

Tribal continues holding Facebook Live events

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By Danielle Frost
Smoke Signals staff writer

Shortly after the Tribe was re-stored in 1983, a frequent topic of discussion amongst leaders was how to avoid putting Tribal members' futures in the hands of another government. The answer was to create endowments that would grow over time and sustain the Tribe should there ever be a crisis. "We were setting up a foundation so that we would never be subjected to humiliation again," said Tribal Council Chairwoman Cheryle A. Kennedy. "Those endowments were thought about before we had a dime to put in there."

Thanks to the foresight of past leaders, the Tribe will remain solvent during the COVID-19 crisis, Kennedy told viewers during a Facebook Live event on Wednesday, April 1.

"We set those up in case of a catastrophic event or if the U.S. government decided to no longer give funds to Tribes," Kennedy said. "The funds are there today to meet the challenges caused by this pandemic. ... The Tribe is financially stable and looking to what the needs of the members may be. Tribal Council passed a COVID-19 Tribal response program for our members today. Staff will need a little while to get the program worked out but together, we can make it through this difficult time. We need to unite."

Also participating in the Facebook Live event were General Manager David Fullerton, Executive Director of Health Services Kelly Rowe, Tribal Council Chief of Staff Stacia Hernandez and Spirit Mountain Casino General Manager Stan Dillon. Almost 400 people tuned in to the event.

Rowe told Facebook Live attendees that the Tribe's Health & Well-

ness Clinic employees began testing Tribal members for COVID-19 a few weeks ago and so far 20 tests have come back negative and three are awaiting results.

"This disease is an insidious one," she said. "There are so many possibilities for it to spread. If anyone watching this has tested positive elsewhere, please let us know. ... As things progress, I just really want to echo Cheryle's ask and ask everyone to make sure they keep up with hygiene. I know (all the restrictions) are a sacrifice so I want to thank everyone for it. You're not just saving you, you are saving everyone around you. Unfortunately, you can't just look at someone and know if they are at high risk for this."

One of the questions for Dillon was how the casino is keeping its employees safe.

"We did the ultimate by shutting down the casino," he said. "By making that sacrifice, we are helping our employees and guests stay safe. Even before this virus, we had heavy duty cleaning every day. Prior to the close, we were doing this every hour."

Dillon said that despite the closure, some construction activities were continuing, with social distancing rules in place. These include the remodel of Spirit Mountain Lodge and a sportsbook betting area, new restrooms and the planning of a recreational vehicle park.

"How long our casino will remain closed is a tough question," Dillon said. "We will meet with our board and Tribal Council and discuss what is best to do. We must be careful and not try to force ourselves to open it too soon. There could be long-term damage to the reputation of the casino."

Grand Ronde Station, located next to the casino, will remain



Tribal Council Chairwoman
Cheryle A. Kennedy



Spirit Mountain Casino General
Manager Stan Dillon

open as it offers essential services of food and gasoline for the community. However, Plexiglas has been installed as a precaution between cashiers and customers.

Another general question was if Elders security payments were going to remain the same.

"The payments will remain the same and go out on time," Hernandez said.

To help ease the financial burden on employees who must stay home, the Tribe authorized an additional 120 hours of paid time off. This is in addition to the 120 hours that were added in March. The additional PTO will be added to employees' time banks on April 12, according to payroll information.

Fullerton continued to emphasize that the intent is to take care of employees at the casino and Tribal government.

"We have met with Tribal Council to talk about what we can do to get through this," he said. "It is safe to say our commitment is to our employees. We have a very loyal workforce and want to continue to support them and their families."

Added Kennedy, "We are a blessed people and we will continue to be so. We are also a generous people and that has been shown in how we treat our employees. In the end, all of this will be returned to us. Stay safe."

The next Facebook Live session was held at 11 a.m. Wednesday, April 8, and featured Finance Officer Chris Leno, Kennedy, Rowe and Fullerton.

Leno discussed the Tribe's endowment funds, which include education, health, housing, government operations and Elders pension.

A common question heard these days is how the Tribe will remain financially sound with its main source of revenue, the casino, closed until the threat of coronavirus has passed.

"We know there is a financial impact (to keeping the casino closed) but we do have reserves and resources," Leno said. "We also have a supplemental budget we have adopted. ... We will continue to utilize state and federal resources, but we have others that have been built up over the years."

Leno assured those viewing the Facebook Live event that the Tribe has enough resources to keep people employed during the COVID-19 crisis and its various programs running.

"We pay for our programs off the interest generated from our endowments. Originally, the goal was to have \$6 million in each one, now we have substantially more than that. Right now, we have enough to fund the Elders pension even if the casino were closed for 3.5 years. Our programs are well-funded."

Kennedy said the COVID-19 crisis is constantly evolving, and that Tribal Council is placing staff on various calls and online meetings to observe and gather information.

"There are numerous calls going on and it's hard to even get in on some of them given the volume of traffic and software available," she said. "I was able to testify on three consultations and give these agencies and officials our proposals. Even though these times are very strange, we continue to put our effort forward and make sure our financial aspects are solid. The steady ship is the one who maintains the course." ■

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NATIVE PLANT PARTNERSHIP

Grand Ronde Tribal Council approved the signing of a memorandum of understanding with the Willamette Valley Native Plant Partnership on Wednesday, Feb. 19. This partnership connects and pools the resources from more than 25 different organizations interested in restoring the Willamette Valley ecoregion. This *Smoke Signals* video shares why this partnership is important to the Tribal Native Plant Materials Program and the Grand Ronde community.



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Community Health Program

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Please call 503-879-2078 to schedule a reservation.

