

Comanches hope to acquire building lease for museum

LAWTON, Okla. (AP)—The Lawton City Council may act upon a lease agreement with the Comanche Nation that would allow them to open the Comanche National Museum and Archive in a building.

The Comanche Business Committee approved a lease agreement this week between the tribe, the Percussive Arts Society and the City of Lawton.

"We'll finally have a museum, which tribal members have been asking for for 20 or more years," said John Plata, tribal lawyer.

The agreement will require the tribe to pay the Percussive Arts Society \$250,000 for all

rights to the existing lease.

The agreement also requires a one-time \$100,000 donation to the City of Lawton for biking, walking and running trails around the community, officials said.

In return, the Comanche Nation will be able to occupy the building rent-free for the remainder of the existing lease agreement, including all lease extensions. The Percussive Arts Society, which is moving to Indianapolis, has a 99-year lease, which includes an option to extend the lease an additional 99 years.

The tribe has wanted a place to archive and display their arti-

facts, Plata said. Plans include cataloging artifacts and opening an office that deals solely with Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) issues, officials said.

Plata said if all goes well at the council meeting on Tuesday, things should move forward very quickly in a way that will benefit the tribe and the city.

"It (the museum) fits in with the city's downtown renovation project," he said.

Officials hope the doors to the museum will be opened and some exhibits placed on display for the Comanche Nation Fair in September 2007.

Girlfriend named in death of former Colville tribal chairman

SPOKANE, Wash. (AP) — Jude Clarence "Jude" Stensgar Sr., a former chairman of the Colville Confederated Tribal Business Council Chairman, is dead, and his girlfriend told the FBI she shot him in self-defense.

Stensgar, 77, was fatally shot Nov. 27 at his home in Inchelium, and his death was reported to tribal police by his girlfriend, Lisa Denobrega, 46, a tribal member also known as Lisa Trevino, according to an affidavit for a search warrant filed in U.S. District Court.

In the warrant, FBI Agent Wesley Floyd wrote that Denobrega told tribal police she opened fire after Stensgar tried to choke her during an argument. She was wiping up blood near the head of Stensgar, who was lying in a hallway, when officers arrived and directed them to a pistol in the living room, Floyd added.

Investigators have taken a .357-caliber Magnum pistol, a .22-caliber rifle, spent shell casings and a "dream catcher" decoration with a bullet in it as potential evidence, according to the affidavit.

The document indicated Denobrega is under investigation for first-degree murder. The FBI is handling the probe because the shooting occurred on an Indian reservation.

Stensgar, a native of Inchelium on the eastern end of the sprawling reservation, spent 20 years in the Air Force before retiring as a technical sergeant and returning to the reservation in 1971. He served on the tribal council for 18 years during the 1980s and '90s and was chairman in 1989.

A funeral Mass was held Dec. 4 at the Inchelium Community Center.

Cherokee leader forgoes Indian governor

OKLAHOMA CITY (AP)—The former chief of the Cherokee Nation believes the time will come when an American Indian serves as governor of Oklahoma.

"Someone just needs to step up," former Cherokee Nation Principal Chief Wilma Mankiller said.

Mankiller, 61, was formally sworn in as chief of the country's second-largest tribe on Dec. 15, 1985. Since she retired in 1995, Mankiller has been asked more than once to run for Oklahoma's 2nd Congressional District seat, now held by Rep. Dan Boren, D-Muskogee. She always declines.

"It's just not in my way of thinking. My vision, my life is in the tribe," she said.

As Oklahoma's centennial approaches, Mankiller said state-tribal relations are improving, although a certain tension is unavoidable because of questions of jurisdiction, tax authority and gaming.

"I'm hopeful in the future there will be more of a partnership," she said.

Mankiller said it will be hard for her to celebrate the centennial because "that period of time was so tragic and so difficult for so many of the tribes."

Instead, she sees the centennial as an opportunity to educate people about Indian contributions to the state, historically and now.

When Mankiller governed the Cherokee Nation, it had about 140,000 enrolled members, an annual budget of more than \$75 million and about 1,200 employees. Bingo was the tribe's only form of gaming.

Today, Principal Chief Chad Smith presides over a tribe of more than 232,000 members and a \$377 million annual budget fueled largely by seven casinos.

"We came to gaming a little late," Mankiller said. "We tend to be a little cautious, and we took our time deciding how we wanted to do it, whether we wanted to do it and where we wanted to do it."

She thinks the move, while controversial, was the right one because it gave the tribe an un-

restricted revenue stream.

"It allows them, for the first time, to set their own priorities," she said.

While an honored guest at many Cherokee functions, Mankiller said she is "almost never" asked to advise the current administration.

"I don't want to muck around in what they're doing. Our management styles are probably different," she said.

At the time she assumed office, she was the first female chief of a major tribe and one of only 83 female tribal leaders among 550 federally recognized tribes. Today there are about 130.

Economic growth fueled by gaming has allowed tribes to expand services, and many women have stepped in to head those programs, creating a pipeline into tribal leadership, she said.

"They get good experience as administrators. That's what happened to me," said Mankiller, who was the founding director of the Cherokee Nation Community Development Department.

U.S. government intervenes in Indian voting case

CHEYENNE, Wyo. (AP)—The U.S. Department of Justice is intervening in a federal lawsuit in which five American Indians are challenging Fremont County's system of holding at-large elections. The department filed notice Thursday that it is intervening in the case for the limited purpose of defending the constitutionality of the federal Voting Rights Act.

Five members of the Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapaho tribes, represented by the American Civil Liberties Union, sued Fremont County last year. They claim the county's system of holding at-large elections violates Voting Rights Act by impermissibly diluting the American Indian vote.

The Mountain States Legal Foundation, based in Lakewood, Colo., is defending Fremont County. In its answer to the lawsuit filed late last year, the foundation argued that it would be unconstitutional to hold Fremont County to the section of the Voting Rights Act which prohibits practices that dilute minority voting.

Fremont County Attorney Ed Newell on Friday referred questions to the Mountain States Legal Foundation, but efforts to reach lawyers there were unsuccessful.

In its notice of intervention filed in the lawsuit this week, the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice stated that the United States has a right to intervene in any lawsuit in which the constitutionality of federal laws is questioned.

Laughlin McDonald, director of the ACLU's Voting Rights Project in Atlanta, said Friday that he believes abolishing at-large elections would help everyone in Fremont County.

"I think if we succeed in this suit, nobody loses," McDonald said. "If we succeed, and if we get a system that allows all the groups in that county to participate in that process, that really fulfills the premise of democracy."

McDonald said the lawsuit is set for trial in February before U.S. District Judge Alan Johnson in Lander.

Federal appeals courts have already rejected Mountain States Legal Foundation's argument that the Voting Rights Act is unconstitutional in a Montana case. The U.S. Supreme Court ultimately declined to review that case.

In last month's general election, Fremont County voters elected Keja Whiteman, a member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa, to one of

three open seats on the county commission in an at-large election. The ACLU announced that it would continue with its lawsuit nonetheless.

"It frequently happens that minorities won't get elected until a lawsuit is filed, it's happened in a number of cases," McDonald said, adding that the fact that a minority person was elected didn't resolve the issue.

Fremont County Attorney Newell last month told The (Riverton) Ranger newspaper that Whiteman's election "a great thing for Fremont County."

Newell said Whiteman's election was proof that the county "isn't full of racists who vote along racial lines." And he said he believes Whiteman's success has weakened the ACLU's case.

"The entire premise of that lawsuit was an American Indian couldn't get elected, and this is clear proof that premise is false," Newell said. "She clearly got support from many Republicans and non-Indians to win like she did. She deserved to get elected, and she did."

In a field of six candidates, Whiteman received 6,422 votes—more than 18 percent of all votes cast. She won four of the six precincts in Lander, where most of the voters are not American Indians.

Hurdle cleared for Catskill casino

MONTICELLO, N.Y. (AP)—A proposed Mohawk casino in the Catskills received environmental approval from federal officials, bringing the long-delayed \$600 million project a step closer to reality, tribal representatives said Friday.

The Interior Department approved an environmental review of the St. Regis Mohawk Indian tribe's

project, said tribal spokeswoman Leslie Logan. That means the agency found the proposed casino on 30 acres next to Monticello Gaming and Raceway in Sullivan County would not have a significant environmental impact.

"It's a terrific Christmas gift for the tribe," Logan said. "That's how we're feeling."

The Mohawks, whose reservation straddles the U.S.-Ca-

nadian border, are among a number of groups that have been trying to build a casino in the Borscht Belt for years. Proponents say casino gambling will bring back tourists to an area where big old hotels sit boarded up.

Rep. Maurice Hinchey, D-Hurley, said Friday the casino would bring thousands of construction jobs and then employ thousands more.

Indian education act headed for Legislature

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — A state Indian Education Act would guarantee a long-term commitment to American Indian students, according to state Secretary of Education Rick Melmer.

"The Indian population is growing in our state," Melmer said. "We recognize it as a significant part of our population today in our schools. It will only grow in the future."

Melmer began previewing the proposed legislation with Indian education leaders throughout the state the past week. Melmer discussed it Thurs-

day at a Rapid City forum that included Keith Moore, the state director of Indian education, and Stacy Phelps, of Oglala Lakota College.

The legislation would ensure the continuation of duties that the Department of Education is already handling and adds other duties necessary to improve Indian education, Melmer said.

It would authorize the Office of Indian Education and an advisory council on Indian issues, both of which were created at Gov. Mike Rounds' request in 2003.

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