

Selwyn Whiteskunk unofficially elected as new Ute Mountain Ute chairman

A White Mesa representative wins against the incumbent, while two Towaoc candidates tied and a councilman is reelected

By Benjamin Rubin Journal Staff Writer

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A small video thumbnail showing a person sitting at a desk with multiple computer monitors. The person is wearing a dark shirt and appears to be working on a laptop. The monitors show various screens, possibly related to the news article.

A large, light blue circular button with a dark blue play triangle in the center, used for playing the video.

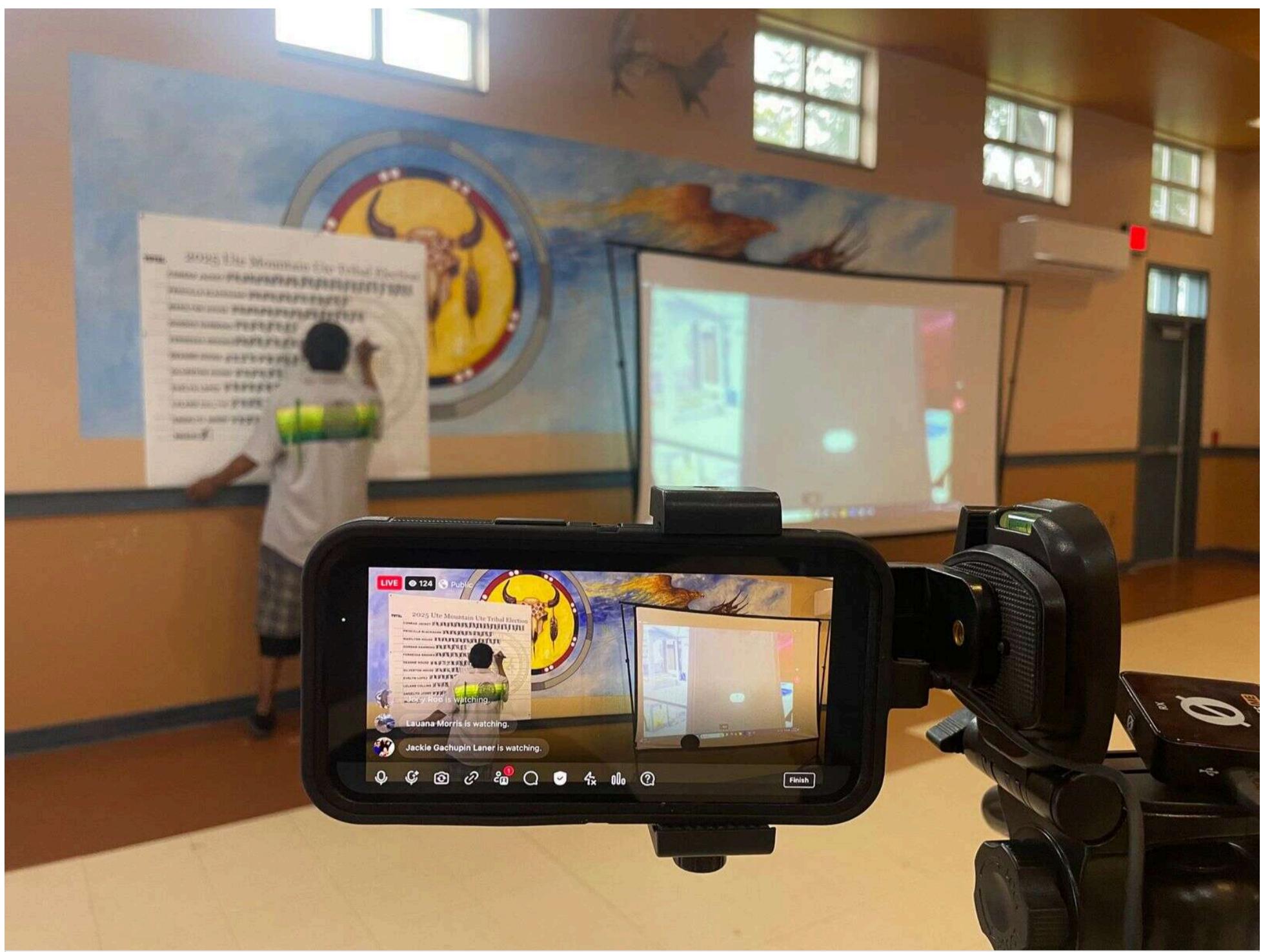
Listen Now: Selwyn Whiteskunk unofficially elected as new Ute Mountain Ute chairman

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As a camera livestreams the ballot counts, a tally maker for the Election Board marks off each vote for Towaoc candidates in the Ute Mountain Ute general election on Friday, Oct. 10. (Benjamin Rubin/The Journal)



“It’s a new council,” said Conrad Jacket, an incumbent representative to the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe in a livestream shortly after unofficially being reelected to the Tribal Council in the Friday, Oct. 10, election.

Leadership changes are underway. Jacket’s remarks reflect the shift in leadership. According to unofficial election results, the more than 2,000-member sovereign nation has chosen Selwyn Whiteskunk, with 156 out of 504 votes, to lead as the new chairman as longtime Chairman Manuel Heart steps aside. Heart has served nearly three decades on the Tribal Council, including about half that time as chairman.

“We’re going to review all policies that have been in place for the last three years,” Whiteskunk, who has been a councilor and a chairman, told The Journal. Whiteskunk underscored the importance of relationship-building with federal and local governments, especially to ensure funding for the benefit of Utes. He added that this could require making compromises at times.



Current Chairman Manuel Heart (left) next to the unofficial newly elected chairman, Selwyn Whiteskunk after the Ute Mountain Ute election results are announced on Friday, Oct. 10. A transition from leadership is set to take place between the two men, who have worked together on the Tribal Council for years. (Benjamin Rubin/The Journal)



Another longtime public servant for the Utes will also step down. Malcolm Lehi, a councilman for the tribe's White Mesa satellite reservation in southeastern Utah since 2013, was defeated by Gwen Cantsee, who received 49 votes to Lehi's 15, according to unofficial results.

But one Towaoc council seat remains uncertain: candidates Marilynn House and Evelyn Lopez each received 116 votes from 830. The two candidates will have until noon on Wednesday, Oct. 15, to either call for a recount or request a runoff election, said Election Board Chairperson Constance Wall.

Newly elected officials will be sworn in on Nov. 7, according to the tribe's constitution.

The change in leadership among the four seats comes as the tribe grapples with numerous challenges, including housing, health care, economic development, education, water rights, land use and the preservation of cultural traditions – all while navigating the fast-paced politics of the federal government.

Chairman results (unofficial)

Selwyn Whiteskunk - 156 (unofficial winner)

Darwin Whiteman Jr. - 109

Archie House Jr. - 146

Anthony Bancroft - 93

Towaoc Councilmember results (unofficial)

Conrad Jacket - 154 (unofficial winner)

Marilynn House - 116 (tied)

Evelyn Lopez - 116 (tied)

Priscilla Blackhawk - 85

Deanne House - 59

Silverton House - 39

Fernessa Brooks - 95

Leland Collins - 72

Gordan Hammond - 51

Angelita Berry - 34

White Mesa Councilmember results (unofficial)

Gwen Cantsee - 49 (unofficial winner)

Malcolm Lehi - 15

Inside the Towaoc Community Center on Election Day

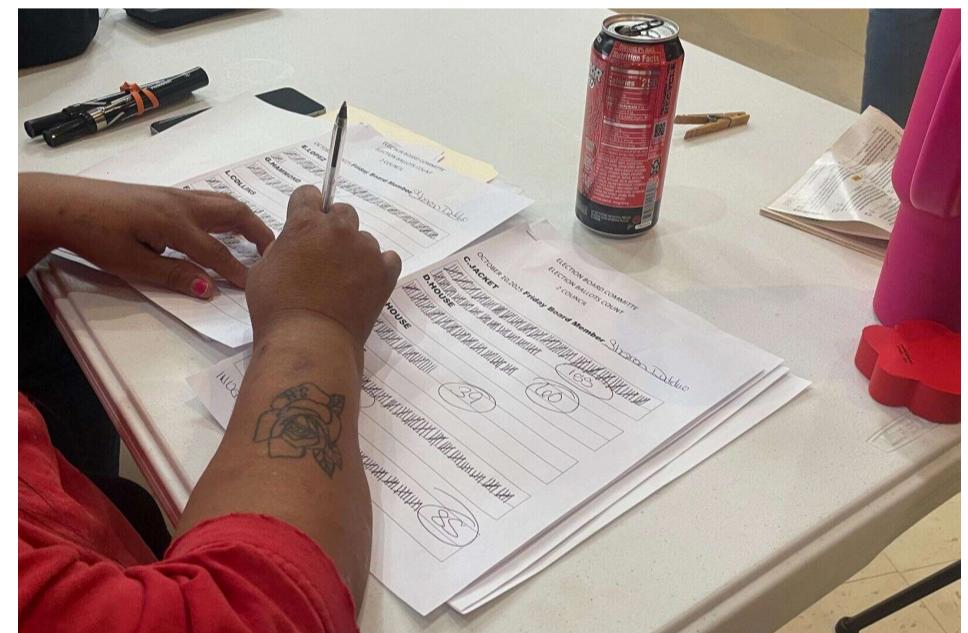
Ballot counts were conducted differently this year amid a tense political environment on the reservation. After voting from 7 a.m. to 1 p.m., the doors of the Towaoc Community Center closed to the public as officials opted to stay cautious.

Over the course of about four hours, officials with the Election Board diligently counted the ballots one at a time, while the Ute Mountain Ute media team, Weenuche Smoke Signals, livestreamed the counts and presented each individual ballot before a camera. By about 2:30 p.m., ballots arrived from the White Mesa community. Counters appeared focused as the rising tallies went almost entirely uninterrupted. A small number of invalid ballots were set aside.

As the hours passed, a quiet sustained the room. What could be heard was little more than the building's hum, the crinkling of unfurled ballot pages from the transparent ballot boxes, the repeated naming of 16 candidates indicating each vote and the squeak of a marker tallying off each running tribal member.



The Election Board counts ballots while the Ute Mountain Ute Media Department, known as Weenuche Smoke Signals, livestreams the election results on Friday, Oct. 10. (Benjamin Rubin/The Journal)



An additional tally maker counts votes for the Ute Mountain Ute general election on Friday, Oct. 10. (Benjamin Rubin/The Journal)

Leaders speak of change after election results

After the ballot count concluded at about 5 p.m., unofficial winners and current tribal leaders appeared before the livestreamed camera to thank the voters, the candidates and everyone involved in the election process. Unofficially elected Chairman Whiteskunk thanked the Creator.

All who spoke offered words on what the future holds.

Current Chairman Heart said he looks forward to "what the new leadership has to hold for the future of the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe from youngest and oldest, on and off the reservation."

New projects and an upcoming budget are underway for the tribe, Heart said.

Councilor Alston Turtle spoke of finding unity after a period of division. He described an endeavor to cultivate more communication between tribal leaders and constituents.

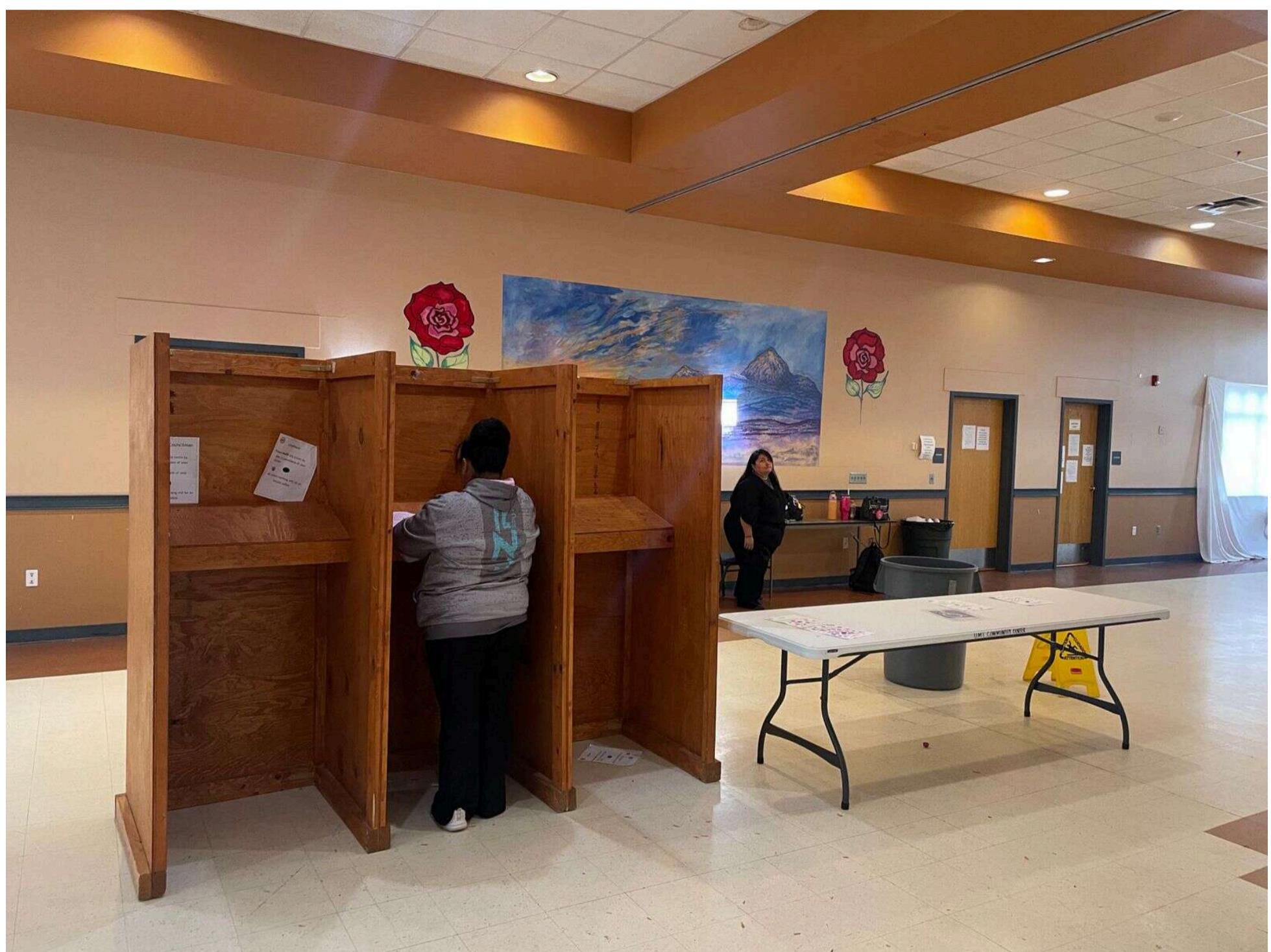
"I know within this election period we all had our differences and we all had our challenges among one another," Turtle said. "Now we get the work done and we move forward," he said.

"We're all here on the same team. We're all Ute Mountain Ute tribal members and we as the Tribal Council are elected by the tribal members out there."

"My hope is that with the new council coming in, we all work together with only one in mind: and that's to take care of the people and the land," said Councilmember Kathryn Jacket, adding native Ute to some of her words.

Chairman-elect Whiteskunk said the work of the Tribal Council would start shortly after new officials are sworn in.

"We'll hit the ground running to pick up and improve the quality of life," said Whiteskunk.



A tribal member casts a ballot in the final moments of voting during the Ute Mountain Ute general election on Friday, Oct. 10. Doors closed to the public shortly afterward amid a tense political environment on the reservation leading up to the vote. (Benjamin Rubin/The Journal)



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