

Tribe withdraws from Willamette Falls Trust

By Dean Rhodes

Smoke Signals editor

Tribal Council Chairwoman Cheryle A. Kennedy has formally notified the Willamette Falls Trust that the Grand Ronde Tribe will no longer participate as a member.

The trust is a nonprofit organization that is raising funds and engaging the community to “realize the collective vision for a spectacular Riverwalk at the Falls,” according to its website. Participants included the Grand Ronde, Yakama, Siletz, Umatilla and Warm Springs Tribes and government representatives from Oregon City, Clackamas, Metro and the state of Oregon.

Kennedy cited the trust’s continued harmful practices in explaining why the Grand Ronde Tribe was withdrawing in a Thursday, April 22, letter.

“There have been many instances of continued undermining of our Tribal sovereignty and subjection to micro-aggressions at both the staff and board levels,” she said.

Kennedy cited two specific incidents.

In February, the Grand Ronde Tribe was presented with a confidentiality and nondisclosure agreement it had to sign to be able to attend the trust’s next board meeting.

“We expressed our concern about the nature of the agreement because we believe the trust should be more transparent in its activities in relationship to a public project,” Kennedy said. She also complained that the agreement was initially sent to the Tribe branded with the colonial name “Rediscover the Falls,” which was the previous name of the trust.

The second incident occurred on Feb. 22 when trust staff refused entry to a Zoom meeting to Tribal Council Secretary Jon A. George

and Tribal Council Chief of Staff Stacia Hernandez, who had both requested to participate in the update.

“These insulting and harmful practices do not demonstrate in any way a commitment to transparency, accountability or partnership,” Kennedy said. “Additionally, the trust regularly sends out public communications mentioning the Tribe’s work at Willamette Falls without prior notice, permission or coordination. However, when the Tribe provides the trust with important studies or information, that information is not given due consideration and is often ignored or dismissed. The trust’s repeated communication failures have become the norm and not the exception in our relationship.”

Kennedy was referring to a recent analysis the Grand Ronde Tribe commissioned from noted Oregon historian Stephen Dow Beckham. He was asked to analyze a Confederated Tribes of Umatilla document that contended Umatilla Tribal members regularly used the falls for fishing in the 19th century.

Beckham found the Umatilla document filled with factual errors, faulty conclusions and misunderstanding of sources.

The Grand Ronde Tribe disseminated Beckham’s analysis and it was posted on the Willamette Falls & Landing Heritage Area’s website, but not the Willamette Falls Trust’s.

In addition, as of Friday, April 30, the trust’s website continued to misspell the name of the Tribe as “Grande Ronde.”

This isn’t the first time the Grand Ronde Tribe, which has been a member of the trust’s Board of Directors since December 2019, has had concerns. In July 2020, the Tribe shared concerns about a

trust contractor perpetuating misinformation regarding the Tribe’s historical and ancestral connection to Willamette Falls.

“In response, your board issued a formal apology and indicated a firm commitment to do better,” Kennedy said. “Unfortunately, that has not been our experience. The practices of the Willamette Falls Trust have not improved.”

In response to the Tribe’s withdrawal, the Willamette Falls Trust Board of Directors said it will always welcome the Grand Ronde community and hold a seat open should the Tribe reconsider. It did not address any of the specific concerns detailed in Kennedy’s withdrawal letter.

What effect the Tribe’s withdrawal will have on its ownership of the former Blue Heron Paper Mill site in Oregon City, which it purchased in August 2019, and the development of the Riverwalk that will go through the Tribal property

is projected to be minimal.

The Willamette Falls Legacy Project is the public sector collaboration between the Tribes and various governmental agencies that is managing the Riverwalk construction.

Kennedy told Pamplin Media Group that Grand Ronde is not sure what role the trust is meant to play in the greater process of completing the legacy project. She also said Grand Ronde might rejoin the trust if a mutual understanding over the role each organization has to play is reached.

“The Tribe holds the vision of the future of Willamette Falls to be sacred with our ancestors and are committed to see that vision through,” Kennedy said in the Tribe’s withdrawal letter. “We will continue to proactively move forward by cleaning up the heavily polluted area to create an inspiring place where all can gather and enjoy the majesty of Willamette Falls.” ■

Police Department has non-emergency text line

The Grand Ronde Tribal Police Department has created a non-emergency text line at 541-921-2927. “Even though this is mostly designed for children, I don’t want adults thinking that they can’t use it as well,” said Grand Ronde Tribal Police Chief Jake McKnight.

McKnight said that emergency situations still require calling 911. For more information, contact McKnight at 503-879-1474. ■

Grand Ronde Tribe has not announced any plans on how it will spend American Rescue funds

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and providing specific contact information for questions.

“Tribal governments have broad flexibility to decide how best to use this funding to meet the needs of your communities, and that is certainly something we heard in the Tribal consultations last month,” Lozar said.

Tribal governments will have to use the Treasury Submission Portal and complete various requirements to receive the two payments. May 24 is the deadline for the \$1 billion equal allocation and June 7 is the deadline for the employment allocation.

In 2020, some Tribes had issues with the CARES Act methodology and sued the federal government. For instance, the Shawnee Tribe in Oklahoma and the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians in Florida received

the minimum \$100,000 because Housing & Urban Development data said they had enrollment totals of zero.

The Grand Ronde Tribe, as well as the other eight federally recognized Tribes in Oregon, fared well under the CARES Act. Grand Ronde received more than \$45 million and used a considerable portion of it to fund coronavirus relief payments to adult Tribal members who received a combined eight payments that totaled \$4,400 in 2020.

So far, the Grand Ronde Tribe has not announced any plans on how it will spend American Rescue Plan funds once they are received.

The \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan was signed into law by President Joseph Biden on March 11, 2021. ■

Includes information from Indian Country Today.

Learning to hunt



Contributed photos

The Natural Resources Department held a field day during which Tribal and community youth earned Hunter’s Safety certificates on Saturday, May 1. The class was hosted by the Parks and Recreation Program and was taught by five instructors from the Polk County area. Eighteen certificates were issued.

