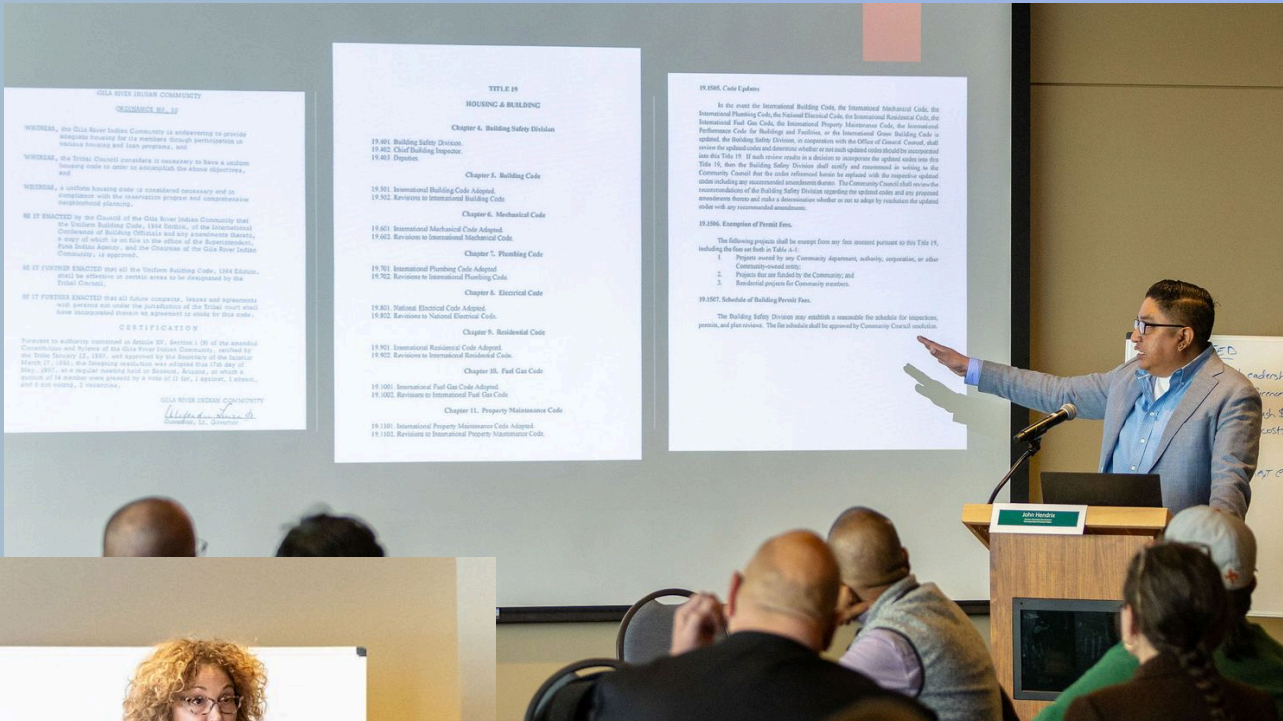
The health environment is also facing greater challenges with extreme and extended weather events. Pouring money into new construction and renovation is futile if developers and contractors are not held accountable to conform with any building codes. For too long Indian Country has endured substandard work in our homes, workplaces, community centers, and schools. Unhealthy buildings lead to unhealthy communities.



Elder health directly impacts the health of Indian Country. Building codes support the ability of our elders to remain in their homes – or age in place – protecting their physical and emotional health and dignity. Indian Country understands that the homes of our elders are our classrooms and a central place of our community. It is where our youth learn our traditions and histories. It is where our adults remain grounded in our culture. It is where we gather in extended family and community. Removing our elders from their homes adversely affects our whole tribal community.



On the issue of economic investment and development, the Circle discussed how having codes can create pathways to both. Honest investors, developers, and contractors welcome codes. They want to know that their investment and work are held to clear and established standards. Some public and private funding may require that there be established construction standards. Recognizing the sovereignty of tribal nations, those established standards are set by the tribe and should, as an exercise of tribal sovereignty, be recorded in writing. As stated earlier, economic investment and development are futile if the results are poorly constructed, unsafe, and unhealthy homes, workplaces, community centers, and schools.



WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

On the issue of workforce development, the Circle discussed how having codes can create good-paying careers and how today's skill tradespeople are tomorrow's contractors and developers. The attendees included those who joined the skilled trades and became building inspectors for their own tribes and are now mentoring younger tribal members. Having codes and having those codes administered by members of their own community has been empowering for both the tribal and tribal members. I also shared my family's journey starting with my parents not having the opportunity to finish high school and both working multiple low pay jobs to support eight children in a one-and-a-half-bedroom apartment. That all changed when my father got into the electrical apprenticeship program. With a good-paying career we moved to a house, and I was able to go to college and law school. Within a generation, the electrical apprentice's son became the building commissioner of the third largest city in the nation. In August 2024, there were 328,000 open construction jobs. Only 1.5% of the construction workforce is Native American. Workforce development is not a one-person program, it is a program to create generational blessings.

As sovereign tribal nations, the Circle was clear that building codes must enhance not diminish tribal sovereignty. In looking at building codes, the discussion was having the codes fit the respective tribal needs and traditions and not having the tribes fit the codes. The value of model codes is that the tribe has 100% control over what they may want to take, leave, amend, or customize from the model codes, including setting provisions specific to tribal customs and traditions. The process is in fact an exercise in tribal sovereignty. Providing building standards for work on tribal land and holding developers and contractors accountable is also an exercise of tribal sovereignty. The model codes offer options, flexibility, adaptability, and are regularly updated to include the latest technologies, innovations, and best practices, all of which can be incorporated into tribal codes at the sole discretion of the tribe. Model codes are not a tool to limit tribal sovereignty, just the opposite they are an additional tool to promote and exercise tribal sovereignty.



DEVELOPING A SENSE OF COMMUNITY



This summit was just a start, and the Circle is meant to grow. As Matthew Beaudet said in the Closing Prayer "The Creator has taught us for generations that we all strive when we share our knowledge and labor and harvest with each other and in doing so we create sustenance for the next generations. It is called a Journey for a reason, and we ask the Creator to grant us patience, resolve and collaboration on this Journey."





Community
Aging
Intera
Youth
Cultu
Aders
Transi
Famili
Langu



- 1) Building codes improve 'investability' of a structure (home)
- 2) List of tribes w/ or pursuing codes that would benefit from more mortgage lending
- 3) Connections to housing decision makers



Family Assets
generations
ability
Opportunity
ts +
ement
th community
aiding
on



Protecting family asset

Community Health
• ADA Compliance
• Safety
Asset M
• Capital
• Resident

