



## Utah Diné Bikéyah

- a non-profit supporting Native Tribes working together to **Protect Bears Ears** -

[www.utahdinebikeyah.org](http://www.utahdinebikeyah.org)

[info@utahdinebikeyah.org](mailto:info@utahdinebikeyah.org)

(385) 202-4954

FB @UtahDineBikeyah | Twitter @UtahDineBikeyah | Instagram @ProtectBearsEars

### **San Juan County Has a Race Problem - Who Can Help?**

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Contact – Alastair Lee Bitsóí: (917) 202-8308

**BEARS EARS NATIONAL MONUMENT** – Discrimination, prejudices, and racism are hard topics in San Juan County. **“As a matter of fact, racism exists,”** says **Utah Diné Bikéyah (UDB) Board Chairman Davis Filfred (Diné)**.

For many in San Juan County, this sensitive reality is hard to acknowledge, and can only be recounted through personal lived experiences. The latest example of this is a ballot initiative that could potentially restructure the San Juan County Commission.

**“This fact is undeniable. The question is what can we do about racism, discrimination and prejudices?”** said UDB board chairman **Davis Filfred**, who has lived in San Juan County most of his life.

On August 20th, the mayors of Blanding and Monticello and three other San Juan County, Utah residents succeeded in placing this issue or studying new structures for the County Commission on the November 4th ballot. In a political move, they have appointed themselves to determine who would serve on the study committee if the ballot initiative passes. This appears to be yet another attempt to get rid of the three current electoral commission districts and gerrymander the county districts back in favor of Anglo residents.

Cross cultural dynamics have created social, economic, and cultural divides in San Juan County, particularly when it comes to fair and democratic representation on the San Juan County Commission. **“A lack of communication and understanding between the white demographic in the north and the Native American-majority in the southern portion of the county is unhealthy, and needs to be addressed with equitable solutions to facilitate listening and ensure the safety of all citizens in the county,”** added Filfred.

The mission and vision of UDB is to “bring healing to the people and the Earth” in the work we do to elevate Native voices, and protect public lands and natural resources. The healing that UDB encourages stems from spiritual healing through cultural connections to ancestral lands. UDB teaches what we call “assertive and active healing,” which is the act of identifying and removing the root of a problem. In this context, this requires a call to action to end the discrimination, prejudices and racism that exists in its many forms in San Juan County. This

form of assertive and active healing mandates that we try to understand the root cause of the recent and frequent attempts to remove Native Americans from office as well as denying us fundamental human rights that nearly all other Americans enjoy such as access to water, electricity, and other basic government services.

One of the first steps to heal this divide in the county is to first understand the definitions of racism, discrimination, prejudice, as well as power and privilege, and to understand how and why each of our cultures (white and Native) believes that they have been, or are being oppressed.

Filfred cites a [structural racism memo](#) as an example of efforts to heal the cultural divide in San Juan County. The educational memo helps non-Native individuals understand how stacked the world is against Native Americans. Additional efforts such as the February 2019 legislative proposal sponsored by Utah Rep. Phil Lyman to split San Juan County by race and class, known as H.B. 93, is perceived as adding insult to long-standing injury in San Juan County. This is one of many efforts non-Native county residents have come up with to either remove Native Americans from power, and go back to how things used to be before Native Americans started voting and speaking up. We live in a democracy, and it is hard to comprehend why Native Americans who are the majority, cannot be given a chance to provide fair and equal county governance to all county citizens, Filfred noted.

Another possible solution for San Juan County is requiring informational sessions on [Cultural Sensitivity Training](#), adds UDB Board Member Mary Benally (Hopi/Diné). The Cultural Sensitivity Training that UDB and other groups offer, may be useful to San Juan County employees and residents who may have never had to understand how Native American culture functions. These trainings, which have been provided to more than 300 people this past year, has been critical for non-Indigenous Peoples to learn more about Native American lifeways, customs, and differences among Tribes.

**“Anglo residents in San Juan County have learned that when dealing with conflict-avoiding cultures like the Ute or Diné peoples, who live according to principles of reciprocity, that aggressive, intimidating, loud and bullying behaviors work,” Benally said. “In most other border towns, Native Americans are treated respectfully, but in Blanding we are treated like outsiders.”**

Benally also recalls how Cleal Bradford, resident in San Juan County and founder of San Juan Foundation, employed strategies and cultural sensitivities that helped him better serve Native Americans.

Utah Diné Bikéyah is calling on outside leaders and experts for help in convening a facilitated dialogue to bridge the cultural divide in San Juan County. Ideally, we believe leaders from the Tribes, the church of Latter-Day Saints and the State of Utah need to facilitate a neutral process to help the county heal, through listening, and learning the cultural norms that create these unnecessary conflicts. There is no reason why disagreements should persist, and the problem is that levels of trust are very low across cultures, and communication opportunities are infrequent.

**“Native, state and county leaders need to assemble as soon as possible,” Filfred said, as a call to action. “UDB believes we must find a way to bring white people and Native people together in the county. Level heads must prevail, and the most challenging thing is that every week new threats and policies are advanced that threaten the vision and future that local people on both sides are striving to create.”**

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