

# Tribe testifies against board rules regarding mascots

By Dean Rhodes

*Smoke Signals editor*

SALEM — As the Oregon Board of Education looks to narrow legislatively mandated exceptions to its outright ban on Native American mascots at state public schools at its Jan. 21 meeting, Grand Ronde Tribal Council Chairman Reyn Leno testified once again in December, arguing that not all Native mascots are derogatory and complaining that the board is not respecting the sovereignty of the state's nine federally recognized Tribes.

The history of the Oregon Board of Education's ban on Native American mascots dates back to 2012 when the ban was formally adopted.

In reaction, the state Legislature passed in 2013 a bill that would have allowed a school district to enter into a written agreement with a federally recognized Tribe in Oregon to retain the school's mascot. That bill was vetoed by then-Gov. John Kitzhaber and the Tribes and bill supporters then worked with the Governor's Office to craft a more acceptable bill.

In 2014, Senate Bill 1509 was approved that allows a school district to enter into an approved written agreement with a federally recognized Tribe for use of a mascot that "represents, is associated with or is significant" to a Tribe.

The bill also required the state Board of Education to establish rule exceptions.

At its Dec. 10 meeting, the Board of Education held a first reading on rules that would provide limited exceptions to the ban on public schools using Native American mascots.

According to the board's administrative rule summary, the new rules would narrow the exception to the ban to such a degree that only three school districts in Oregon out of 15 with Native American mascots could potentially meet the new requirements. Those districts would be the Molalla Indians, the Rogue River Chieftains and the Siletz Warriors.

The new rules would require, among other things, that the proper name of a particular Tribe or the proper name of a Tribe that is part of a confederation of Tribes enter-

## Native mascots in Oregon

**2006:** Requests to ban Native American mascots at Oregon public schools begin.

**2012:** The State Board of Education bans Native American mascots at all Oregon public schools.

**July 15, 2013:** Oregon Legislature passes SB 215, which allows school districts to enter into a written agreement with a federally recognized Tribe with respect to a name, symbol or image of a mascot associated with the Tribe.

**Aug. 16, 2013:** Oregon Gov. John Kitzhaber vetoes SB 215, which would allow some Oregon schools to keep their Native American mascots.

**Feb. 28, 2014:** The state Legislature approves SB 1509, which was a negotiated compromise between Kitzhaber and Tribes and supporters of SB 215. It would allow school districts to enter into an approved agreement with a federally recognized Tribe in Oregon for use of a mascot that is associated with a Tribe.

**March 6, 2014:** Gov. John Kitzhaber signs SB 1509 into law.

**May 22, 2015:** The Oregon Board of Education members vote unanimously against an amendment that would have allowed schools to continue to call their athletic teams and other student organizations nicknames such as the Warriors, Braves, Indians and Chieftains.

**Dec. 10, 2015:** The Oregon Board of Education holds a first reading of an amended rule that would provide an exception to the ban on Native American mascots at Oregon public schools and would apparently allow only three out of 15 Oregon public schools to keep their Native American mascot.

**Jan. 21, 2016:** The Oregon Board of Education is scheduled to vote on the amended rule.

**July 1, 2017:** Deadline for public schools that do not meet Board of Education requirements for having a Native American mascot to change their mascots.

ing into the agreement have been included in the name of the mascot as of Jan. 1, 2013.

"The original 2012 ban which prohibited the use of Native American mascots would continue to apply to all of the other school districts that presently continue to have a Native American mascot," the summary states. "These school districts would continue to be required to change their mascots prior to July 1, 2017."

Those school districts include Amity, Banks, Roseburg, Lebanon, Oakridge, Philomath, Scappoose and Warrenton-Hammond, among others.

Leno and Siletz Tribal Council member Lily Butler testified against the new rules, chastising the Board of Education for not working in a collaborative government-to-government relationship with the nine federally recognized Tribes in the state and also for assuming that the board knows what is best for Tribes.

"Our warrior mascot does not create a negative school environment, but poverty and inadequate funding most certainly do," Butler said about the board's administrative summary tying the mascot issue to below average graduation rates for Native American students in Oregon. "If the board is sincere about addressing this gap, we invite you to turn your efforts toward helping our community get a state-of-the-art school with adequate funding for administration, educators, equipment and other supportive materials."

Butler defended the Siletz Valley Charter School's use of a warrior mascot.

"The Tribe has attempted in good faith to participate in the political process to keep our warrior mascot," Butler said. "We believe that Senate Bill 1509 achieved an outcome consistent with the board's intent and assured our school mascot continued as a symbol of cultural, community, school and individual pride. The board's steadfast resolve to maintain its original position despite evidence to the contrary is disturbing. Refusing to consider the Siletz Tribe's perspective as valid and dismiss us as misguided is paternalistic and offensive."

Leno followed Butler and discussed how the Grand Ronde Tribe has worked to establish government-to-government relationships with city, school, county, state and federal entities. However, he said, the Oregon Board of Education has not conducted government-to-government consultations with Oregon's Tribes.

"We are deeply troubled by the state Board of Education's disregard for our sovereignty and your passivity when it comes to ending racism against Oregon Native people and requiring that schools in Oregon

teach our history," Leno said.

"The rule before you is a bad one. It is unresponsive to the needs of the Tribes and our Tribal members. If passed, the proposed rule would pit our neighboring communities against us. It is the board that made this decision of an outright ban, but the reality is that communities in which these schools are located have a perception that we are the ones that are promoting this policy. This kind of confusion is a deterrent to the positive relationships that we have built over time with our communities."

Leno said the proposed rules improperly limit Oregon Tribes from determining when a Native mascot is culturally significant and appropriate.

"This is highly offensive and we believe outside the board's regulatory authority. Why would the state Board of Education not trust Tribal governments to do the right thing in determining what is and what is not culturally appropriate?"

Leno said the Grand Ronde Tribe supports allowing school districts to keep their Native American mascots if they work with nearby Tribes on a positive mascot portrayal and incorporate Native American educational curriculum in their schools.

"The history of Oregon did not start with the arrival of Lewis and Clark," Leno said. "It was occurring for thousands of years before they set foot on our land and many of those Indians – braves, warriors, chiefs – are worthy of being honored as high school mascots. High school mascots are supposed to be inspirational. High schools do not usually adopt derogatory figures. They adopt admirable and inspirational figures."

Leno said the Grand Ronde Tribe has been working with school districts in Willamina, Sheridan, Dallas, Springfield, McMinnville, Independence, Salem-Keizer, Beaverton, Molalla, Eugene and Marcola about integrating Grand Ronde's fourth-grade educational curriculum into their schools.

In addition, Leno said the Tribe is working with schools within Grand Ronde's treaty lands that have Native American mascots, such as Amity, Lebanon, Marcola and Banks.

"Let's take a strong look at the teaching of Oregon students about the history and culture of Oregon's nine Indian sovereign governments instead of spending hundreds of thousands of dollars ripping up gym floors across the state," Leno said. "Let's put the money where it matters most, toward education of our children. ... What we look forward to is what is best for our kids. If we have education in our schools about the nine Tribes, maybe we won't have a mascot issue to deal with 10 years or 20 years from now. We are here for the solution."

Also attending the Board of Education hearing were Tribal Council members Jon A. George, Denise Harvey and Tonya Gleason-Shepek, as well as Assistant Tribal Attorney Kim D'Aquila and Tribal lobbyist Justin Martin. ■

## Bike helmets available

The Tribe's Social Services Department has bicycle helmets available for distribution. Those needing a helmet need to visit the department and sign a helmet application, as well as get fitted.

For more information, contact Social Services at 503-879-2034. ■

## CTGR Higher Education Program deadlines set

There are now only two Higher Education programs depending on whether you are full-time or part-time. The deadline for the Full-Time College program is at least 30 days before the start of classes. The deadline for the Part-Time College program is at least 10 days before the start of class.

Visit the Tribal website for more program information and an application. [www.grandronde.org/departments/education/higher-education/](http://www.grandronde.org/departments/education/higher-education/) ■