

Editorial and Opinion

Willis will leave Executive Office position this fall

By Mark Mercier

Most tribal members will have heard by now that our Executive Officer, Jim Willis, has advised the Tribal Council that he wishes to leave his current post this fall, once the gaming center is on line and some other key projects are complete. The executive function is a crucial one, and with Jim in it, took on new perspectives that had never before been considered important.

Needless to say, during the next few months Tribal Council will be doing some careful planning to determine how to best fill a pair of very big shoes. I want to take this opportunity to discuss the future of the Tribe, and thoughts about Jim Willis' service to the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde.

In November of 1985, when Jim was appointed General Manager, the Tribe was headquartered in the Depot building, with no less than twelve full time employees working. (Mind you, this was less than a decade ago!) At this time, the Tribe has embarked on what was to become the most significant Tribal action since the 1954 Termination Act...the establishment of the Grand Ronde Reservation Plan, a dramatic project to regain some of the original reservation that was lost to the Tribe many years ago. Some of the Tribal Council had termed the years 1985 through 1988 as the "Dark Ages", since the Tribe had faced

severe (and unfair) community opposition and antagonism.

Much of this criticism centered around the Tribe's timber policies, including the controversial BLM land exchange and the never-ending arguments surrounding log exports. Countering this misinformation took hundreds of hours of research and scientific investigation, a task well suited to Jim's background and expertise. Once reviewed, this information then had to be put into layman's terms so that tribal representatives could make effective presentations when discussing the Reservation Plan.

Many will recall that some of these presentations were given under less than cordial conditions, even downright hostile, and a times it became difficult to retain one's sense of dignity and

composure. I recall especially the June, 1986 "town hall" meeting in Willamina. I had little or no public speaking experience at the time, and for a month prior to that meeting, Jim willingly spent hours per day helping me prepare my opening statement.

Besides his work on the Reservation Plan, Jim was instrumental in the expansion of service programs that the Tribe contracted from the BIA, IHS, and other federal agencies. These contracts resulted in added jobs for tribal members, and the subsequent expansion of work space and tribal facilities.

President Reagan signed the public law establishing the Grand Ronde Reservation in September, 1988. Most of us thought that the Tribe would now have some breathing room, and that 1989 would be a restful year. Wrong. Jim and others took on a completely new project that

year—Nanitch Sahallie Youth Treatment Facility. It was completed in March, 1989. The residential treatment center continues as one of the Tribe's most significant contributions to tribes throughout the northwest and Alaska.

As manager of a staff numbering 120, Jim has consistently maintained a long-term view of things. He's helped the Tribe build a solid, effective team and assisted the Tribal Council in putting a solid foundation together on the legislative front, both in Salem and Washington, D.C.

He has allowed his staff to make mistakes, and he stands up and takes responsibility as a manager. Our successes as a Tribe has been our willingness to try new things and take risks, even though mistakes will be made (but seldom repeated). I think this strategy has paid off for us, evidenced by our fine professional staff and our efficiently run organization.

For ten years of his life, Jim Willis has devoted long days, evenings, and weekends to helping our Tribe. We have asked a lot of him, and he's always been up to the task. Looking back over this time, we can find consistent progress across all fronts...and Jim has been deeply involved in all of our steps.

He's been a trusted and valued team member in all our efforts. For many of us, he has been a big

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Thoughts from important figures in Grand Ronde history

Note: Grand Ronde tribal members are not the only ones who respect and revere Jim Willis for the contributions he has made. Here are the comments of some others who have been important players in the Grand Ronde Tribe's achievements.

As many of you know, I have long been a friend and admirer of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde. I remember well the exciting days working with the tribal leaders on the Reservation Act. Jim Willis played a major role in the reservation effort. I remember so well his steady effort as Kathryn Harrison and Mark Mercier and the Tribal Council spearheaded that tremendous event. Jim's energy level and resilience were spectacular. He never wavered and he never diminished his efforts to regain the Tribe's land. The Tribe will miss his brilliant mind, his drive, and his commitment to true Restoration for the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde.

—Elizabeth Furse, Member of Congress

During my tenure in Congress, I have had many unique experiences, one of which was working with the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, and their controversial reservation plan. In 1987, I personally conducted a series of meetings in the West Valley area, at which many people opposed to the establishment of the reservation constantly presented the same arguments of opposition. At these meetings, Jim Willis would jot counter arguments and give them to me, so I could take these sometimes frivolous arguments and shoot holes in them. I was always impressed with Jim's ability to write information down in an easy-to-understand format during pressure situations such as this was. Jim always maintained an air of professionalism at all public meetings in which I participated. The Tribe should be proud of all the accomplishments Jim has made for it over the past years.

—Les AuCoin, Member of Congress 1976-1992

Jim Willis has been a highly respected representative in forums across the country relating to redefining the relationship between tribes and the BIA. For several years he was a co-chair of the regional committee working on BIA reorganization and budget reform. These groups were instrumental in key pieces of national legislation by which the Tribe enjoys many benefits today, such as flexibility, more funding going to tribes, and reduction in paperwork and BIA approvals needed by the Tribe. Jim is well-known and highly respected. His counsel is frequently sought by federal representatives at both regional and national levels.

—Stan Speaks, Portland Area Director, Bureau of Indian Affairs

My first introduction to Jim Willis occurred when he was the Tribal Housing Director back in the days when the entire staff was confined to sharing the small maintenance building at the Tribal Cemetery. Since then, I have had the pleasure of watching the Tribe grow from a "small" to "large" and a very influential tribe. Accompanying this growth has been the development and evolution of a

highly competent staff. The composition of this staff and its successful day-to-day functioning is very much the result of Jim's ability as a successful manager to grow as the Tribe has grown. Having been a consultant to many tribes over the years, I have no doubt that Jim Willis is one of the finest tribal managers in Indian Country today.

—Dennis Petrequin, ASCG, Inc., formerly Cooper Consultants

A letter from the Executive Officer

To Tribal Members:

On April 12, 1995, I notified Tribal Council, by memo, of my intentions to leave my position with the Tribe as Executive Officer in the fall of 1995, hopefully, following the opening of Spirit Mountain Casino.

I made this decision for personal reasons. First, I believe change is inevitable and ultimately good for us all. Second, I believe that after ten years with the Tribe it is appropriate to move on to something else. While that "something else" is not entirely clear, my hope is to take some classes and do some projects of interest to me and to be able to spend significantly more time with my family.

Coming to this decision was not easy. Each year the Tribe makes considerable progress and will continue to do so with visionary leadership, competent staff and a healthy dose of involvement from tribal members. I am proud to have been a part of the Tribe's success and development, and I will always carry that with me. The Tribe has accomplished a lot over the past decade and will accomplish much more in the next.

The next several months will be one of the most complex periods for the Tribe's develop-

ment. With the rehabilitation of the community water system, the construction and completion of the gaming center, the decisions on the use of gaming revenue for the future, planning for a tribal health and wellness center, development of a site use plan for tribal lands, and the implementation of the Strategic Plan, it is vitally important to maintain tribal stability.

For these reasons, I wanted to notify the Tribal Council of my decision early to allow for a thoughtful transition which could include a complete analysis of the Executive Officer position prior to advertising, input from tribal members and staff on the process, and hopefully time for a new person to work directly with me prior to my leaving.

Finally, I want to thank tribal members and staff for the opportunity to be a part of this community for so many years, for the experiences and memories I will keep with me forever and for the many, many things I have learned from all of you over the years. You have truly been the backbone of every accomplishment.

Sincerely,
Jim Willis, Executive Officer