

General Council debates mascot use

By Dean Rhodes

Smoke Signals editor

The Tribe's official stand on Native American mascots being used by Oregon public schools was debated at length during the Sunday, March 6, General Council meeting held in the Community Center in Grand Ronde.

On one hand, Tribal member Monty Herron made a 20-minute presentation outlining why he and other Tribal members feel that Native American mascots promote discrimination against Indian students and that the Grand Ronde Tribe should have supported the Oregon Board of Education's outright ban on their use.

"While communities think they are honoring us, there is a growing body of social science literature and empirical research that states there are harmful effects, such as racial stereotyping and inaccurate racial portrayals, and these are particularly harmful to the social identity, health and self-esteem of Native American students. ...

"Our culture is not up for grabs. Our ethnicity, our traditions, who we are is not swag for non-Indian students, parents or communities to make money off of. ... I am not a mascot, a stereotype or a nickname. We are all human beings."

On the other hand, Tribal Council and Tribal staff explained the Tribe's stand on Native American mascots.

"This is a Native American issue, not a Board of Education issue," said Tribal Council Chairman Reyn Leno. "We should have it in our hands to declare what is right and what is wrong. ... Why should we be told by the Board of Education what is culturally correct? We got told in 1954, they called it Termination, 'Here's what's best for you.' When they just go across the board and say no more Native mascots in the state of Oregon, isn't that a form of Termination?"

In the end, the discussion boiled down to a matter of perspective: Anti-mascot Tribal members viewed it as a cultural issue while Tribal Council saw it as a sovereignty and lack of government-to-government consultation issue.

Banning Native American mascot use by Oregon public schools has been a hot button issue before the Oregon Board of Education since 2012. The board, which is appoint-



Photos by Dean Rhodes

Tribal member Monty Herron, left, and Tribal lobbyist Justin Martin, right, were two of the presenters during the Sunday, March 6, General Council meeting that discussed the Tribe's stand on Native American mascots. Herron supported the Oregon Board of Education's outright ban on Native American mascot use by the state's public schools while Martin outlined the Tribe's consternation about not being consulted on the issue from the outset by the Board of Education. Most of the meeting, held in the Community Center, focused on the controversial issue.

ed, passed a rule that mandated all Oregon high schools with Native American mascots cease using them by 2017.

State legislators and Oregon Tribes, including the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, became involved and a compromise eventually came out of the state Legislature and was signed by the governor. The compromise provided for exceptions to the Board of Education's outright ban if Oregon high schools with Native mascots worked with their local Tribe to ensure that the mascots are culturally appropriate and that curriculum regarding Oregon Tribes was being taught in the district's respective schools.

However, an editorial by Leno that discussed the Grand Ronde Tribe's stance on Native American mascots that appeared in *The Oregonian* in early February prompted a backlash from Tribal members who attended the Feb. 7 General Council meeting in Clackamas.

Despite coverage of the issue in *Smoke Signals* over the past three years, some Tribal members said they were caught off-guard by the Tribe's stance that not all Native mascots are derogatory and that education about Oregon's nine Tribes in the public school system would go a long way toward ending racism.

In reaction, Tribal Council decided to devote the March General Council meeting to explaining the Tribe's decision.

Tribal lobbyist Justin Martin ex-

plained the political aspects of the decision, keying in on the fact that Board of Education members are appointed and not elected.

"The reality is that your council felt like this decision from the Board of Education, along with several other folks in other Tribes, really thought the state was overstepping its bounds in laying out a blanket ban on mascots and imagery," Martin said. "The state of Oregon was saying it knows what is best for Oregon Tribes. We didn't believe that then and we don't believe in it now."

Martin said Tribes were offended by the lack of consultation regarding the ban. "Not a single bit of consultation occurred," he said. "We were offended by that. ... We do not feel it is appropriate for the state of Oregon to be making decisions on our behalf when we know best what is the right thing to do for our people."

Martin said Oregon Tribes have worked to get rid of offensive names, such as savages and squaw, and will work diligently to ensure remaining Native mascots are appropriate. "Have a little faith in Oregon Tribes to make the right decision," he said.

Tribal Attorney Rob Greene reviewed draft agreements the Tribe is currently working on with school districts regarding their continued use of Native American mascots. He said that one of the main goals is to foster positive relationships between the school district and Tribe and to encourage Native curriculum and Native Clubs in the schools, as well as establishing sportsmanship responsibilities that will not allow inappropriate racial actions at games and other sporting events.

Tribal Historic Preservation Department Manager David Harrelson discussed how the Tribe will determine a particular school's historic connections to a Tribe.

Tribal Council Chief of Staff Stacia Martin talked about how the Tribe's Culture Department will decide what imagery is appropriate.

She said the Tribe is encouraging schools to use images of objects instead of human caricatures.

Tribal Curriculum Adviser Mercedes Reeves discussed the Tribally created fourth-grade history curriculum that is being used in about a dozen Oregon school districts, as well as the eighth-grade curriculum currently being tested in the Willamina School District.

General Manager David Fullerton talked about how the Grand Ronde Tribe has created a coordinated effort to take advantage of the educational opportunities created by the mascot ban compromise. He added that if any disagreements arise between the Tribe and a school district regarding its mascot use, the Tribe can walk away, which would default a school district back under the Board of Education's blanket ban.

"As you can see, we put a lot of work into this," Leno said. "Unfortunately, we understand the mascot issue. We don't say we don't understand it. But we were stuck between a rock and a hard spot: Do we fight the mascot issue or try to educate people on who we are."

Even with all the explanations offered on both sides, the "Other Business" portion of the meeting indicated that few opinions were changed.

Tribal Elder and former Tribal Council member Val Grout said that she is proud to see Native American mascots if they are not derogatory while Herron and others said that the Tribe did not need the hammer of the mascot issue to get its history curriculum taught in Oregon public schools.

Herron suggested that Tribal Council consult the general membership on important public policy issues, such as the Native mascot ban, and that it use its sovereignty to renegotiate its gaming compact with the state.

In other action, it was announced that the next General Council meeting will be held at 11 a.m. Sunday, April 3, at the Valley River Inn in Eugene.

Raymond Petite, Mike Wiggs and Nancy Renfrow won the \$100 door prizes and Debi Anderson, Steve Bobb Sr., Jenny Vanatta, Cindy Gullledge and Sally Petite won the \$50 door prizes. A gas card donated by Tribal Council member Brenda Tuomi and her husband and necklaces also were raffled off.

Tribal Council member Jon A. George joined Culture Department employees Bobby Mercier and Brian Krehbiel, as well as Harrelson, Public Affairs Administrative Assistant Chelsea Clark and Tribal youth Kailiyah Krehbiel in performing the cultural drumming and singing to open the meeting.

The meeting, in its entirety, can be viewed on the Tribal website at www.grandronde.org by clicking on the News tab and then Video. ■

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