

Casino hosts ATNI Mid-Year Convention

By Dean Rhodes

Smoke Signals editor

Twenty-three of the 57 members in the Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians answered the initial roll call when the nonprofit organization opened its Mid-Year Convention on Monday, May 23, at Spirit Mountain Casino's Event Center.

Jeanie Louise, ATNI secretary and a member of the Coeur d'Alene Tribe, declared that the convention had a quorum of members and a quorum of Executive Board officers.

The Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, which has been an ATNI member for many years, and Spirit Mountain Casino hosted the Mid-Year Convention from Monday, May 23, through Thursday, May 26, for the first time since May 2010.

ATNI formed in 1953 and is dedicated to Tribal sovereignty and self-determination for Native governments in Oregon, Idaho, Washington, southeastern Alaska, northern California, Nevada and western Montana.

Conventions are where Indian Country representatives come together to advance the work for their communities in developing and implementing policy and programs for the region. The convention serves as a platform for sharing information on matters of interest, as well as representing and advocating for the interests of member Tribes.

ATNI President Fawn Sharp of the Quinault Tribe told attendees that the conventions matter since more than half of the resolutions considered at a recent National Congress of American Indians convention came from the Pacific Northwest.

The Mid-Year Convention opened traditionally with the Grand Ronde Veterans Color Guard of Tribal Elders Wink Soderberg, Alton Butler, Steve Bobb Sr. and Raymond Petite, as well as Veterans Special Event



Photos by Michelle Alaimo

Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians President Fawn Sharp (Quinault), gives a "State of ATNI" address on Monday, May 23, during the organizations 2016 Mid-Year Convention held at Spirit Mountain Casino's Event Center.

Board member Al Miller, carrying in the flags as a drum comprised of Tribal members David Harrelson, Bobby Mercier, Travis Stewart and Jordan Mercier played.

After the posting of the colors, Tribal Council member Jon A. George delivered an invocation.

Tribal Council Chairman Reyn Leno welcomed attendees to Grand Ronde as he acknowledged Tribal Elders and veterans and briefly explained the Tribe's history. He also invited attendees to this year's Marcellus Norwest Memorial Veterans Powwow, which will be held July 8-10 at Uyxat Powwow Grounds and honor Vietnam War-era veterans.

"I was actually elected to Tribal Council 20 years ago," Leno said. "One of the first things you ask is, 'What do you do as a councilperson?' One of the first things they said was, 'Go to ATNI and find out what's going on in the Northwest.' Thank you for all the work you do and carrying our issues back East."

After Leno's welcome, a video from Oregon Sen. Jeff Merkley played. He discussed his work to return Kennewick Man to Tribes for a proper burial as well as work to improve Tribal village living conditions at The Dalles Dam.

Then Sharp delivered her "State of ATNI" speech, which criticized the federal government for not fulfilling its trust responsibility to Native American Tribes.

"So many of the trust issues we are dealing with are symptoms of a much deeper problem," Sharp said. "And the deeper problem is that we recognized the federal government is failing to fund the trust responsibility. No matter what issue we're talking about ... we could be talking about natural resources, health care, education, but every one of those issues the reason the federal government is not upholding its trust responsibility is it's not funding it."

"You've often heard people say that the plan is terminate by budget. Just keep reducing the Tribal budgets and force Tribes to try to generate profits through enterprises and economic development, curtail our taxing authority. ... It was very clear we have to address the failure of the federal government to fund its trust responsibility."

Sharp said the Quinault Tribe has been unable to fill forestry positions for two years because of a lack of funding, yet she saw federal government employees taking large retirement packages. "Those are some significant problems for us in Indian Country," she said, adding that the federal government is also reducing funding for Native American programs.

Sharp said ATNI pushed for an update of the 2003 U.S. Commission on Civil Rights' 136-page "Quiet Crisis Report" to address the "humanitarian crisis" of inadequate funding for Native American Tribes. More than a decade ago, the report found that "federal funding directed to Native Americans through programs ... has not been sufficient to address the basic and very urgent needs of indigenous peoples. Among the myriad unmet needs are: health care, education, public safety, housing and rural

development."

Sharp said there was a big disconnect between federal agencies and Indian Country, and commission members did not want to hold a field hearing in the Pacific Northwest regarding the issue. However, with the help of Washington Rep. Derek Kilmer, Sharp announced that the chairman of the Civil Rights Commission relented and that the commission will be visiting the Pacific Northwest to conduct a field hearing to update the "Quiet Crisis Report."

"That was good news. Not only did ATNI advance a resolution seeking an update of a significant report, we weren't going to accept that it was going to be based on agency reports," Sharp said. "It took us three years to get to this point. We, as a region, want to hold the United States accountable. It's not right that this funding has declined year after year. It's not right that each year we are trying to do more with less. It's not right that our children are suffering. It's not right that our health care is not a comprehensive system."

In addition, Sharp said ATNI is working on a "Northwest Platform" for the next administration to advance.

"We want to continue to advance our agenda, to build alliances with other regions across the country and continue to hold the United States accountable for not only its trust responsibilities, but getting out of our way when we want to exercise our inherent sovereign authority and our jurisdiction," Sharp said. "We are constantly under attack and constantly defending what belongs to us. We're going to stand strong."

During the afternoon, ATNI attendees broke into myriad committee meetings to discuss diverse issues important to Indian Country that included Telecom/Energy, Culture and Elders, Health, Taxation, Youth, Human Resources, Indian Child Welfare, Transportation, Economic Development, Natural Resources/Land, Education, Veterans, Law and Justice, Trust Reform, Tribal Employment Rights Offices, Housing, Gaming, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, International Affairs and Drug Abuse and Prevention.

On Monday afternoon, Tribal Council Secretary Cheryl A. Kennedy chaired the Health Committee meeting and Education Department Manager Leslie Riggs gave an overview of the Tribe's offerings during the Education Committee hearing.

Tuesday presenters concentrated on federal agencies and programs. Ken Johnston, manager of Tribal Affairs at the Bonneville Power Administration, gave an update on his agency.

David Conrad, deputy director of the Office of Indian Energy Policy & Programs at the U.S. Department of Energy, briefed ATNI members on progress in his department and

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Grand Ronde Gaming Commission Executive Director Michael Boyce talks about gaming in Oregon during a Northwest Gaming presentation on Wednesday, May 25, at the Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians' 2016 Mid-Year Convention held at Spirit Mountain Casino's Event Center.