

# Tribal-State Summit concentrates on economy

**Chairs discuss how Tribes have dealt with downturn**

By Dean Rhodes

*Smoke Signals editor*

Oregon's battered economy and its effect on the state's nine federally recognized Tribes was front and center during the 12th annual Tribal-State Government-to-Government Summit held Nov. 18 at Cascade Hall on the grounds of the Oregon State Fair in Salem.

Tribal officials, including a contingent of Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde members led by Chairwoman Cheryle A. Kennedy, met with numerous state officials and discussed ways to deal with difficult economic times.

State officials in attendance included Gov. Ted Kulongoski, State Superintendent of Public Instruction Susan Castillo and State Sen. Ted Ferrioli (R-John Day), a member of the Commission on Indian Services.

The daylong event covered other topics of importance to Oregon Tribes, such as how unearched Native remains should be handled in accordance with state law and improving Oregonians' awareness of Tribal history and sovereignty, but it was the economy that dominated the day.

Chairs of all nine Tribes addressed how their sovereign governments were dealing with the difficult economic times.

"We're living in a time when Oregon is experiencing a great economic tragedy," Kennedy told attendees, who numbered about 235. "Our soldiers are worried about having jobs when they return.

"Our focus at the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde has been maintaining sustainability and employment."

Kennedy said the Tribe focused on its budget and sought ways to be more effective and efficient for its approximately 1,850 full-time employees.

In 2008, she said, the Tribe set aside its merit-based performance pay scale and gave employees a \$500 bonus instead. "Employees rallied around that," she added.

In addition, the Tribe sought more grants, including American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds, for the improvement of the community and job creation, most notably the Grand Ronde Road project.

Still, Kennedy noted, the lion's share of funding for the road project came from Tribal coffers.

"We see ourselves as part of Oregon and we want to do our fair share," Kennedy said. "It's been a challenging time. We need to work together to find creative ways to move into the future and join hands together."

Kennedy thanked Kulongoski for Oregon's leadership in establishing government-to-government relationships with Tribes.

"It is truly a sign of respect," she said. "We have a bright future together because we're sitting here together. It doesn't happen in other

states."

Other Tribal chairs related similar stories of tighter Tribal budgets and even layoffs as the economy affects how much customers spend at Tribal casinos statewide.

Coquille Indian Tribal Chairman Ed Metcalf reported a 7 percent work force reduction at his Tribe's casino.

"We're dealing with the situation day by day, month by month, quarter by quarter," Metcalf said. "We attacked the problem on the cost side and our savings exceeded our revenue decline."

Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Chairwoman Sue Shaffer, who called herself a child of the Great Depression, said that even with the economic downturn, the Cow Creek opened a new wing at its hotel featuring an upscale spa and buffet.

"Our priority is to provide jobs and instill in our children the thought of being productive," she said. "We've watched expenses and had minimal layoffs."

Klamath Tribal Chairman Joe Kirk said Oregon Indian County is a major employer in the state's economy, citing Spirit Mountain Casino as the best example.

"In Klamath County, we employ more nonIndians than Indians," Kirk said. "People don't understand the impact that has. We're looking for more partnerships and collaborations, and are dedicated to a positive resolution."

Siletz Chairwoman Dee Pigsley reported that Chinook Winds in Lincoln City experienced a 7 percent decline in revenue, but avoided layoffs by reducing employees to 30 hours a week so they could retain their jobs and benefits.

"We're the largest employer in Lincoln City," Pigsley said.

There were signs of hope, as well.

"I truly believe the economy is coming back," Pigsley said.

Umatilla Chairman Antone Minthorn said his Tribe has avoided layoffs and actually added jobs on its eastern Oregon reservation near Pendleton by building a new governance center.

Minthorn said Wildhorse Casino offers 600 family-wage jobs with good benefits, which are rare in eastern Oregon.

He suggested the state adopt some Tribal economic practices, such as retro-budgeting. "Don't spend the money you've earned until the following year," Minthorn said. "Then you know what you have."

Coos, Lower Umpqua & Siuslaw Chairman Bob Garcia said Oregon Tribes have a long history of dealing with adversity and declining resources.

"This is a chance to change the paradigm of Oregon's economy," Garcia said, "and re-invest in Or-



Photo by Michelle Alaimo

**Tribal Chairwoman Cheryle A. Kennedy speaks about strategies the Tribe is using to deal with the difficult economic times during the 12th annual Tribal-State Government-to-Government Summit at Cascade Hall on the Oregon State Fairgrounds in Salem on Wednesday, Nov. 18.**

gon. We need to bring jobs here for the long-term. And Tribes are important because we can include federal contracts."

Warm Springs Vice Chairwoman Aurolyn Stwyer-Pinkham said her Tribe is keying in on green industries, a new casino in Cascade Locks and improved telecommunications to bolster its central Oregon economy.

Kulongoski said that the state and Tribes can work together to help bring Oregon through the difficult times.

"I bring a message of hope and optimism to every Oregonian," Kulongoski said.

He cited cooperative state-Tribal projects with the Klamath, Coos and Umatilla Tribes that have protected and saved natural resources.

"We are far stronger and more successful when we work together than when we work alone," Kulongoski said. "We're succeeding ... we're finding strength in unity."

Kulongoski also honored two Tribal Restorations occurring around the time of the summit — Siletz's on Nov. 18 and Grand Ronde's on Nov. 22.

He said he sees more substance to Tribal sovereignty that just the legal technicalities.

"You have to look at Termination and Restoration together in a historical sense," Kulongoski said. "It was another federal act to diminish or extinguish Native peoples. Restoration goes to the human spirit ... it's about what people are ... a renewal of the human spirit."

The Tribal-State Government-to-Government Summit opened with the Grand Ronde Color Guard, led by Tribal Elder Steve Rife carrying the eagle staff, presenting the flags.

Tribal Council members in attendance included Secretary Kathleen Tom and June Sell-Sherer, Toby McClary and Chris Mercier.

Staff in attendance included Executive Officer Chris Leno, Director

of Development Peter Wakeland, Public Affairs Director Siobhan Taylor, Cultural Resources Director David Lewis, Natural Resources Director Michael Wilson, Education Division Manager April Campbell and Tribal Attorney Rob Greene.

Other Tribal members who attended included Tribal Elder Gene LaBonte, chairman of the Governor's Advisory Committee on Veterans Affairs.

After lunch, Kennedy moderated a discussion on Public Health Partnerships and gave a brief history on Tribal health issues beginning with pre-European contact. She was joined by Eric Metcalf, health director for the Coos, Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw; Oregon Health Reform Director Dr. Bruce Goldberg; and Dr. Mel Kohn, who discussed Tribal and state efforts in preparing for the H1N1 flu pandemic.

Kennedy reiterated a message she took to Washington, D.C., in early November and delivered to Health & Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius.

"We're the only ones who pre-paid for our health care," she said, by ceding land in the 1850s to the federal government in numerous treaties that promised health care.

"So why do we receive the least amount of money for our health care?" Kennedy asked, noting that Native Americans receive less than \$3,000 per person for health care in the United States. "It's a failure of the federal government to live up to its promises."

The afternoon session also included a forum on Tribal economic development and federal and state stimulus funding.

The Tribes also honored Oregon State Medical Examiner Dr. Karen Gunson for her work in improving culturally sensitive treatment of Native American remains found in Oregon, as well as Shaffer for her years of service on the Commission on Indian Services. ■