



SAINT REGIS MOHAWK TRIBE CASE STUDY

Overview

The Saint Regis Mohawk Tribe (SRMT) is in northern New York within the community of Akwesasne, a reservation spanning across both the United States and Canada. SRMT exercises sovereignty in the enactment and enforcement of its codes, with authority derived from Tribal Council and codified through Tribal ordinances. Today, SRMT uses New York State building codes as the basis for its regulatory framework. These codes are then implemented and enforced by tribally certified inspectors. Code enactment and enforcement are central to improving community safety, supporting economic development, and ensuring resilient housing for future generations.



Foundation – courtesy of St Regis Mohawk Tribe (THPO)

Code Enactment

SRMT's interest in enacting building codes began in the late 1990s. After severe storms, flooding damaged homes that had not been built to any recognized standard. Because of this, many families could not qualify for FEMA disaster relief. Tribal leaders decided to pursue stronger building requirements to increase safety for residents and to ensure access to outside resources. The Tribal Council passed an ordinance in 1999 establishing SRMT's authority to enact and enforce building codes.

Then, around 2006, SRMT decided to majorly expand the Akwesasne Mohawk Casino. Due to the scale of this project, Tribal leaders wanted to oversee the development on their own terms while still meeting insurance requirements. In 2008, Tribal Council amended its earlier ordinance to formally enact the New York State Uniform Fire Prevention and Building Code as Tribal law. The resolution also ensured that the Tribal Code would update when the state code updated. Simultaneously, SRMT trained its own staff to enforce the codes. Staff completed the state's code enforcement training program and became Tribal Code Enforcement Officers. This gave SRMT the ability to manage tasks like permitting and inspections all in-house.

Code implementation began with tribally owned projects (like the casino) and expanded over the years to include tribally supported housing and loan programs. Today,

SRMT's Compliance Office coordinates permitting and inspections in collaboration with the Planning & Infrastructure Office and the Home Improvement Division. Alongside these teams, the Tribal Historic

Preservation Office (THPO) reviews proposals and conducts field research to identify burial grounds or other cultural sites. THPO then issues clearance letters and advises relevant departments on potential cultural impacts. This interdepartmental approach ensures that projects meet requirements while still staying in touch with community needs and protecting areas of cultural significance.

Their phased approach unfolded like this:

- First three years: focused on 100% tribally owned and operated buildings
- Following five years: expanded to tribally supported projects, such as housing initiatives and facilities with Tribal financing.
- Next fifteen years: extended further through loan programs, which required compliance as a condition for financing.
- Today: community members are reaching out on their own, seeking guidance and permits to bring their homes into compliance.

This approach gave SRMT the ability to build internal expertise while expanding code coverage, all without overextending resources.

Impacts

Since enacting building codes, SRMT has seen steady improvements in their built environment. Over the years, codes have raised standards for construction across the reservation, making homes and facilities safer, consistent in quality, and built to last. The foundation codes provide allow SRMT to plan for the future knowing its housing and infrastructure will serve the community for years to come.

One of the most recent impacts has been in energy. The Akwesasne Housing Authority now operates a 617-kW solar array that powers Tribal buildings and offsets costs for 70 low-income households. Also, SRMT has launched a Net Zero initiative to ensure new housing and community buildings are designed with sustainability at the forefront.

The enactment of codes has also allowed SRMT to strengthen essential programs like the Housing Improvement Program, which has upgraded more than 600 homes over three decades. Additionally, codes have helped SRMT prepare for new opportunities such as the Tribal Home Electrification and Appliance Rebate Program. In this way, codifying standards has not only improved construction practices but also positioned SRMT to bring in new resources and expand programs that benefit the Akwesasne community as a whole.



Trusses – courtesy of St Regis Mohawk Tribe (THPO)

Challenges

Although SRMT has made significant progress and improvements with their codes, they still face obstacles. Considering housing, many homes were built prior to code enactment, and a considerable number need major repairs or renovations. Families may stay in older houses that fall short of current safety standards and limited housing options leave few alternatives.

Capacity is another ongoing challenge. SRMT has invested in training Tribal staff as certified inspectors, but the demand for code officials and similar work continues to grow. Codes are most effective if there are people on the ground to implement them, and that requires sustained interest and investment.

Finally, code enforcement itself requires balance. Community trust is paramount. SRMT's staff emphasized the need to apply codes in a way that supports families rather than punishing them. In practice, this means engaging with community members to come to solutions that improve safety while still recognizing the realities of housing shortages and limited budgets.



Concrete pour – courtesy of St Regis Mohawk Tribe (THPO)

Lessons Learned and Opportunities

- Starting small works. SRMT applied codes to its own projects first, then to supported housing, and later to other programs. By taking a phased approach, the process was manageable and easier for the community to accept.
- Investing in staff pays off. Training local staff as inspectors gave the SRMT control over enforcement and reduced dependence on outside officials. That knowledge now stays in the community.
- Teamwork makes the system stronger. Departments work closely together, so reviews and inspections happen as a team instead of separately. This prevents delays, solves problems earlier, and gives residents more support.
- Trust is part of enforcement. Staff apply codes with the goal of keeping the community safe. Working with residents has helped increase understanding of codes and allowed for programs to grow.
- Energy is the next big step. The solar array, net-zero housing, and the upcoming rebate program show how codes can support sustainability and lower costs.

Learn more about the Saint Regis Mohawk Tribe – www.srmt-nsn.gov/about