

# Feud Imperils Hope for Change

By Steve Young, Argus Leader

PINE RIDGE - On a reservation beset by poverty and alcoholism, joblessness and despair, Oglala Sioux tribal members should be preparing to inaugurate an era of prosperity.

After all, they have the support of a U.S. president who has promised to help create jobs and revitalize communities.

But with millions of dollars ready to flow from federal spigots, the Oglala instead find themselves entrenched in a tribal government dispute that has put numerous opportunities on hold - and could potentially jeopardize others, federal officials say.

## Among the significant projects being held up are:

A \$4 million youth wellness center planned for the east edge of Pine Ridge.

A five-year, \$16 million Youth Opportunities grant through the Department of Labor to keep at-risk reservation children in school, and to provide education and job training for those who already have dropped out.

A 10-year, \$20 million investment through the Department of Agriculture's Empowerment Zone program to leverage other federal and private dollars for job creation, better housing and community needs.

None of those dollars will be released until the tribe's government stabilizes, Kevin Gover, assistant secretary of the Interior for Indian Affairs, insisted last week.

Specifically, that means the tribe's financial stability must be determined through audits. Political favoritism within the tribe's public safety department has to be brought under control, the Interior official adds. And, any continued discussion of changing tribal government must follow processes laid out in the tribal constitution.

"There's a great deal riding on this," Gover said. "We've had several follow-up meetings at the White House about what we're going to do. No money will change hands until this matter is resolved."

The "matter" he refers to is the ongoing strife between tribal Chairman Harold Salway and the 17-member tribal council.

Salway suspended the tribe's treasurer, Wesley "Chuck" Jacobs, last October, claiming financial improprieties. Jacobs later was reinstated by a tribal judge.

Then, on Jan. 16, a group of tribal members called the Grassroots Oyate took over the Red Cloud Administration Building in a peaceful protest over what they called mismanagement of tribal funds. That was followed by the tribal council's suspension of Salway, who turned around and suspended all but four of the 17 council members - a move the tribal court later ruled was unconstitutional.

"The problem here," said Tom Casey, manager of KILI radio station in Porcupine, "is that we have chaos. We are on the verge of anarchy."

In a letter to Salway on Thursday, Gover said the federal government no longer recognizes his authority on the reservation because of his suspension. It also said he had no power to call a state of emergency on the reservation two weeks ago, a move which prompted some tribal police officers to begin carrying out his orders.

"Any tribal employees, particularly tribal law enforcement officers, who act on your orders do so without any of the authorities and immunities of the Oglala Sioux Tribe," Gover wrote. "If they should again carry out your orders, they will face liability for any wrongs they may commit, both civil and criminal."

The BIA is "actively considering" tak-

ing over the Oglala Sioux Public Safety Department, Gover said, or at the very least withdrawing BIA funding for public safety programs

## Will projects materialize?

The question now among federal officials and tribal members is this: Can the problems be ironed out before opportunities such as the youth center, the Empowerment Zone, the Youth Opportunities grant and others are squandered?

Salway was unavailable for comment late last week. But one of his adversaries on the tribal council, Mike Her Many Horses, said he doesn't believe anything has been lost yet.

"Now there is a sense that something needs to be done quicker than sitting around the old campfire and talking about it," Her Many Horses said. "I'm sure the feds have some real concerns about having taxpayer dollars sent here for meaningful projects. I think we can demonstrate to them in the coming weeks that we can address those concerns."

For one thing, the BIA already is auditing the tribe's financial records of the past five years. And the tribal council is addressing the public-safety issue, Her Many Horses said.

"Once people get the sense there is some urgency on these opportunities, I think things will happen," he said.

"The real losers here are the youth on this reservation. They're being held up while the adults behave like children."

As for the planned youth center and the Empowerment Zone, nothing has been lost yet, said Dallas Tonsager, state director for the Rural Development Office of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. His office is working with tribal officials on those projects.

"Nobody has suggested to me that these problems terminate the efforts going on with these programs," Tonsager said. "When the problems are resolved, these things will move forward."

## Youth center a priority

One project everyone seems anxious to embark on is the youth center, which in fact is an outgrowth of an Oglala teenager's vision for happiness on her reservation.

A decade ago, as a high school basketball phenom, SuAnne Big Crow used to tell friends that she was going to take her athletic skills off to college, turn them into a degree and then return home one day to create happiness and harmony on her reservation.

"SuAnne would say, 'When I come back, I'm going to build you guys a 'Happy Town,' " her mother, Leatrice "Chick" Big Crow, recalls. "That's what she wanted to do ... create a place where people get along and support each other."

Her daughter died before fulfilling that dream, killed in a car accident on Feb. 8, 1992, near Murdo while on her way to a basketball awards banquet.

But Chick Big Crow kept the vision alive by creating what was the first Boys & Girls Club on any reservation in America, transforming an old plastics plant in Pine Ridge into the SuAnne Big Crow Boys & Girls Club. It hasn't been easy financially and otherwise through the years to keep the soda fountain open, the pool tables available and the old jukebox running. But thanks to Clinton's interest, that's all about to change.

The president suggested building a youth wellness center after his visit to Pine Ridge last summer. The Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Department of Agriculture and the Bureau of Indian Affairs, as well as the Boys & Girls Clubs of America, then joined forces to find the finances to build it.

When it's finished, the 30,000-square-foot complex will include an indoor swimming pool, a multipurpose gym, an exercise room, a library and technology center, and counseling and day-care space.

In conjunction with the \$16 million Youth Opportunities grant through the Department of Labor, the youth center potentially could have a dramatic impact on the Oglala Sioux Tribe, said Patrick Gross of the Rural Development Office.

"There is a critical statistic out at Pine Ridge that has really captured imagination," Gross said. "And that is, 50 percent of the population on the Pine Ridge Reservation is under age 21. So in the long term, we really believe the economic revitalization of this reservation ... includes work we can do with the youth."

What will that work be? What will programming at the youth center focus on? Using mentors and tutors, for one, to get reservation kids off the street and back into classrooms so they aren't counted among an abysmal 60 percent high school dropout rate.

It will involve counseling to try to reduce the number of births to single teenage mothers, of youth on drugs and alcohol, and of young people dying because of suicide, car accidents or other causes.

It will include efforts to improve youth fitness and health, along with their employment rates.

The center will include a soccer field and lighted baseball field, Chick Big Crow said. The new pool means children will no longer have to be bused to border towns to swim. And the center should employ 40 people full time and part time, thus giving young people exposure to work opportunities.

Learning the value of work is critical on a reservation where the alternatives are crime, alcoholism and violence. Chick Big Crow knows that reality personally. She had to suspend the teen programs at the recreation center last November when she couldn't find adequate people to staff them.

"It's hard here to get people into jobs as mentors and leaders to children who are drug and alcohol free," she said. "That's the frustration, because we have the finances to pay them. But finding people who aren't affected by drugs and alcohol, that's the hard part."

## Job training and tutoring

Those are issues where the Youth Opportunities grant can tie into the wellness center, said Angie Eagle Bull, director of the Job Training Partnership Act on the reservation and spokesperson for the Youth Opportunities grant. Though some of those dollars will be earmarked for recreational activities, much of it will go for tutoring, job training, and drug and alcohol counseling.

"We do intend to work together with the center once it is built," Eagle Bull said. "We're hoping it will offer us some office space. And we hope to run some of our programs out of there."

The grant provides \$4 million the first year to serve 750 youth, Eagle Bull said. They're going to target children at risk in the educational system and try to keep them in school with the enticement of part-time, paying jobs, she said. They also will work on getting dropouts back into school to earn their General Educational Development diploma, or to get job training.

Elsewhere around the reservation, good things are occurring now in the aftermath of Clinton's visit, despite the tribal government unrest.

In response to the president's call for private investment in Pine Ridge's future, Gateway has given \$50,000 to

Oglala Lakota College to purchase computers, and Microsoft has committed \$300,000 to the college in software. Both will be used to develop an information technology degree at the school.

And planning continues on projects evolving through the Empowerment Zone. Even with the turmoil, the tribe and the Empowerment Zone's board of directors signed a Memorandum of Operations agreement on March 15 in Porcupine.

Gross believes the \$20 million committed through USDA could potentially help tribal communities access another \$80 million in federal and private funds during the next decade.

Those dollars will help to train and place 1,000 Oglala into jobs. It will be used to ensure that at least 90 percent of reservation residents have access to safe, affordable housing. It will go toward improving education standards. And it will help to provide the basic needs of families, giving them access to water, telephones, day care and public transportation.

Proposed Empowerment Zone projects include building a facility in Kyle for fire and ambulance equipment, planting grass and putting up fences in Pine Ridge, and controlling the trash that blows into town from the dump.

## Building job structure

To a larger degree, the Empowerment Zone wants to assist the nine districts established within its boundaries with reasonable job creation, Gross said. In most cases, those efforts will be on smaller scales, encouraging family businesses that are culturally relevant to the people.

"It probably means trying to find as many economic activities as close to home as possible to overcome transportation problems for many of these families," Gross said.

One example they've explored is a company out of Colorado that builds birdhouses. They could potentially hire 10 to 15 families to produce up to 10 birdhouses a day for them, using bark and other natural wood products at hand on the reservation, Gross said.

"And you could keep people right at home to do that," he said.

Along with Empowerment Zone efforts, Rural Development staff has developed and worked to fund a variety of projects on the reservation, including multifamily housing projects, water and waste water projects, money for a landfill and for medical vans and dollars for a tribal tourism business.

Beyond all of that, one of Clinton's goals in his visit was to nurture private investment on the reservation through incentives such as tax breaks. An opportunity being nurtured now by HUD and Rural Development is an interest by Dow Chemical Co. in building a particleboard factory that would employ 80 people on the reservation.

The production of particleboard from wheat straw would have several implications for the tribe and South Dakota, said Bob Ecoffey, superintendent for the Bureau of Indian Affairs on the Pine Ridge Agency.

For one, wheat straw is a waste product available throughout the Midwest, Ecoffey said. And the production of the particleboard could be used in a house-manufacturing industry on the reservation, he and Gross said. That, in turn, would increase the need for carpenters, cabinet makers and other jobs that tribal members could be trained to do.

A house-manufacturing plant also would address the chronic need for safe, affordable housing among the Oglala. Tribal officials estimate there is a need for 2,000 to 3,000 new

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