

Public hearing attempts to capture Tribal priorities

By Dean Rhodes

Smoke Signals editor

Twelve Tribal members testified during a public hearing on Tribal priorities and budgeting held Sunday, June 4, in the Tribal gym about numerous subjects, such as not losing public transit service to Lincoln City, a new sweat lodge, morale of Spirit Mountain Casino employees and increased economic development efforts.

The meeting, which started 20 minutes late due to technical difficulties, began with good news when Tribal Council member Chris Mercier said that the opening of the Cowlitz Tribe's casino north of Vancouver, Wash., in late April is not hurting Spirit Mountain Casino's revenues as much as predicted.

"People will be relieved to know it is not adversely impacting us as much as we thought it would," Mercier said. "This is kind of new territory for us because for the last 22 years Spirit Mountain has always been the premier gaming destination in Oregon. It has served this Tribe really well.

"This is our first encounter with real competition so we thought it would be a good idea to do some soul searching for the Tribe in terms of services that we offer our membership. What would people like to see if we start feeling the impacts adversely and we are looking at cutting back on services?"

Tribal lobbyist Justin Martin has

previously estimated that the opening of the Cowlitz casino potentially could cost the Grand Ronde Tribe as much as \$100 million annual-



Chris Leno

ly while the draft Tribal budget for 2017 conservatively estimated a 38.8 percent decline in casino revenues that are transferred to the Tribal government to fund such programs as Elders' pensions, health care and education.

Tribal Finance Officer Chris Leno reviewed Tribal endowments for the approximately 50 people who attended the public hearing to give them context on the Tribe's finances.

Leno said that despite the Tribe's use of interest earnings on the endowments to fund programs, all of the endowments are worth more today than they were in 2013. The Tribe is allowed to use a maximum of 15 percent of interest earnings annually to fund governmental programs and operations.

A slide asked Tribal members to consider several questions before giving their public testimony, such as:

- What do you think Tribal funding priorities should be?
- How would you define essential

government services?

- Are there programs that should be safeguarded from the effect of the Cowlitz Tribe opening its new casino?
- If there are budget reductions, what areas should be looked at first?
- Tribal per capita is currently at 28 percent: If there is a financial impact, should it remain at that percentage?

Tribal Elder Debi Anderson, who lobbied for addressing deferred maintenance and an increased minimum wage at the casino and improved infrastructure in the Grand Ronde area, said she thinks that if there are budget cuts required that they should be across the board and not concentrated on any one department.

Tribal Elder Ann Lewis said that she was concerned about Tribal health funding considering the Trump administration's desire to repeal the Affordable Care Act and cut back on Medicaid funding.

Tribal Elder Linda Olson said she is grateful for the Tribal burial fund and that keeping rental assistance and job training programs for members is important.

Tribal Elder and former Tribal Council member Wink Soderberg said that economic development should be a priority for the Tribe.

Tribal Elders Carol Logan and Kathy Provost both said that a better sweat lodge should be a budget priority to allow Tribal members

to practice traditional religious practices.

"I feel that every time we bring the subject up, we are ignored," Provost said.

Other Tribal members who testified included Veronica Gaston, Les McKnight, Tauni McCammon, Michael Langley, Francene Ambrose and Joanna Brisbois.

The public hearing, chaired by Tribal Council Secretary Jon A. George, allowed Tribal members five minutes to speak. The format, which required Tribal members to sign up to speak and did not include responses to questions from Tribal Council members or staff, frustrated several Tribal members who attended because they said they felt it limited give-and-take conversation.

Other Tribal Council members who attended all or part of the public hearing included Brenda Tuomi, Jack Giffen Jr., Kathleen George, Denise Harvey and Tonya Gleason-Shepek.

Comments on Tribal budgeting priorities can be submitted to Tribal Council Chief of Staff Stacia Hernandez at stacia.martin@grandronde.org until the end of June. The meeting was recorded, but was not filmed by the Tribe's Information Systems Department for posting on the Tribe website.

Lunch was provided and served by members of the Tribal Youth Council. Soderberg gave the invocation. ■

'Being the chairman, you are the face of the Tribe'

LENO continued
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"When I think of being on council, I always think of you are only one of nine up here. If anybody thinks you don't make a mistake up here, you're kidding yourself membership. I think, looking back on our councils that have served, I'd like to acknowledge all that they have done because it didn't really matter what side you were on, especially back in the days when I started. You always had an outcome of something good for our membership. That's what it is really all about."

Leno challenged Tribal Council to tackle the issues of funding the Tribe's health plan, protecting Tribal endowments with a constitutional amendment, enhancing culture and protecting Tribal sovereignty.

During his time in office, Leno has been a staunch supporter of veterans' issues based on his service in the U.S. Marine Corps during the Vietnam War.

Leno was instrumental in starting the Veterans Summit, which has been held for four consecutive years before the annual Marcellus Norwest Memorial Veterans Powwow in early July. He also was appointed by Gov. Kate Brown to the Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs Advisory Committee in March 2016.

Leno also has been an avid supporter of regaining Tribal sovereignty, working for reinstatement

of Tribal hunting and fishing rights that were lost during negotiations to obtain Reservation land in the 1980s.

In 2015, the Tribe authorized 46 Tribal Reservation hunting tags and set Tribal hunting seasons for the first time since the Tribe was restored. In 2016, Tribal members harvested salmon at Willamette Falls for the first time in approximately 120 years.

He also has been vocal about protecting Tribal endowment funds and thanking previous Tribal leaders who established the funds for the future of the Tribe.

"Being a lifelong friend of Reyn's, seeing his commitment to his people and his community I have certainly admired," Steve Bobb Sr., who served six years on Tribal Council with Leno, said. "The thing that I have seen him spearhead in his longtime position as a councilman are certainly his commitment to our youth and their education, the care of our Elders with housing and foster care, seeing to doing all we can to not only recognize but care for the issues of our veterans."

"One of his strong points has always been finance, our endowments and staying on top of the direction of those who handle the Tribe's investments.

"But, most of all, his endurance to the overwhelming pressures of being a council person. My hat is off to Reyn, and those who wear that hat every day."

"Reyn has been a staunch believ-

er and prodder in our Natural Resources," Tribal Council Vice Chair Cheryle A. Kennedy said. "Because of that, we have an endowment because of his concern that this was something that had profited the Tribe and will go on into the future. I appreciate your attention to that detail."

Kennedy said Leno's dedication to helping veterans will be a legacy that lives on in the Tribe.

Bobb said being Tribal Council chair requires a person to be the "face" of the Tribe and that Leno performed the role well.

"Being the chairman, you are the face of the Tribe," Bobb said. "He has been, in my opinion, a good face of the Tribe and of the Grand Ronde community. Not everybody can be the face of the Grand Ronde Tribe. I think a lot of people think they can be, but I don't think everybody can take that spot and be the representative and be at the forefront and be the face of the Grand Ronde Tribe. I think he has."

"You don't get elected to seven straight terms on accident," Tribal Council member Chris Mercier said. "That shows that you have earned a lot of trust from people and support from people. I would never question the fact that you love this Tribe and you have committed a lot of your life to it, and I will express my admiration for the fact, and this might surprise some people, that you are able to maintain your sense of humor a lot

in this job and sometimes this job tests your ability to maintain your sense of humor."

Leno's announcement opens the door for new blood on Tribal Council since he has been a perennial top vote-getter. In 2014, he received 558 votes. During his seven runs for Tribal Council, Leno received a cumulative 3,140 votes, which averaged 449 votes per campaign.

Also up for re-election in 2017 are incumbents Chris Mercier and Tonya Gleason-Shepek, neither of whom announced their re-election intentions during the Tribal Council meeting.

Leno is the son of Orville and Ramona (McKnight) Leno and the grandson of David and Emma Leno and Thomas and Elvira (Langley) McKnight. He has been married to his wife, Liz, for almost 46 years and has three children: Shonn Leno, Dustin Leno and Angela (Leno) Fasana. He also has eight grandchildren and one great-grandchild on the way.

Leno said that he will still be around, helping Bobb, who is the Veterans Special Event Board chairman, with veterans' issues and events, as well as continuing to serve on the Department of Veterans' Affairs committee.

However, Leno said, he is looking forward to the freedom of not being weighed down with Tribal Council chairman responsibilities.

"I am going hunting without a cell phone," he said. ■