

Tribe receives apology from Willamette Falls Trust regarding its contractor’s cultural insensitivity

By Dean Rhodes
Smoke Signals editor

After receiving a July 13 letter from Grand Ronde Tribal Chairwoman Cheryle A. Kennedy, the Willamette Falls Trust has apologized to the Tribe for its contractor’s cultural insensitivity during recent public presentations.

Willamette Falls Trust, a nonprofit organization raising money to build a walkway to Willamette Falls, hosted an online public presentation that prompted Kennedy’s letter.

“The recent presentations ... have caused our people significant harm and concern,” Kennedy wrote, citing historical and cultural inaccuracies and the mispronunciations of Tribal names. During the presentation, Grand Ronde Tribal staff members were unable to comment or provide insight because the comment function was turned off and only Willamette Falls Trust and its contractors were able to speak and be heard.

“The Trust and its contractor, MASS Design Group, have failed to recognize and respect the sovereignty of the Tribe at this sacred site,” Kennedy wrote about not seeking the Tribe’s input before the presentation to ensure historical and cultural accuracy.

Kennedy also complained that the public presentation had conflated the history of Celilo Falls with that of Willamette Falls by using slides of the waterfall submerged by Bonneville Dam.

“The history of Celilo Falls is a painful part of the colonial history

on the Columbia River to many Tribes, but the Trust and its contractor should understand the differences between these places and not conflate them,” Kennedy wrote.

A principal with MASS Design Group also used the term “discovery” several times during the presentation “seemingly unaware of the harmful colonial implication of such language to Native people,” she wrote.

Kennedy said the indigenous story of Willamette Falls must be told by indigenous people.

“We have not given permission to the Willamette Falls Trust, its staff or contractors to tell the indigenous story of Willamette Falls. The story of our people is ours to tell. That is our way. It is a matter of social justice, and efforts to decolonize and begin healing require it,” she said.

Kennedy also criticized the Trust’s actions after the presentation.

“Following the presentations, our many respectful attempts to request copies of the slides to review the content for accuracy were refused by both the Willamette Falls Trust staff and MASS,” she wrote.

To move forward, Kennedy asked for a re-examination of the appropriate roles of the Willamette Falls Trust vs. the roles of the Tribe as well as reconsideration of the trust’s contractors because they “have demonstrated neither the expertise nor the credibility to carry out this work.”

“We ask that you commit to the principles of transparency, account-

ability and partnership, and change practices and processes going forward,” Kennedy said.

Willamette Falls Trust Board Chair Jodi Bailey acknowledged in a July 20 formal apology that there was “significant harm from the recent presentations we hosted.”

“We made a mistake in failing to center the voices and guidance of the Tribe, and in doing so, failed to recognize and respect the sovereignty of the Tribe. ... While we have and will make mistakes, we will continuously strive to do better,” Bailey wrote.

She also promised that the nonprofit organization will improve collaborative efforts with the Grand Ronde Tribe, which purchased the 23-acre Blue Heron Paper Mill site in August 2019.

“In honoring these efforts, we recognize that the success of this project is not possible without meaningful collaboration with Tribal governments,” Bailey wrote.

Metro regional government officials who asked Willamette Falls Trust to help with public engagement said that there is “room for improvement,” according to Willamette Falls Legacy Project Manager Brian Moore.

“Navigating the various needs of each of the Tribes is a complex and sensitive process, and there are a lot of opportunities for missteps,” Moore said. “We can begin crafting meaningful changes to the scope of work for the Trust and MASS, going forward, in support of the Legacy Project.”

During its July 20 board meeting, Willamette Falls Trust also added five new board members, including

Grand Ronde Tribal Council Secretary Jon A. George, Siletz Tribal Council member Robert Kentta and Umatilla Board of Trustees member Armand Minthorn.

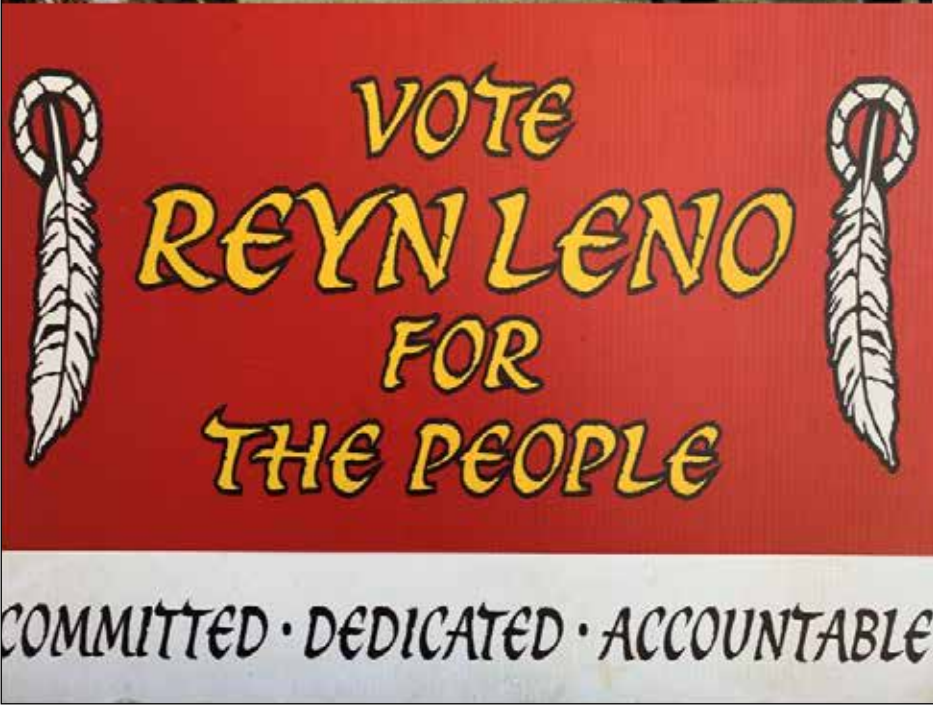
“It would be obvious to most everyone else that the Grand Ronde needs a seat on the board, but then they undermine us by asking other Tribes to take seats,” Kennedy was quoted as saying by the *Lake Oswego Review*. “In this day of racial equity, by and large the board there is not composed of minority people, so they’re making decisions that are wrong. ... We’re the sovereign nation that has the treaty for the entire metropolitan area. No other Tribe can say that.”

Despite the recent controversy, both Tribal and Metro officials say they remain committed to seeing the project through to provide public access to Willamette Falls.

“We share the same concerns and we’re committed to work with all the partners to work through the issues and build a great project,” Tribal Council Chief of Staff Stacia Hernandez said.

Initial estimates to build a walkway through the middle of the Blue Heron Paper Mill site were between \$20 million and \$33 million, but the Tribe now wants the walkway path to go along the river rather than along Main Street. An updated Phase One estimate puts the cost at about \$49 million. State officials have pledged \$10 million toward construction costs while Metro has \$20 million available from a bond approved by voters in November 2019. ■

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