

Tribes set their own criteria for membership

AMENDMENT continued
from front page

enrolled and do not have any Grand Ronde blood. They were adopted by Tribal members and enrolled as biological children, which occurred prior to DNA requirements. This provision will ensure their descendants will not be enrolled.

Tribal Council member Kathleen George said during a Tuesday, Aug. 20, Legislative Action Committee meeting that the solution to the ongoing enrollment issues is a constitutional amendment.

“Tribal members can decide how they want our Tribal government to move forward and how they want us to enroll new Tribal members,” she said. “I’m encouraging everyone to participate in the constitutional amendment election...and leave it in the hands of Tribal members to decide if we should continue the way we’re doing it today or if we should change that and have a brighter future for more families in our Tribe.”

Constitutional amendment history

This will be the 8th time the issue of enrollment has been put to a vote, including the 1999 amendment. Additionally, there were two discontinued elections in 2007 and 2014.

In addition to the problematic 1999 amendment, Tribal members have only agreed in sufficient numbers on two other proposals -- in 2008 when they increased the relinquishment period from one to five years and in 2022 when they agreed to ban disenrollment actions unless fraud or dual enrollment can be proven.

The Grand Ronde Constitution requires two-thirds of those who register for and cast ballots in a

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BIA-supervised election must approve any proposal for it to change the Tribe’s governing document. An effort to remove the federal government from Tribal constitutional amendment elections was rejected by voters in 2014.

Of the 12 constitutional amendment proposals voted on since 1983’s Restoration, three have received 66.7 percent or more of the votes.

During the 2023 Tribal Council election, Tribal members were asked five questions regarding enrollment.

The results found that more than 70 percent of Tribal members who voted – 1,295 for a 29 percent turnout – favored changing current enrollment requirements and more than 65 percent supported moving toward lineal descendancy for enrollment.

Lineal descendancy also was the most favored enrollment option during the advisory votes, garnering 45 percent out of four options given.

Enrollment requirements were established post-Restoration

When the Grand Ronde Tribe’s Constitution was adopted on Nov. 30, 1984, after Restoration occurred approximately a year earlier, membership requirements were relatively straightforward.

“The membership of the Confed-

erated Tribes of the Grand Ronde Community of Oregon shall consist of all persons who are not enrolled as members of another recognized Tribe, band or community,” it stated, adding that the person’s name had to appear on the official membership roll prepared under the Grand Ronde Restoration Act and that the person must possess 1/16th or more degree Indian blood quantum from a federally recognized Tribe or Tribes and be descended from a member of the Grand Ronde Tribe.

“For purposes of this section, descent from a member of the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde Community of Oregon shall include lineal descent from any person who was named on any roll or records of Grand Ronde members prepared by the Department of the Interior prior to the effective date of this Constitution.”

Those membership requirements, including blood quantum, stayed in place for 15 years until 1999. In response to an increasing number of enrollment applications prompted by the financial success of Spirit Mountain Casino and the beginning of per capita payment distributions, Tribal members approved an amendment that restricted membership.

The biggest change was that the applicant had to be born to a parent who was a member of the Tribe at the time of their birth and who, unless they had passed away, was a member of the Tribe when the applicant filed an enrollment application.

The amendment is now viewed as the main cause of several contentious enrollment problems facing the Tribe, including split families in which siblings with the same heritage are and are not Tribal members. In 2019, Tribal voters favored resolving the split-family problem with 63.5 percent supporting an amendment, but the two-thirds majority required by the Tribal Constitution negated the effort.

And, as Tribal Council Chairwoman Cheryle A. Kennedy and other Tribal Council members have cited numerous times in public meetings, Grand Ronde’s enrollment problems predate Termination in 1954 and Restoration in 1983.

Indian agents employed by the federal government assigned Tribal members blood quantum amounts at their whim with little to no scientific or genealogical data to support the numbers. The Tribe inherited those blood quantum numbers when it was restored and has since then been dealing with the multi-generational problems those have created.

Several other Tribes use lineal descendancy

In 2023, Smoke Signals surveyed the enrollment requirements of 48 federally recognized Tribes in the continental United States. Using the Department of the Interior’s list of Tribes, staff searched for Tribal constitutions and enrollment ordinances on the respective Tribes’ websites and found that a variety of membership requirements are used throughout Indian Country.

Since Tribes are sovereign nations, they set their own criteria for membership.

Other Tribes mostly use a combination of lineal descent and blood quantum in their enrollment requirements with most required blood quantum amounts ranging from 1/4th to 1/16th.

For instance, to become a member of Oklahoma’s 17,000-member Comanche Nation, an applicant must trace their ancestry back to a Tribal member who received a land allotment in 1900 and possesses 1/8th quantum of Comanche blood.

Closer to home, the 5,700-member Klamath Tribes in southern Oregon require that applicants be named on or be descended from someone on the official 1954 final roll and possess 1/8th degree or more of Klamath, Modoc or Yahooskin Indian blood.

Examples of Tribes that use direct descendancy include the 10,000-member Delaware Tribes of Indians in Oklahoma, which requires an applicant link back to an ancestor on the 1904 Pratt Roll. “Your parents and grandparents do not have to be enrolled,” the Delaware Tribes’ enrollment requirements state.

In Oregon, the Confederated Tribes of Coos, Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw Indians’ Tribal code states that a person is eligible for membership if their name is on the Jan. 1, 1940, census roll or the person is a lineal descendant of a person listed on the roll. There is no blood quantum requirement. “Nor have we ever,” said Enrollment Specialist Debbie Bossley about blood quantum.

The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, which has approximately 223,000 members, has perhaps one of the most streamlined membership requirements in its constitution. “The Choctaw Nation ... shall consist of all Choctaw Indians by blood whose names appear on the final rolls of the Choctaw Nation approved April 26, 1906, and their lineal descendants.”

The Grand Ronde Tribe held five meetings in 2023 hoping to find consensus for a potential constitutional amendment and conducted surveys about going with a 4/4 proposal or lineal descent. The 4/4 blood quantum proposal was rejected by a majority of voters during the Sept. 9 election.

The most recent meeting on the constitutional amendment was held Wednesday, Aug. 21. A survey will also be distributed to Tribal members.

For more information, visit grandronde.org/media/3728/08072024-final-lineal-descendancy-faq.pdf. ■

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