

Congressman Visits Pemayetv Emahakv *Charter School Hosts Rep. Mahoney*

By Susan Etxebarria

BRIGHTON — On a tour of the 16th District of Florida, stretching from the East Coast to Highlands County, U.S. Representative Tim Mahoney visited the new Pemayetv Emahakv Charter School on Aug. 27.

The school, built and operated by the Seminole Tribe of Florida, is a state-of-the-art education facility serving kindergarten through fifth grade Brighton students. It offers a groundbreaking advanced immersion program to teach and retain the culture and language of the Seminoles.

Rep. Mahoney was on a whirlwind tour of the district during an August Congressional recess. At the last minute he made the trip to Brighton, even though it was not on his original agenda — and he said he was amazed.

“This blows me away,” Mahoney told school administrators. “I don’t know what I expected but this is very special. I commend the Tribe and everyone involved.”

Mahoney, accompanied by an entourage of aides, was escorted around the school campus to see the many newly constructed classrooms, offices and cafeteria. The representative also was accompanied by the school’s Assistant Administrator Michele Thomas, Assistant Director of Education Emma Brown, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Charter School Sandra Barker and Brighton Board Representative Johnnie Jones. Principal Russ Brown and Education Director Louise Gopher were in meetings elsewhere at the time of the unexpected visit.

Glades County lawyer and Tribal attorney Travis Trueblood brought the VIP to the reservation after Representative Mahoney expressed interest in a tour. Mahoney told his hosts that he is very fond of Brighton. He said he brought his daughter to Brighton’s rodeo grounds on many occasions when she was attended barrel racing clinics for teen rodeo. He said he really enjoyed pulling in his horse rig and staying the day.

In the brief hour he had for a visit, Mahoney took time to speak with teachers and staff, especially culture class teachers and their aides. He saw Creek language letters and words on walls and heard from Tribal leaders how their crisis of losing their native language must be turned around. Thomas, and other adults, talked to him about how their grandparents speak the native tongue, but not many of their offspring. The language resurrected has become one of the major goals of the Tribe.

Michele Thomas also explained to the visiting politician that a high percentage of Brighton adults, and their parents, went through grade school and high school only learning English, and many went on to college. As youth they had to adapt to the outer world and their Tribal language was forgotten. She poured out a persuasive speech tying the importance of teaching their native language to the survival of the Tribe.

“Our Tribe can’t think of a better way to use Tribal resources than to educate our children,” said Thomas.

Thomas explained that the Tribe’s Culture Department and Education Department staff members attend special classes and workshops to be qualified to teach the language. The teaching of legends, tales, and traditional arts, passed on through sacred Tribal authority, are authentic, real and valuable, she said.

“I really appreciate the opportunity to tour; I am very impressed,” said Mahoney. “Your Seminole children need to be proud of who they are and where they come from. The Seminole Tribe has such a rich culture and history. You contribute much to the state of Florida.”

Emma Brown told Mahoney that the students are very happy they don’t have to board a 6:30 a.m. school bus and ride to Okeechobee. Now, the school bus comes about 7:30 a.m. Brown said about

95 percent of the Brighton Tribal youth are attending Pema'yetyv Emahakv Charter School and that the parents are very excited.

Sandra Barker explained to Mahoney that the charter school is providing training at each grade level in computer usage. Older classes will learn how to do podcasting, a new and important skill in the internet world. Today people often podcast events and send them to the news desk at CNN, and other TV stations around the world. Podcasts are often found on social networking websites, like Facebook and YouTube. To be aired, though, a pod cast must be high quality.

“Our children will be learning the best technology out there,” Barker said.

In addition, Mahoney learned that the school also is utilizing a specialized reading and writing program that has recognition nationally for its excellence; and that physical education classes are held 45 minutes a day with swimming classes included in the curriculum.

Mahoney told the administrators and Brighton Board Representative Johnnie Jones that the school enriches not only Brighton, but Glades County as a whole. Mahoney promised to do anything he can on behalf of the school, and its students, including having a special awards ceremony at the Capitol Building or arranging a congressional tour of Washington, DC.

Mahoney is getting used to cameras flashing in his eyes after serving eight months in his first term in Congress. Most of his stops on touring the district were political. He was asked many questions and what he is doing in Washington, D.C. to represent his constituents. However, the trip to the school was different. He didn't make speeches but listened intently to all the information he received.

Before leaving Pema'yetyv Emahakv, CEO Sandra Barker, presented Mahoney with a school T-shirt and the commemorative issue of *The Seminole Tribune* recently published in honor of the Tribe's 50th Anniversary. Then, he graciously agreed to stand out in the hot sun with his hosts for a photo of him with the school in the background. That final photo shot at the end of the tour was the idea of Board Representative Johnnie Jones.

“We are growing at Brighton,” he said. “This is one big step. It is bigger and better for us than casinos.”



Pema'yetyv Emahakv CEO Sandra Barker, Asst. Director of Education Emma Brown, Brighton Board Rep. Johnnie Jones, U.S. Rep. Tim Mahoney, Assistant Administrator Michele Thomas.



Asst. Director of Education Emma Brown and the school's CEO Sandra Barker (l) present Mahoney with gifts