

Director Sorenson makes report to Unit III



BRIDGETT SORENSON,
DIRECTOR, UNIT III

On July 12, I held office hours and attended the Unit III elders' monthly meeting. Chairman Payment was there and said we needed an institutional researcher position (\$63,000) for grants and gathering data and a contract for livestreaming our meetings. I said I would probably not be supporting these items as we had just come back into the black with our budget. It seems when we just get a few dollars in the black, there are proposals to spend without trying to pad the pocket book for unexpected items. I do believe we need more grant writer positions because they do pay for themselves with the right person, but it was not good timing for me. I suggested waiting until we see where we were at for 2014's budgets.

The livestream contract I cannot support. Those of you who do not know what I am talking about, I will explain. Last fall when the Constitution was going to be reviewed by the elders, board and Constitutional Committee, the chairman invited his friend, Tom Biron, to livestream (broadcast on the Internet live) the review. There was a vote, or maybe several, depending on who was coming into the room to support the vote. I voted 'no' and so did a few other board and Constitutional Committee members including the past committee chairman.

Anyway, from that point on, Tom has been livestreaming our meetings and workshops held on the meeting dates. He is being paid (travel and expenses) by the chairman and some Unit I board reps. Some feel that those of us who do not support paying \$20,000 a year for this service have something to hide or want closed door meetings. This is far from the case. I am not willing to pay for something we can do in-house for little or no cost and the tribe owns it. We have our entertainment manager who comes to all the meetings with the microphones and video camera. He is a salaried employee who already comes. We can take the recording and download it to our website and have it accessed only by our members by using their tribal enrollment numbers as passwords. This way, our information is limited to our members and it is the property of the tribe. Currently, with Tom livestreaming the meetings, he owns the information. Who in their right mind would let someone come into their business and record things without owning the rights? This became a feud at our July

16 meeting in Munising. The resolution was on our meeting agenda and there was no contract attached and was not sent out for bids like our normal practice. Would you vote on something without details? I don't like shady business. The board voted 7-4 against it. The chairman said he would pay for it himself and own it. I say, then why would we pay for it, if he is willing to pay. The other issue is sometimes we discuss things that should not be aired to the world about our businesses. It is one thing for members at the meetings to hear, but we do not need our competitors or potential business partners knowing everything we do. I did thank Tom for volunteering his time.

On July 15, we had our casino oversight meeting with our casino CFO, COO and executive assistant. We discussed each casino's local customer base (living within 50 miles). Hessel is 80 percent locals, Christmas 79 percent, Manistique 74 percent, Sault Ste. Marie 66 percent and St. Ignace 45 percent. The next largest market share for St. Ignace is 101-250 miles, which is 32 percent, followed by 51-100 miles, 16 percent and tourists 250 miles plus is 7 percent. St. Ignace is mostly affected by downstate competition, so we need to be more competitive and become a resort destination. I proposed, since we were just named the number one casino in Michigan, that we advertise the crap out of it. All of our billboards and commercials and newsprint need to state this. We should be using the lady who won \$3 million at the Shores in this advertising campaign as well. I would also like to see the following changes: Each casino needs its own marketing representative. All three of the smaller casinos have none. They can each have their own promotions based on their target market and, after all, they know their customers better than anyone. I would also like to see each casino have their own menus with some similarities for buying power but, like I said before, each casino has different markets. Each casino bar department should select its own entertainment and bar promotions. I believe that even though we are all Kewadin Casinos they do not have to do everything the same. With differences, your customers will travel to each casino for the different promos and amenities. We need change and buy in from everyone involved. The auditing firm we hired to review marketing and our food outlets were on site the week of July 22. They will be providing a written report to the board soon.

On July 16, we had our board meeting in Munising. The livestream was discussed and voted on like I wrote about earlier. The other item of contention was the board putting the Health Division under the executive director. We did motion and voted on this and Housing at our June 25 meeting in the Sault but it came forward on a resolution in Munising. The only change was that Bonnie Culfa, the health services director, will report to Christine (executive director) who reports to Chairman Payment.

The board made a management decision within its authority. This is being portrayed as such a bad decision. There are many reasons for this action. The chairman has recently been appointed to many boards at the federal level, which is a great thing for our tribe, so it is one less division to oversee. At many of our elder meetings, there are concerns about getting appointments, keeping doctors and dentists and overall services. There is also some politics involved that I will not point out at this time. When we were discussing this item, I spoke twice on this and raised my hand a third time and was told by the chairman that I already spoke twice and he would poll the board to see if there was an objection to me speaking again (which there wasn't). Needless to say, I was very upset. I normally only speak once, maybe twice, on an item and several people speak several times on an item and he wanted to play that card. He better stick to that rule for everyone, not just when it is not going his way! Now he is trying to petition the membership to referendum this resolution. Really, let's waste \$10,000-\$30,000 more money on a management decision. There was also a letter sent to tribal employees of the Health Division saying the change affected their livelihood. What a scare tactic. They all still report to Bonnie, so nothing has changed for them. There was also a petition for the health change and a petition for constitutional amendments. Many employees were upset about this and do not want to be put in the middle of it. I brought this information to the board members on July 30 and showed them the mailing. None of them had admitted to knowing and many were not happy about it either. Don't we have more pressing issues to deal with?

On July 17, I was at the St. Ignace casino from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. doing the last team member surveys for that site.

On July 18, I was at the Sault casino from 9 a.m. to noon and 1:30 to 4 p.m. doing their last surveys. There was a large turnout for this.

On July 19, I held office hours and went to the elders' center to say goodbye to Toni Conguy, a cook for several years who moved on to another job. We will miss Toni and wish her luck in her new job.

We held a gaming expansion meeting that afternoon with some of our developers on the Lansing and New Boston projects. We are in the middle of negotiating our compact with the state and anxiously awaiting a conclusion to move forward.

On July 22, I attended the Elders Advisory Committee meeting in Newberry. There were concerns with getting into the dental clinics and, when having need for extractions and work, they were told they needed a cleaning and exam prior. I told them, if they have emergencies, they can go to any clinic at 8 a.m. and will be seen and do not have to wait for an appointment. Some prefer to travel to the Sault instead of St. Ignace or Manistique.

Justin Miller, the Elder

Division VISTA worker, discussed possible fundraising opportunities and growing tobacco for individuals. Division Director Cheri Goetz discussed working with GFS on our meal programs and the tribe's bidding on these services. There were concerns with elders declining participation in events such as wanting a picnic. Many elders feel there has been loss of pride in their tribe as a factor. This is very unfortunate and we need to re-instill that faith and pride. I believe this could happen if everyone would do the right thing and tell the truth without constant politicking. Another concern was that my article was so big that another director only got limited space. This is not the case, all directors can choose to write as little or as much as they want.

On July 23, we had our workshop in the Sault and held a Gaming Commission hearing and dealt with some of the issues of parties involved. Indian Energy gave a brief update on trying to secure government contracts and the tribe is still years away from any return on investment.

We drew the winners of the team member surveys. There were five \$100 winners from each casino and one \$1,000 winner from all casinos. Congratulations to all winners, especially Kerbi Eimerman, the lucky \$1,000 winner from Manistique. Thank you to all team members who took the time to fill them out. We ran out of time to open them because some of us had appeal hearings to sit on and there was also a gratitude party for long-time team member, Jim Ailing, who recently passed on.

The appeal hearings lasted from 2 to 9:20 p.m. Terminated team members have the ability to appeal their termination to an appeal board that is comprised of three board of directors members, a department manager and a team member who is in a similar position. The supervisors who terminated them tell their reasons for termination and then the team members come in separately to state their side of the termination. The appeal board can ask questions to all parties involved. The appeal board's decision is binding and can result in the team member getting re-instated and there many be stipulations put in place such as probation, payback, vacation pay out, etc. There have been some recent terminations done for background investigation findings and lying on employment applications. This has resulted in some long-term team member terminations.

On July 26, I held office hours. On July 30, we had our workshop in the Sault. We discussed budget modifications that needed to be done.

The Election Committee discussed changes to filling an unexpected vacancy on the board of directors or chairperson. This is going to be taken care of because of the fiasco when Chairman McCoy resigned and there was never an election for replacement. We will be voting on changes at our meeting on Aug. 6 in Kinross. We wanted to open the casino surveys but did not have access to them as they were locked up

at Law Enforcement. At least we know they are safe, right? We will be opening at least a sample of them at our workshop on Aug. 6 and putting a plan in place for compiling the data.

We received the announcement that our property on Greenough, which was the original administration building, has been put in trust.

We had lunch with tribal businessman Noah Leask from South Carolina. He recently donated \$10,000 to our tribal scholarship fund and participated in the July 29 golf scholarship fundraiser. We look forward to a promising relationship with Noah and thank him for his contribution to higher education for our members!

On July 31, we met with the Housing Division to discuss its 2014 plan. Unfortunately, most of their Housing Commission meetings usually conflict with another one of our meetings so it was nice of the Housing director to accommodate our schedule so we could participate. We discussed emergency housing through our ACFS Division. If someone has been given an eviction, a person may qualify for a once a year payment of up to \$750 to prevent eviction or it allows for a deposit for a member needing a place to live. We have a program for members to receive up to \$6,500 for a new furnace or water heater under a homeowner rehab program. We learned that Housing only brings in less than \$150,000 per year on rent for about 500 of its units. That is very sad. There are only about half the residents paying any rent at all. I see Housing as a resource for low income families to be able to provide shelter for themselves and/or their families, but not necessarily a lifetime residence, unless you are raising a family, an elder or handicapped person. There are so many members in need of housing and we don't have enough units to help everyone. We have some single people living in three bedroom homes also. It is not that I want to go around kicking people out of housing, but we need some happy medium. Everyone needs to pay some sort of rent because no matter where you go you will have to pay something. Some members quit or will not work so they don't have to pay rent. I suggested that maybe everyone could at least pay \$100 and put that money in a fund for a down payment program so eventually that person could purchase his or her own home. Currently, there are deductions for having children, child care, paying child support and a travel allowance, so if you were set an amount for rent and had all these deductions you could potentially not pay anything. We used to have about a 25 percent turnover in tenants and now it is about 10 percent, which probably is due to the economy.

The Housing Division is heavily subsidized by a NAHASDA block grant and has specific guidelines to follow. We use this money to be able to modernize our homes, pay for the tribe's K-9 unit, dog food and training, community policing activities, culture camp support, community center construction such as the Hessel

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community center, etc. Housing must maintain all of its current homes before spending money on new construction. Twenty percent of our annual grant covers administration and planning expenses. We need to plan for ways to continue supporting these programs if someday we lose our NAHASDA funding and as we see more sequestration cuts to this area. There are proposed cuts of 14 percent for 2014 and the government will not be funding home improvement through the BIA for next year, either. Housing is very interested in establishing 501(c) 3 status and 8(a) a status to encourage more funding and revenue sources, which I agree with.

Aug. 2, I held office hours and could not make any phone calls from my land line or use my computer through the network possibly due to the recent storms. My phone will be fixed soon at my office.

Aug. 3, I went to the Youth Empowerment Powwow in

Rexton. It is my understanding this has been taking place for about 10 years. I am so proud of the youth for taking on this task. I also want to thank the YEA staff and all the volunteers and drums who were present to make this a great youth event of learning and participating in their teachings and customs. Rexton has a special place in my heart, anyway, as my family has had a cabin there for about 25 years and it is truly “God’s country.” I will be back next year and encourage everyone to try and make it.

As I write this report, the board received an email from the chairman wanting to limit how much we can write in our unit reports. Apparently, directors only used to be able to write one-half page and the chairperson a full page. The only restriction that I have been aware of is no more than 500 words during your election cycle. I have been on the board for one year and there has never been a comment or policy shown to me about it. I will continue to inform the member-

ship and have actually had a lot of positive feedback about my reports. The next thing will probably be censorship. We also were sent an email on Thursday along with the government financials that we cannot ask questions about programs only financial information during these meetings. If we had program questions we need to send them to the chairman on the Friday before Monday financials to get a response. Are you kidding me? If I have a question that may have just came to mind, I will ask it. Sometimes this may be the only time you see the division directors to ask questions.

A request to mark your calendar for the best powwow in the U.P., the St. Ignace powwow takes place on Aug. 24-25 at the Father Marquette Memorial grounds off of US-2.

As always, feel free to contact me with your questions or concerns at bsorenson@saulttribe.net or Bridgett91@yahoo.com, my office at 643-2123 or cell phone at 430-0536.