

New Tribal apartments open

By Brent Merrill

Smoke Signals staff writer

The Tribe's newest housing opportunities were realized when the five-building, 20-apartment Chxi Musam Illihi complex was dedicated with a grand opening on Thursday, May 21.

The apartments, 115 Wind River Drive, are near the Tribal Housing Department offices on the north side of Tyee Road.

Tribal Council member Jon A. George gave the invocation and Interim Housing Director Shonn Leno spoke on behalf of the Tribe's Housing program.

"We placed another footprint on our land," George said in his opening blessing.

Leno said the dedication sends a message to the community.

"As a Tribe we take one step closer toward our path of healing since Restoration," said Leno. "The opening of these homes is just one more piece of the story that continues to be written about the Grand Ronde people. As a Tribe, we have been known for our resiliency and the opening of these homes makes a very important statement to this community that not only are we here to stay, but more of our people are coming home."

Leno thanked his staff for the work they put in to get the project done.

"First of all I want to thank Randy Bean," said Leno. "Randy has been my eyes and ears for this operation."

Leno also thanked Engineering and Public Works Manager Jesse



Photo by Michelle Alaimo

Shonn Leno, left, Grand Ronde Housing Department interim manager, and Tribal Council Chairman Reyn Leno cut the ribbon during the Chxi Musam Illihi North Apartment complex grand opening on Thursday, May 21.

White, Tribal Council, the General Manager's Office and the officials present from Gerding Builders.

"This was a team effort," he said.

Tribal Council Chairman Reyn Leno thanked Tribal Council members present – Jack Giffen Jr., Jon A. George, Ed Pearsall and Denise Harvey – for their support.

"As a council, you know we listen to our membership," said Reyn Leno. "Looking back, I never thought we would see these houses in these fields that we used to cut across when we were young. The first project was Grand Meadows and we were recognizing the housing needs then, and here we are today. I'm looking forward to the next project."

The Lenos cut a white ribbon stretched across the walkway at Unit D and the grand opening was official.

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Visitors toured the one- and two-bedroom apartments. Refreshments were provided in one of the units and the views of Spirit Mountain were among the biggest talking points.

The streets are named after rivers or creeks on the Tribe's reservation lands and each street sign has the Chinuk Wawa version below the English translation.

"This is pretty sweet," said Giffen. "Hopefully, this will fill the need we have and it's a chance to help the members who need it."

Each building has four apartments and a separate laundry room. Each unit's electrical and hot water systems are located in a separate closet so Housing staff can make repairs without having to enter individual apartments.

Rooms are wide open with the heater vents off the ground so furniture can be placed anywhere in the room. Floors are vinyl plank like those used in some of the Elders' units. The twist-open windows give way to great views of Spirit Mountain, especially from the upper floors.

"I'm really looking forward to this," said Tribal member Veronica Gaston.

Gaston said she had been waiting a long time and that she was the first person on the list to get a one-bedroom unit. She moved into her unit on Wednesday, May 27.

"I love the colors, I love the view and I love the location," said Gaston. "Now I can be closer to my family and I can be more involved with the Tribe. I'm moving home."

Groundbreaking for the 20-unit apartment complex was in June 2013 and the need for the units was based on the Housing Department's long-standing waiting list for one-bedroom units.

"This was actually Shonn's idea," said Housing Department Administrative Program Manager Joani Dugger. "He was the one that said we needed to finally address the needs of the people who had been on the waiting list the longest."

Dugger said discussions among Housing staff about the waiting lists for one- and two-bedroom units began as far back as late 2011.

"The discussion was regarding the fact that those wait lists were virtually stagnant," said Dugger. "At that point, Shonn brought forward the idea to staff and the board that he felt it was time to look at moving toward a new type of development."

Shonn said he proposed the idea for the apartments and then went to work with Dugger on contacting several Tribes

throughout the Northwest. He said they wanted to see what kind of housing those Tribes had developed and to learn everything they could while compiling data they used in a report to the then-Housing Authority Board of Commissioners.

The board passed the plan in 2013 and received approval from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development shortly thereafter.

"Some of those people had been on the waiting list for five years or more," said Shonn Leno. "This will be good for people and definitely serve that niche."

There are 15 two-bedroom apartments and five one-bedroom apartments open and available to those on the waiting list.

"The waiting list will be balanced now," said Shonn Leno. "In fact, we should only have single digit wait lists now."

Many of the units are handicapped accessible and each top-floor apartment has solar tubes for added light.

The apartments were built using Structural Insulated Panels. According to Shonn Leno, the new panels should help keep noise between units down as well as provide a host of other benefits.

Shonn Leno said the panels are made in Montana and that they found out about them from the Tribes they visited in Washington state.

Shonn Leno said the playground at the complex was designed with younger children in mind and that the area will eventually have picnic tables.

As the grand opening ceremony, which was organized by Tribal Council Chief of Staff Stacia Martin, was winding down and people were filing back into their cars and walking back to their homes and offices, Tribal member Kelly Mercier walked up after getting to see the apartment he will be moving into.

"I'm so happy I have tears in my eyes," said Mercier. "It means a lot to me to finally have a place. This is perfect for me and I'm so appreciative."

Tribal Elder Dakota Whitecloud smudged the units a couple of days after the grand opening. ■



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