

Tribe distributes premium pay to government employees

By Dean Rhodes

Smoke Signals editor

The Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde distributed \$6.2 million in premium pay wages to its approximately 600 governmental employees on Friday, Nov. 5.

“We’re happy to announce that the Tribe is issuing premium pay wages to all those in the Tribal government whose hard work, dedication and flexibility has allowed the Tribe to continue services and expand programming to Tribal members and the Grand Ronde community over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic,” the Tribe announced on its webpage www.grandronde.org.

The American Rescue Plan Act, which was passed into law in March of this year, stipulates that premium pay wages can be awarded to employees who worked and contributed throughout the course of the pandemic that began in mid-March 2020 because the employees faced a greater risk of exposure.

The Grand Ronde Tribe received \$27.544 million in American Rescue Plan funds in May and another \$23.547 million in August, bringing the Tribe’s total payment to more than \$51 million. In 2020, the Tribe also received \$45.56 million in CARES Act funding.

The Treasury Department issued guidance in May that stated American Rescue Plan funds should be used for public health response, water, sewer and broadband infrastructure and premium pay for essential workers “who have and will bear the greatest health risks because of their service in critical

infrastructure sectors.”

The Tribal announcement said that the Tribe’s executive staff worked closely with department managers to determine the appropriate premium pay level for every governmental employee and calculated the premium pay accordingly.

Based on the amounts received by *Smoke Signals* staff members, employees received anywhere from \$15,000 for those who averaged 32 hours or more a week in the office to \$1,750 for those who primarily worked from home during an 18-month period that began in mid-March 2020.

“Whether they’re one of our dedicated clinic staff working on the frontlines, someone interacting with Tribal members to provide services, processing emergency or COVID-19 relief payments for Tribal members or a temperature check station employee, this service has been invaluable and the Tribe wanted to recognize that effort,” the statement said.

The premium pay sparked debate on social media by Tribal members who primarily criticized Tribal Council members for reportedly receiving \$20,000 each in premium pay.

Tribal Council members defended providing and receiving premium pay during the Tuesday, Nov. 9, Legislative Action Committee meeting.

Tribal Council member Lisa Leno said the premium pay amounted to about 6 percent of the federal funds received by the Tribe during the pandemic. “This was always about our employees,” she said, adding that Tribal Council members did

not participate in determining the premium pay tiers, the amount of premium pay and where they individually fell in the tier structure. “It was about our wanting to show our appreciation for our employees and thank them for the tremendous sacrifices that they have made for our people for the last year and a half.”

Tribal Council member Denise Harvey defended, at times emotionally, her colleagues for diligently working to ensure the Grand Ronde Tribe received its fair share of federal funds that were distributed through 2020’s CARES Act and this year’s American Rescue Plan Act.

“Historically, we have this time and it’s one of the first times ever that we have been equally included in those funds,” Harvey said. “It was a lot of work. Tribal leaders had a certain responsibility that they had to do. ... This council did everything they could to ensure that not only us, but Indian Country was going to get the benefits that we were allowed.”

Tribal Council member Kathleen George said that Tribal Council has been focused on helping the membership and employees during the pandemic.

“It seemed like a narrative that was trying to be developed was this was something about Tribal Council trying to get something,” George said. “I just want to assure the membership that throughout this entire pandemic, over 18 months now, Tribal Council has been 100 percent focused on supporting our people ... and our people also includes our employees. ... Did the people on Tribal Council receive

some benefits? We did, so I guess we’re guilty of that, but we’re also guilty of putting the people first and that’s what this effort had really been all about.”

Tribal Council Secretary Michael Langley said that Spirit Mountain Casino employees were not eligible to receive the premium pay funded through the American Rescue Plan Act. However, casino employees received \$1,300 bonuses on Oct. 29, as well as continued to receive wages during the casino’s 74-day closure that occurred between March and May 2020.

“It is about the employees, and not about us,” Langley said.

The statement said that the Tribe also has distributed more than \$37 million in direct payments to Tribal members, including eight monthly payments that were sent between April and November 2020 to help offset financial hardships caused by the pandemic, and started more than \$5.7 million in new programs to help Tribal members during the pandemic.

A frequently asked questions posted at www.grandronde.org stated that Tribal members have received almost 38 percent, or \$8,400 per adult Tribal member, of all federal pandemic funds received by the Tribe while employees received slightly more than 6 percent.

One ramification of receiving premium pay, however, means that Tribal employees will not receive the usual Christmas bonus this year. “We used that budget to ensure all employees were included in some level of premium pay,” General Manager David Fullerton said. ■

Tribal Council OKs grant application to provide veterans with new building

By Dean Rhodes

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The Tribe’s Veterans Service Office and the veterans it serves will have a new home in 2022 and the Tribe is seeking a grant from the Oregon Office of Veterans’ Affairs to help convert the building.

Tribal Council approved applying for a \$51,888 grant that would help renovate the Procurement building across Grand Ronde Road from the Tribal Housing Department office for Ramona Quenelle, who started working as the Tribe’s Veterans Service Officer in July 2020.

The budget includes providing for a handicapped ramp and purchasing computers, tables and chairs, new blinds and carpeting. The current garage would be converted into a gathering area and the conference room would be used for program conferencing, training and confidential meetings.

Veterans would be able to use the computers to check on their federal Veterans Affairs benefits and access forms electronically.

Procurement soon will be vacating its current location for a new building south of the Grand Ronde



Photo by Timothy J. Gonzalez

The Tribe’s current building housing the Procurement Department off Grand Ronde Road is slated to be converted into the new home of the Tribal Veterans Service Office in 2022. Tribal Council approved applying for a \$51,888 state grant to help with that conversion during its Wednesday, Nov. 10, meeting.

Police Station on the west side of Grand Ronde Road.

In other action, Tribal Council:

- Approved the enrollment of five infants into the Tribe because they meet the requirements outlined in the Enrollment Ordinance and Tribal Constitution;
- Approved the Tribe’s Natural Resources Department applying for a maximum \$17,000 in funding from the Natural Resources Conservation Service to improve habitat for existing elk and deer meadows on the Reservation. The

project would include mechanical and chemical control of invasive species and replanting of grasses and shrubs;

- Approved Friday, Dec. 10, as the next per capita payment date. Finance Officer Chris Leno said that the per capita amount will not be determined until early December;
- Authorized a Tribal credit card for new Human Resources Manager Sarah Harvey to pay for recruiting posting fees on websites, special job boards and

professional associations, as well as myriad other recruiting and departmental expenses;

- Sent a new Fuel Tax Ordinance out to the membership for a first reading. The new ordinance would allow the Tribe to impose a motor vehicle fuel tax at the same rate as the state, which is currently 36 cents per gallon. The Legislature amended the state statute to allow for the tax effective Jan. 1, 2022. Tribal members will have 30 days to comment on the proposed ordinance;
- And appointed Kalene Contreras to the Housing Grievance Board with a term expiring in March 2024.

Also included in the Nov. 10 Tribal Council packet was an approved authorization to proceed to distribute \$730 timber revenue payments to Tribal members. The payment is being sent out early to accommodate Tribal members who might have to shop earlier for Christmas because of national supply chain difficulties, Tribal Council Secretary Michael Langley said during the Tuesday, Nov. 9, Legislative Action Committee meeting.

To watch the entire meeting, visit the Grand Ronde Tribal government website at www.grandronde.org and click on the Government tab and then Videos. ■