

Board OKs Grand Ronde-Banks mascot agreement

By Dean Rhodes

Smoke Signals editor

SALEM — The Oregon Board of Education unanimously approved the first Tribal-school district agreement that will officially allow Banks to retain its Braves mascot as it adopts a more culturally acceptable Native American image.

The Board of Education held a first reading on the memorandum of understanding struck between the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde and Banks School District on Thursday, Feb. 23, during its meeting held in Eugene and approved it during its Thursday, March 23, hearing held in Salem.

During the Salem hearing, Department of Education Government and Legal Affairs Manager Cindy Hunt reiterated that Department of Education staff members had no concerns regarding the agreement.

Tribal Council Chairman Reyn Leno, Tribal Council Secretary Jon A. George, Tribal Council member Tonya Gleason-Shepek, Tribal Attorney Rob Greene and Tribal lobbyist Justin Martin attended the hearing, as did Banks School District Superintendent Jeff Leo and three Banks School Board members.

The Banks School District and Grand Ronde Tribe have been working together since 2015 on the mascot issue after the Board of Education was forced to amend its blanket ban on Native American mascots in public schools. The Oregon Legislature mandated in 2014 that school districts be allowed to retain their Native American mascots if they work with one of the



Photo by Michelle Alaimo

Tribal Council Chairman Reyn Leno testifies during the Oregon Board of Education meeting held in Salem on Thursday, March 23. During the meeting, the board approved the first Tribal-school district mascot agreement that allows the Banks School District to keep its Braves mascot, but to use more culturally acceptable Native American imagery. Also at the table with him are Cindy Hunt, middle, Department of Education Government and Legal Affairs manager, and Banks School District Superintendent Jeff Leo.

nine federally recognized Tribes in Oregon to create more culturally appropriate images.

Banks' new image – inverse Bs in the shape of an arrowhead replacing a profile of a Native American Brave – was first presented to the Grand Ronde Tribal Council on Nov. 14. Nike marketing and graphics employees worked with Cultural Resources Department Manager David Harrelson and school district representatives to craft the new image.

The new image will gradually replace the old stereotypical image over a five-year period on uniforms, buildings, merchandising and school district stationery.

"Throughout this process, it has been the Tribe's goal to build respect and understanding of the Tribe's history and culture, to give all youth the opportunity to learn the Tribe's curriculum, and to foster a culturally respectful representa-

tion of Native American symbolism and pride," Leno said during his testimony before the board.

"The Tribe and district were able to reach an agreement on a mascot that is appropriate, has community support and is significant to the Tribe. The Tribe has been impressed by the district's willingness to collaborate to have a mascot image designed that respects Tribal culture and the community's needs.

"Grand Ronde encourages you to approve this agreement so that we can truly make a difference for the benefit of Native people and all Oregonians."

The agreement also requires the Banks School District to adopt the Grand Ronde Tribe's fourth- and eighth-grade Native American history curriculums and establish a Native Club at its schools. Leo said that approximately 3 percent of Banks' 1,100 students identify as Native American.

"This is very important to the Tribe because it will help to combat stereotypes," Leno said. "The history of our peoples, who have lived in Oregon since time immemorial, is significant for all Oregonians and is usually ignored or poorly described in our schools. We appreciate the opportunity to work with the school district to educate more Oregonians about the histories, societies and cultures of Oregon's Native peoples."

Board Chairman Dr. Charles Martinez Jr. said the negotiations that the Grand Ronde Tribe and Banks School District went through to craft an agreement have set a high bar for future agreements that will come before the board for approval.

"This issue has been a 'big' issue," Martinez said. "The board has been dealing with this issue since 2012, and at least a year before that there was analysis around this issue. Here we are, more than five years later. It has caused grief, pain, stress ... I have had a 1,000 different emotions about this along the way. When the Legislature adopted the notion of an exemption, it was a crack in the armor of the board that was very distressing.

"ODE did a lot of work to craft a set of guidelines and rules that we could ultimately implement and when I look at this agreement, I can't help but wonder whether or not this process that was established may in fact be better than what would have happened if the schools simply had banned the images because what you had to do to fulfill the spirit and requirements of these rules was extraordinary.

"I can only imagine the kind of learning that has already taken place at that district and the Tribe. ... It is humbling to see the effects of this in terms of what it might mean for the students

in the Banks School District.

"I know we are going to be facing other requests and all I can say is that the bar to me has been set really, really high in terms of the kind of work that we can hope for for districts and their Tribal partners."

Banks, which is west of Portland off of Highway 26, is within the traditional homelands of the Tualatin Kalapuya, one of the myriad Tribes and bands that were forced to move to the Grand Ronde Reservation in the 1850s and confederate after signing treaties with the federal government.

Leo testified that the Banks School District has already removed its old mascot image from the gym floor, scoreboard and walls, and ordered sports uniforms that do not have imagery on them, among other efforts.

"I think this is a win for everybody," Leno said. "I think there were people who truly believed, and we respect that, that they didn't want these images used. There were people like us who believed we could work on the history and education side of it, but at the end of the day we were both all working to get rid of the bad imagery that was out there, and this type of agreement helped that happen."

Public school districts that do not enter into an approved agreement with an Oregon Tribe before July 1 will be required to change their mascot. So far, only the Marcola School District northeast of Eugene has officially announced that it is abandoning its Native American mascot and nickname.

Hunt said that the Department of Education is expecting approximately seven more Native mascot agreements to come before the board in the next several months.

During the same meeting, the Board of Education held a first reading for the agreement between the Grand Ronde Tribe and Scappoose School District, which is seeking to retain its Indians mascot. Grand Ronde is also working with the Molalla River School District regarding its Indians mascot. ■

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