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Robert Watson brings wealth of experience to Spirit Mountain Casino

■ Former state corrections chief is no stranger to casino operations.

When the Spirit Mountain Gaming Inc., board tapped Robert J. Watson as interim chief executive officer and president of Spirit Mountain Casino, it was the second time the Grand Ronde Tribe had turned to Watson's leadership.

The Tribe drew on Watson's experience as head of the state corrections departments in Oregon and Delaware to take over as its top gaming regulator when it decided to establish Spirit Mountain Casino.

"The dedicated and capable staff at Spirit Mountain Casino has made it the premier casino in the Northwest and Oregon's favorite attraction," Watson said. "I'm proud to have this chance to be more closely associated with them and to be of service to my Tribe."

The board named Watson, an enrolled member of the Grand Ronde Tribe, to lead the Casino after Bruce Thomas resigned last month to work for Spirit Mountain Management & Consulting Inc., another Grand Ronde tribal enterprise. Watson is overseeing the day-to-day operations of the casino and its 1,500-person workforce while the board conducts a national search to fill the top casino job. Watson is taking a leave of absence from his post as chair of the Grand Ronde Gaming Commission and plans to return in about six months.

"I will spend the upcoming months sustaining the excellent work that's been going on here at the casino."
~ Bob Watson

Photo by Tracy Dugan

Watson's work with the Gaming Commission is what drew him back to Oregon. After serving as head of corrections for the State of Oregon from 1976 to 1986, he took a similar appointment in Delaware, where he remained until 1994.

"I watched from afar as the tribal leadership carried out its remarkable vision for the future," Watson said. "I was impressed at the way this tribe has worked toward self-sufficiency and the wise way it is planning for the future."

Grand Ronde tribal leaders asked Watson to come back to Oregon to set up the Grand Ronde Gaming Commission as required under the National Indian Gaming Commission rules and the Tribe's compact with the State of Oregon. The Grand Ronde Gaming Commission is a separate entity, entirely independent of the tribal government and casino management. Watson's stellar reputation in the law-enforcement field underscored the integrity of the new casino and the Tribe's commitment to work closely with Oregon law enforcement officials.

The Gaming Commission supervises financial controls, performs regular audits and conducts thorough background checks on all casino employees and vendors.

"It is impossible to describe how important Bob Watson's contributions have been to the Tribe and to Spirit Mountain," said Mike Larsen, chair of the Spirit Mountain Gaming Inc. board of directors. "He is a key contributor."

During the last few weeks, Watson has been busy meeting with Spirit Mountain staff and familiarizing himself with current casino issues.

"I am pleased to take on this role," he said. "I will spend the upcoming months sustaining the excellent work that's been going on here at the casino."

Watson grew up in Corvallis, one of four children. His parents died when he was five, and the family was split up. Watson lived in a variety of foster homes, and attended Forest Grove High School before graduating from Salem High School. He earned a bachelor of arts in sociology from Willamette University in Salem.

Watson's return to Oregon brought him closer to his family.

"In a real way for me, the restoration of the Tribe has helped bring my family back together," Watson said. "I feel connected to the Tribe though our rich culture and family history. And that's where a lot of my energy comes from."

Tribe hosts Youth Leadership Academy

By Brent Merrill

The qualities of leadership are the same as the attributes of Native Pride and the importance of getting that message to young Native Americans today is extreme.

That was the message of guest speaker Howard Rainier when he addressed an audience of young Native people on Wednesday, February 9, in Salem.

"You see, all we are trying to do here is self-awareness," said Rainier.

Rainier said he makes the young people in the audience ask themselves some serious questions. He said he tries to give them some answers as well.

"Who am I?" asked Rainier rhetorically. "What do I have going for me? And, what can I do with it?

"That is the power — and it is really called self-discovery," said Rainier. "Once these kids see who they are they have choices to make in life. 'What can I do as a Native American in today's world?' A lot. But, we hold back. 'Why are we holding back?' We hold ourselves back.

"What I want to do is heighten that high expectation and start self-evaluating," said Rainier. "A lot of them say, well this is the first guy that really made me face myself. The urgency is there and there are thousands that will doubt you. Whether they are Indian or not Indian. That message is so vital. We bring these kids together and say 'this is who you are. This is what you can do and this is what you should be doing.' And that is the essence of why I'm here."

Rainier's appearance was part of an ongoing Youth Leadership Academy program operated by the Grand Ronde Tribe, Chemawa Indian

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Youth participate in pride-building exercise. Photo by Brent Merrill

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