

Letters

Dear honorable General Council:

Recently the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde lead a crusade to reverse a ruling made in 2012 by the Oregon State Board of Education to eliminate all Native mascots used by public high schools in the state of Oregon. This amounted to 14 of the 503 public high schools.

Native American Tribes across the nation have been fighting against the use of these Native-imaged mascots for decades. When Congress passed the 1968 American Indian Civil Rights Act, the National Congress of American Indians picked up the fight and have continued to champion this battle for all these many years. The battle was based not only on eliminating the mascots, but stopping the money exploiting machine derived by these sports teams. The following is a quote taken from the NCAI website:

“About ‘Indian’ Sports Mascots & Harm: Born in an era when racism and bigotry were accepted by the dominant culture, ‘Indian’ sports brands have grown to become multi-million dollar franchises.”

In 2012, the OSBE set a precedent and became a leader in stopping schools from promoting racism through the use of Native American-imaged mascots. They passed a ruling removing all Native American-imaged mascots from Oregon high schools and gave the schools until 2017 to make the change.

However, in 2013 the issue returned to the table. Discussions and meetings took place and an amendment to the ruling was presented. The OSBE decided to have a study conducted on the effects these mascots had on Native American youth attending the high schools with Native-imaged mascots. The findings overwhelmingly proved harmful effects to Tribal youth. In fact the study showed a 2-to-1 dropout rate and disciplinary actions vs. those of Native students attending schools with no Native-imaged mascots. In early 2015, the OSBE reviewed the results of the study and voted to uphold their 2012 ruling.

In addition, I should add the Adidas Corp. also got on board and offered to donate money to cover the cost for all schools willing to make the change.

Now here is where things get crazy. At some point the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde Tribal Council decided to lead a crusade of their own and fought to have the ruling made by the OSBE reversed. From recent statements made by Tribal Council, they wanted to have a part in deciding what mascots were considered harmful on a school-by-school basis. They felt it was against our sovereignty for the OSBE to make a ruling to stop racism against Tribal youth and remove the mascots. They got other Tribes involved. However, according to various news articles, not all Oregon Tribes agreed with CTGR’s position.

Due to the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde’s crusade, in January of this year the OSBE took another vote and reversed the 2012 ruling. The new ruling states that Oregon high schools need only get one of the Oregon Tribes’ approval to retain their mascot.

Unfortunately, our Tribal Council never brought this issue before the membership and at February’s General Council meeting it became the main topic of discussion. In fact at one point a vote of the membership in attendance was requested. A show of hands was taken and the majority of Tribal members attending voted against Tribal Council’s recent actions. I believe of all those voting only two hands went up when asked who was in favor of the position taken by Tribal Council.

It was also disclosed that no action to proceed or vote of any kind was ever taken by Tribal Council on this sensitive topic. However, Chairman Reyn Leno took it upon himself to submit an article to the *Oregonian* newspaper. It was this news story that brought the issue to light for many of our Tribal members. Prior to this story, most were unaware of our Tribal Council’s position on this issue. Here is a portion of that news article:

“By Reyn Leno

“I am Reyn Leno, and I’m proud to be an Indian who fought for this country as a warrior in Vietnam. I am Tribal Council chairman for the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, following in the footsteps of the chiefs that came before me and signed treaties with the United States.

“Our people are proud to be known as Indians, Braves, Warriors and Chiefs. The Oregon State Board of Education recently made the right decision to approve a rule that reinforces the Legislature’s bill allowing for federally recognized Tribes and neighboring school districts to enter into agreements on culturally acceptable and respectable mascot imagery.”

If I were to say anything positive came from this, it would be that the Tribal Council in attendance recognized how disgusted the majority of General Council members were and the importance of including the membership in decisions that affect our Tribe. They seem to be making an effort to share more information. Chris Mercier even went as far as to say they needed to put language in place that includes the General Council in making decisions that have a major effect on our Tribe. I truly hope Councilman Mercier follows through on that statement.

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter to the editor. I realize it is long, but I wanted to be sure I included as much detail as possible of what actually took place. I oftentimes read news articles that don’t necessarily give the entire story, especially for those who live in other states.

Ann K. Lewis

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(Editor’s note: Since 2012, Smoke Signals has published nine stories about the Native mascot issue in Oregon, including a Message From the Chair written by Tribal Council Chairman Reyn Leno. In all of those stories, Tribal Council’s stand on Native mascots was outlined: That they are not necessarily derogatory and that Oregon Tribes should have input on deciding if they are appropriate, and that improved education in Oregon public schools about the state’s nine Tribes is necessary to end racism.)

General Council meeting

11 a.m. Sunday, March 6

Tribal Community Center

Smoke Signals

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2016 Tribal Council

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