

Candidates forum attracts several attendees

By Nicole Montesano

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Approximately 30 people turned out in person on Thursday, July 25, to hear candidates for Tribal Council discuss their vision for the Tribe, with another 50 watching on Zoom.

Finance Officer Chris Leno moderated the forum at the request of General Manager Angie Blackwell, who is related to one of the candidates.

Leno said recordings of the event will be made available by request but won't be posted online. Copies may be requested from Tribal Council Chief of Staff Stacia Hernandez.

Seven candidates are vying for three council seats. Incumbents Cheryle A. Kennedy, Jon A. George and Michael Cherry are facing challengers Valeria Atanacio, Pamala Warren-Chase, Tonya Gleason-Shepek and Andy Jenness.

Jenness currently sits on the Smoke Signals Editorial Board, but under the Tribal Free Press Ordinance amendment that received its first reading before Tribal Council on July 24, he would be required to resign from the Editorial Board if he were elected to Tribal Council, as the ordinance amendment prohibits serving on both at the same time.

Questions were submitted by Tribal members ahead of the forum and covered a range of topics, including candidates' stance on changing enrollment requirements to lineal descent, recording ceremonies, how they might strike a balance between providing more Tribal programs and providing the per capita payments, whether they support a free and independent Tribal media, and whether they would pledge to create more positions to represent the two-spirit/Native LGBTQIA community. The acronym stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex and asexual/aromantic/agender.

Altogether, eight questions were asked and three candidates responded to each. A few took their next opportunity to speak, or their closing statement time, to address questions they hadn't had the opportunity to answer.

Kennedy has served on the Tribal Council for 25 years, 18 of them as chairwoman.

"We've endured so much and it's up to all of us," she said, referring to the Tribe's treaty rights.

George has served on the Council for 12 years. He said that he has learned to "have a strong voice and stand strong."

Cherry, who serves as Tribal Council Secretary, was elected in 2021. She told the audience, "we have much to celebrate but we also have much work to do."

Gleason-Shepek served on council from 2014 to 2017, then worked for the state child welfare system, retiring about a year ago. She said she wants to improve, "open and honest communication" between the council and Tribal members.

Atanacio is a first-time candidate and said she is seeking to bring the energy of a younger generation to

the council.

"I feel a calling and inspiration to start moving into leadership in the Tribe," Atanacio said.

Jenness said that he first served on the council 30 years ago, and voted on momentous decisions for the Tribe including putting the endowments into place and bringing in Spirit Mountain Casino. While those decisions brought benefits, Jenness said, they also brought division and he wants to work on healing that divide.

"I want to see us restored to unity and harmony, and to get along," he said.

Warren-Chase is running for council for the second time and has worked for the Tribe in various capacities throughout the years.

"Every time I leave, I always come back," she said. "I realized it's the people. I need to be here. I need to serve."

One question was whether candidates would be willing to commit to creating more job positions in support of two-spirit/Native LGBTQIA Tribal members and if not, what they would do in lieu of that to address needs of the community.

Candidates said they would do whatever they could to support that community. However, Jenness said, "Creating positions is not in the council's scope of authority."

He added that the council should "set the tone" by showing "love for all our people no matter what lifestyle they choose."

Warren-Chase said she's unsure what sort of position is being called for, and that the council would need to sit down and think about how to meet the needs of that community.

"Discrimination is shameful," she said.

Cherry said the Tribe needs to add more mental health services, noting that the two-spirit/Native LGBTQIA community is at extremely high risk for suicide.

"I can't promise new positions," Cherry said, but she did promise her support for improved services.

Changing Tribal enrollment criteria to lineal descent also drew promises of support from the candidates.

The question was answered by George, Atanacio and Gleason-Shepek, all of whom said the council needs to respect the will of Tribal members and move forward with the change, although they also indicated it will be "a lot of work."

Gleason-Shepek suggested more might be needed than simply changing the criteria.

"I think our Tribe has a lot of healing to do around enrollment, perhaps some type of healing ceremony," she said.

The question of whether to allow Tribal ceremonies to be recorded or documented, and viewed by non-Tribal members, drew more varied responses, although candidates' general consensus was that certain ceremonies should be kept private and others allowed to be recorded.

Kennedy said the "most sacred are burials and they are open," but said she believes sweat and healing ceremonies should be kept private.

Ceremonies around food, Kennedy said, should be open for recording and documenting.

"One of my goals is to restore our culture to the greatest extent possible," Kennedy said. "I wish we could offer more classes so people could know we're from an ancient people, a spiritual people."

Cherry said that seeing certain things on video, such as prayer, "hurts my heart."

On the other hand, Cherry said, "I don't like exclusivity."

She said the Tribe's oral history is for maintaining traditions involving sacred events and those should not be recorded.

"I think about members who are not near us and how they got there," Jenness said. "A lot were forced to move."

In some cases, he said, such as the annual trip to honor Tom-anowos at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, it simply isn't possible for the entire Tribe to participate.

"Our members need to have access to our ceremonies and what those are and why so those can be integrated into their lives as well," he said.

Warren-Chase said that some ceremonies should be kept private, but that "there's a level of education that we need to do," with others. Decisions about which ceremonies should be recorded or kept private should be made by the Tribe's spiritual leaders, Warren-Chase said.

Another question asked candidates' thoughts on an independent press. In addition, candidates were emailed two questions, requested by Smoke Signals Editorial Board Chair Mia Prickett.

Four candidates, Cherry, Warren-Chase, Atanacio and Kennedy responded before press time. Other candidates' answers will be added to the online story if they reply.

The questions were:

- "In your opinion, what is the role of Smoke Signals and what is your stance on the Tribe having an independent free press?"
- "What do you believe the difference is between the Smoke Signals as an independent free press and the Tribe's public relations department? And how would you as a council member help foster an environment of interdepartmental collaboration?"

Jenness, who did not respond to the emailed questions, said during the forum, "I think an informed citizenry is what it takes to live in a democracy and to hold our leaders accountable."

He noted that there are approximately 500 Tribes in the United States and Smoke Signals is one of five or six with an independent press.

"So, we are trend setters, we are leading the way in Indian Country," he said.

Cherry said, "I absolutely support (the) independent press and would continue to do so," a comment she reiterated in her emailed statement.

George, who did not reply to the emailed questions, said he wanted to "honor Chris Mercier, whose idea

it was," and noted the council had amended its ordinance, "for the hard work they do and wanting to speak the truth," to ensure there would be "no repercussions for speaking their truth."

Atanacio did not have a chance to answer the question during the forum, but responded by email.

"I believe it is important to have (an) independent free press to give all sides to a story in order to allow people to form their individual thoughts and opinions."

Atanacio wrote that the difference between Smoke Signals and the Tribe's public relations department is that, "Public relations is to really focus on the Tribe as a government entity and the image of our government business, whereas Smoke Signals provides accurate and neutral documentation of events focused on both government, community and individual Tribal members."

She said the two "definitely have a responsibility in collaborating and communicating with one another and as a council person, I would work to make this a priority by lobbying for support to the Editorial Board and staff within our public relations department and Smoke Signals, in the form of co-designing and building shared goals for the work that intersects across both areas."

Warren-Chase, who responded both in the forum and by email, said, "I feel an independent free press is vital to reporting and disseminating news and events free of undue bias and/or influence. A true free press should not have any outside political or personal influence."

She said she was unaware the Tribe had a public relations department, but that "it would be a priority to me to foster interdepartmental communication/collaboration across the board."

Kennedy wrote that she supports Smoke Signals as a free press.

"I support Smoke Signals operating as an independent free press because I've observed that Smoke Signals operates in an ethical manner," she said. "I trust it will continue operating in a responsible and fair way."

As to the question about inter-department collaboration and the difference between Smoke Signals and the public relations department, Kennedy said, "Smoke Signals is a newspaper reporting on general news, events, occurrences, culture, information, services and notices of upcoming events, while the public relations department is an advocate for the Tribe to promote good relations with agencies, federal, state and local governments and to promote the goals of the Tribe."

She continued, "Because the roles between Smoke Signals and Public Affairs are distinctly different, each has an important role. It may be beneficial to have a monthly joint meeting but must be careful not to duplicate work nor increase workload. I would seek opinions from the professional staff who bear the responsibility before an action is taken." ■