

# Sorenson asks: Can the board get it together?



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Can the board get it together?

There will be changes coming to our team member insurances. The board voted to switch from our current provider (Sun Life) to Unum for life and disability coverage. The switch will save both the tribe and employees almost \$63,000 each a year with the same coverage. This is good news because it will also open up enrollment to those current team members that do not currently have short-term disability. While I was a team member, people would say I don't have the coverage, I don't need the coverage or I can't afford the coverage. My message is that nobody plans to break a leg, have an unexpected surgery, etc., but life happens and if you have limited sick and vacation hours to cover your time off work, how will you pay your bills? The cost is minimal when you think about it. It may cost less than a night at the movies, six pops a pay period or a few packs of cigarettes. PLEASE TAKE THE TIME TO ENROLL in short term disability for January.

The board will be voting on a 10 percent health insurance premium increase at our Oct. 7 meeting. This increase will apply to both the employee and employer. Nobody wants to increase costs for team members especially when we have not been able to provide raises in years. Unfortunately, our costs are skyrocketing along with everyone else's in America. Last year, when the insurance adhoc committee surveyed the team members, the team members voted that they would rather see an increase in premium rather than a loss of benefits. The tribe's plan has always been considered a Cadillac plan when looking at what other employers provide.

If the increase passes, it will be effective Jan. 1, 2015. I would encourage all covered team mem-

bers to read all of the changes prior to Jan. 1.

The board will also be voting on the Indian Housing Plan for 2015 at our Oct. 7 meeting. Section 102 of the Native American Housing Assistance and Self Determination Act (NAHASDA) requires the submission of an Indian housing plan guiding and accomplishing housing activities to meet community housing needs. The funds are made available through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Office of Native American Programs. Included in this plan is \$100,000 toward the down payment assistance program, homeowner rehabilitation of \$450,000, furnace and water heater replacements of \$75,000, \$60,000 in rental assistance to help low income families rent a house, \$50,000 for the Odenaang water and sewer infrastructure, \$25,000 towards the culture camp, \$6,000 for the K-9 dog, \$60,000 in emergency housing services through ACFS, and \$2,200,000 for a 10-2 bedroom unit elder complex in St. Ignace. The elders complex project will continue on a smaller scale because we have been unsuccessful in securing tax credits towards the 20-2 bedroom project.

Director Massaway and I tried to amend the New St. Ignace Midjim Store resolution at the Sept. 23 Munising meeting to just approving a plan to proceed on verifying cost, researching traffic studies and soil samples, etc. but the board voted to table it. This is the second time the issue was tabled by the board. I am still dumbfounded as to why this is such a big issue to some. The estimated payoff is 9 years. What other business has an estimated payoff of 9 years? The proposed Manistique Midjim is projected to have a 25-year payoff, and Hessel a 44-year payoff. The new store and new location would cost \$445,725 more than the cost to fix the current store tanks and parking lot. How many people get gas at a Meijer gas station, Sam's Club gas station or Glen's gas station because they are located outside of the store's parking lot? The decision to just deal with the current store is like putting a band-aid on a severed vein.

Many of the governmental positions in the tribe are paid for by grants. Some positions may be a small percentage and others are entirely funded by a grant. It is very beneficial for the tribe and its members to secure these grants to provide services. When the

grant funding expires, the team member's positions that are paid for by the grant are then not funded. This usually results in those team members being terminated. Where I get frustrated is when team members who have worked for the company for years and have designed and implemented programs and services and management includes their position in the grant that was prior funded and then the team member loses their job. Team members do not have a choice to be covered by a grant. Team members need to be told up front that their position is grant funded and subject to termination when the grant ends. There should also be core services listed that will be funded with or without grants. I understand using grants to cover wages but when the grant is ending and the services are core services than they should be funded. Some positions are only created because of a grant. In this case, team members should be told in the interview that the position would only last as long as the tribe retains the grant funding.

We had the same problem last September when we didn't know if we would be getting the re-authorization of the special diabetes program. Positions in this grant to me are vital with or without the grant. Some of our professional staff have to stress continuously whether or not they will have a job. Would you want to work under that uncertainty? These positions used to be funded by the IHS funding. Now that we qualify for grants we pay wages out of the grants for these positions and use that money elsewhere.

Our casinos are in chaos like never before. The board never had a plan in place when we started to make changes in executive management. The gaming authority (board of directors) approved an executive committee made up of the chairman, treasurer, secretary, HR director, CFO and executive director for the purpose of creating a draft plan of options and presenting to the gaming authority within 14 days. This committee met a couple of times trying to find companies to help turn our casinos around. We did report to the board on the 14th day with an update. We continued to meet going over org charts, a CEO job description, chain of command, and possible appointments until we had a solution. When I tried to discuss this plan in Munising it was said that our committee was not charged with these tasks. Well to those

of us on the committee we just wasted our time because some of the board felt like we were making decisions without them. They were all invited to our meeting and no decisions would be effective unless voted on in a dually called meeting. The board voted to disband this committee.

The board met to discuss management authority and could not come to a consensus on who could be temporarily in charge over the five casinos. There have been some interim appointments where staff has vacated positions and unfortunately we do not have a policy or procedure to appoint people and how to compensate them. Some people are told other duties as assigned per all job descriptions and others will be compensated for their extra duties. This is wrong until we have a policy and procedure defined. We can't create them after the fact. Some board members worry that the interim appointments will become permanent. All these positions need to be posted and interviewed. They need to follow the hiring preference. In the normal business world, management or a business owner would come to a qualified employee and explain what they need and how they will be compensated. In tribal politics some people get appointed because someone likes you and you may get paid a certain sum and you might not. Our whole process is ridiculous. Someone needs to fill in for these positions when a person leaves. They can't be put on hold until we get a new management structure or the board gets their sh— together. Business must go on.

We are losing many key team members who have institutional knowledge and have dedicated their careers to the tribe. Why is this happening? We don't try to keep people. We don't value education. We think everyone is replaceable. Team members are bashed on Facebook. We haven't been able to give raises or contribute to their 401Ks. The industry pays more and their job descriptions do not reflect what they actually do. Bad decisions seem to be made when it comes to staffing. There seems to be no job security. What happens when too many of these key employees leave? Only time will tell.

Some of the board members insist that the chairman should be in charge in the COO's absence. I disagree. The membership voted that they wanted a separation between the chairman and CEO.

The board did vote in 2012 to delegate him some authority but it does not specify the casinos. The chairman has publically said he has limited business experience. He is out of town on government business probably a week or more each month.

As I write this report, the board has yet to approve the 2015 budgets. On the agenda at the Sept. 23 meeting in Munising was the 2015 budget excluding internal services. The total budget is \$33,696,816 of which \$683,036 comes from tribal support. There was a motion to table and there was not enough support so we voted on a continuing resolution. I voted no because I believe we need to pass it so divisions are spending according to their 2015 and not their 2014 budget. The continuing resolution passed. This \$683,036 is only 3.8 percent of our \$18 million tribal support dollars. The majority of those dollars consisted of ACFS (tribe's social services), education and elderly.

The board has since directed staff to give them specific information regarding the budgets and for all levels to approve them. It is very unfortunate that we have been going through this process since August and cannot get a budget passed. I believe that the number one cause is lack of communication. The chairman supervises the budget department so we get whatever information he tells them and when to give it to us. The budget department should be reporting to the CFO like they did in the past. We have wasted our time, our staff's time and our membership's time by not having the correct information in a timely manner.

This chaos is going to continue until the board comes together with a strategic plan and priorities on what is important to the membership and the direction of the tribe. With no current direction we are going in circles and not accomplishing anything. We can't pass a budget, make business decisions, stick to an agenda, etc. I have never in my life been more stressed or frustrated with working with a group of people.

Please remember that the LIHEAP applications should be available Nov. 1 for those who need assistance for heating.

Thank you to all the members for your continued support and kind works. I can be reached at bsorenson@saulttribe.net, 430-0536, or Bridgett91@yahoo.com.