

## Nebraska tribe leads American Indian business diversification

WINNEBAGO, Neb. (AP) — Rising from the bluffs of eastern Nebraska, on the sparsely populated, historically poor Winnebago Indian reservation, stands a glass-paneled office building.

The out-of-place structure is home to Ho-Chunk Inc., a \$100 million business with more than 500 employees in six states, Mexico, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Ho-Chunk, the economic development arm of the Winnebago Tribe, is similarly remarkable in the world of American Indian business, because its success has little to do with gambling — besides getting seed money from casino revenue.

Employees of one of the company's 16 subsidiaries pose as civilians on faux battlefields in Indiana so U.S. soldiers can hone their combat instincts.

A Ho-Chunk subsidiary in Mexico provides technical support for a new DNA laboratory used in criminal cases. And since 2005, Ho-Chunk subsidiary All Native Systems has had a multimillion dollar contract with the U.S. State Department to provide support for rebuilding Iraq's governmental infrastructure.

Ho-Chunk, derived from a Winnebago term that translates to "The People," is trying to end the cycle of poverty that has plagued many reservations for hundreds of years. In Winnebago, median household income is around \$20,000 and more than 40 percent of people don't make enough to live above

the federal poverty line.

"It's not like we're a rich tribe," said Ho-Chunk CEO Lance Morgan. "We're just one of the best of the poor tribes."

Ho-Chunk is part of a growing trend of diversification by American Indian tribes.

Casino revenue is inherently unstable in many states. Contracts must be renegotiated with each new governor, legal fights over casino issues drain income from tribal budgets and legalized gambling in some states brings new competition.

"Tribes are finding that gaming, while it's been successful for many, it's not the only answer," said Kip Ritchie, a vice president of the economic development arm of the Forest County Potawatomi Community in Wisconsin and touts a portfolio of investments and assets of more than \$26 million.

Ho-Chunk and the Winnebagos are ahead of the game when it comes to sustaining a diversified economy, said Prof. Joseph Kalt, co-director of the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development.

"All these tribes are very much like emerging democracies and developing countries around the world," he said.

Tribes across the country are at different stages of success in diversification, said Peter Homer, president of the National Indian Business Association.

"We are changing a culture that is a very giving culture into a hard-knocking, business-think-

ing," Homer said. "We were horse traders. We never were used to making money and sticking it in our pocket."

U.S. tribes now have more than \$22 billion in annual revenues from gambling, according to government figures.

But casino profits deflated for the Winnebago Tribe after a 1994 Iowa law allowed casinos to be built just across the river from Omaha, a 11/2-hour drive from the Winnebago reservation.

Fortunately, tribal members took \$8 million in casino money in 1994 and 1995 and put it toward a new venture.

Ho-Chunk started out with what Morgan calls "stereotypical Indian business," tobacco and gasoline. It started companies to serve primarily tribal members, then branched out once they were established. The company learned how to obtain federal grants and low-interest loans by taking advantage of its tribal status, setting a model for other tribes to follow.

Ho-Chunk posted revenues of \$111.3 million in 2005, up from \$22.9 million in 2000, and assets have grown to \$39.8 million from \$8 million. It recorded nearly \$691,000 in net profits in 2005.

Ho-Chunk's board of directors acts independently of the tribal council, which keeps short-term political ups and downs from stopping Ho-Chunk's progress, said John Blackhawk, who serves on the tribal council.

Balancing distance with help-

ing people is a problem for some tribes, Kalt said. American Indians in poor communities see for the first time a chance at income — and it's hard to convince them that money generated must be reinvested.

To help maintain the balance, Ho-Chunk helped start the Ho-Chunk Community Development Corp., a nonprofit group that has raised \$11 million since it was founded in 2000 to help improve the Winnebago reservation.

The group's biggest project has been Ho-Chunk Village, a development northeast of town.

A homey village square surrounds a sculpture garden filled with 12 statues representing the original clans of the Winnebago Tribe. A hair salon, art studio, Dollar General store, and an Indian gift store are mixed with the headquarters of several of Ho-Chunk's businesses. Walking trails lead through the village and, along with new roads, connect the houses.

Ho-Chunk wants to keep luring tribal members with a college education and disposable income to Winnebago. But those people, while unlikely to qualify for welfare assistance, still don't have the savings to buy a house.

So the homes are sold at low interest rates with down payment assistance for tribal members, some of whom have never before owned a home.

The key to pulling Winnebago out of poverty is to keep young people from fleeing the reservation, Ho-Chunk leaders say.

## Old Elk remembered for commitment, sense of humor

CROW AGENCY, Mont. (AP) — Crow Tribal Secretary Andrew Old Elk was remembered last week as a well-educated man who valued his culture and wanted prosperity for his tribe.

Old Elk, who devoted much of his career to natural resources and their development on the reservation, died Sunday at a Billings hospital after a heart attack. He was 62.

"Hopefully we can continue his dreams and aspirations for the tribe," Tribal Chairman Carl Venne said to the estimated 800 people gathered.

Lt. Gov. John Bohlinger was among those in attendance, along with numerous dignitaries from federal and state agencies and tribal governments.

Bohlinger called Old Elk a great leader who was well-known throughout the state. He said Old Elk's humor leaves a "rich legacy."

"We all need to live with a sense of hope, and that sense of hope is often found in a sense of humor," Bohlinger said.

Several speakers shared stories about Old Elk's humor and how it was his way of showing compassion and teaching people.

Many also spoke of the value he placed on education. Old Elk graduated from Haskell Institute in Kansas in 1963, and he went on to earn two associate's degrees, a bachelor's degree and a master's degree.

Old Elk's death leaves vacant the tribe's secretary position.

Out of respect, Venne said he waited to begin the election process to fill the position. Old Elk was elected Nov. 6, 2004. His term was to run through 2008.

The Crow Tribal Constitution requires that Venne declare the office vacant. That begins a filing period for candidates. An election will be held within 60 days. If more than two candidates file, a primary election will be held, Venne said.

Old Elk is survived by his wife, a daughter and three sons. He was preceded in death by a son.

## Judge dismisses arguments by casino opponents

GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. (AP) — A federal judge dismissed arguments by opponents of a proposed Indian casino in southwest Michigan, bringing the 304-member Gun Lake tribe a step closer to developing the project.

U.S. District Judge John Penn in Washington ruled late Friday in favor of the Department of the Interior, which intends to take 146 acres in Allegan

County's Wayland Township into trust for the casino.

Michigan Gambling Opposition sued in 2005 to block the government from taking the land into trust. Penn ruled Friday that the anti-casino group "has raised no genuine issues of material fact."

Gun Lake officials said they expected an appeal, but called Penn's ruling a significant step,

The Grand Rapids Press reported Saturday. Once the land is in trust, the tribe can proceed with its plans to build the casino.

"This decision is a cause for great celebration, both for the tribe and the people of West Michigan who dream of economic opportunities and good paying jobs with great benefits," D.K. Sprague, tribal chairman, said in a statement.

## Tribe may build bridge across Salt River

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. (AP) — The Fort McDowell Yavapai Nation is looking at the possibility of constructing a bridge across the Salt River that would connect the Bush and Beeline highways.

Although no plans have been committed to paper, the prospective site of the bridge is near the intersection of the Bush

Highway and Usery Pass Road, across the river to State Route 87, also known as the Beeline Highway.

The bridge would ease the commute of people who work on the Indian Community, said Phil Dorchester, Fort McDowell's acting general manager. It also would make it easier for Fort McDowell's casino, res-

taurants and golf course to draw from the wealth of east Mesa.

If the Fort McDowell Yavapai Nation is serious about this bridge, its next step is to help pay for a feasibility study done by Maricopa County. Such a study would cost \$150,000, with the county paying half.

## Sanders

For instance, he said, the Warm Springs Elementary School has improved drastically as a result of tireless work on the part of the staff.

"We came from a school district that was in last place in the state of Oregon," Sanders said.

Now, however, the school meets the states academic standards but is still lacking in terms of attendance.

According to Sanders, "Because of the cultural diversity in our community, attendance does play a significant part in why we haven't met that standard

yet." Sanders insists he is only a small fraction of the work being done by various organizations in Warm Springs and in Jefferson County—but all have the same goal of promoting educations.

"It's the collective effort of all of us that deal with education in the Warm Springs community," he said.

Sanders also dedicates his time to the local Alcohol and Drug Council.

Focusing on problems like alcohol and drugs, he said, is one way of fixing a much larger problem that involves issues like domestic violence and crime.

"Alcohol and drugs are not the problem," he explained. "It's

a symptom of a problem."

For now, Sanders can rattle off a list of dates and places he will be traveling to in the near future.

In his opinion, it's all part of how he chooses to give back to a community that has given to him.

"There's an obligation that I have to give back to the community," Sanders said.

"I'm very grateful to my boss, Jody Calica, who has allowed me to participate with these things," he added.

As for his constant work with education, Sanders said, "It's a good fit for people who really want to do this."

## Bill to protect archaeological sites

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — A bill that would make it difficult for treasure hunters and looters to raid ancestral burial grounds and other significant archaeological sites in South Dakota received unanimous approval last week in the state Senate.

HB1286 was passed earlier by the House but must be returned for review because of some Senate changes.

Sen. Ed Olson, R-Mitchell, said the bill would seal state records that show the locations of archaeological sites. He said federal law protects such sites on federal property, and the bill would extend that protection to archaeological sites on private property and land owned by the state.

If there is a legitimate need to see the records, such as making sure the path is clear for highway construction, the state archaeologist can release the records on a case-by-case basis, Olson said.

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