

## OPEN LETTER TO LEECH LAKE BAND MEMBERS

By Eugene "Ribs" Whitebird

After being in office for just over a year I thought it would be good to update tribal members about the progress we've made in fulfilling one of our major campaign pledges. We committed to learning about Nation Building and to working toward change so as not to do "business as usual" as we make decisions as elected government officials. As part of that progress I attended a Nation Building seminar, along with the Chairman and several upper administrative staff, in Tucson Arizona last November.

Since then there has been a number of things we have accomplished in order to improve our people's lives on the reservation. We started having open forums at our regular quarterly meetings "before" we convened to do business, rather than "after." In this way we are able to add issues to the business agenda that the Band membership feels is important.

We also had the first ever meeting of all government side employees to explain to them our concerns as a government and to emphasize the need for better communication and a dedicated work ethic. Many employees let us know that they really enjoyed the meeting and that it made them feel that they had important jobs, no matter what position, because they were working for their own people, friends, and relatives. There was a real good spirit about that whole meeting and we intend to do it again.

This past July we hosted a Nation Building Conference at the Northern Lights Casino and brought in many of

the presenters we had heard in Tucson last November. There was good participation from Red Lake, White Earth, and other reservations in the Territory. The idea that we need to stop using the "standard approach" to governing was generally understood and accepted. There is a strong commitment to adopting the "nation building approach" and start acting like the sovereign Nations we are and to exercise our self-determination, rather than be dictated to by others.

One very important development, as a sovereign government, has been the creation of a Tax Commission as part of the governing structure of the Leech Lake Reservation. This came about through an opportunity that was presented to us in early June. Representatives from the Ho Chunk Incorporated, from Nebraska, and from the Lower Sioux Community, invited us to join in confronting the State's bad-faith implementation of the tobacco portion of our tax agreements. So we decided to join White Earth and Lower Sioux in a strong act of sovereignty, by creating our own tobacco tax and applying it to Native manufactured and distributed tobacco products.

We didn't do this out of spite, but in spite of the fact that the state has not been dealing in good faith with us concerning tobacco taxes. We have kept our end of the bargain and continue to allow state taxes on other brands (such as Marlboro, GPC, Newport, etc.) and we expect to continue "sharing" that revenue with the state as negotiated in the agreements. However, we had not taken a look at the fact that when Minnesota received the multi-billion dollar tobacco settlement, in the late 90's, they did not share one red cent with

any of the reservations. On top of that the state has imposed a \$7.50 per carton "health" fee of which none of the reservations has again seen one red cent. This "fee" was not called a "tax" and therefore was not included in the formula for "sharing" taxes as spelled out in the agreements. Finally, the state has imposed another \$3.50 per carton "fee" on cigarettes manufactured by non-settling companies. Again, no share for Indians. So we decided to take care of ourselves by creating the tax commission and charging a Leech Lake Tobacco Tax on the Native manufactured cigarettes. We do not allow the state to tax these products and the result has been that we can retail cigarettes at about half the price and yet generate taxes and great profit margin for our retailers. We do this in good faith because these products are not available to non-Indian retailers. A portion of these taxes is dedicated to smoking cessation and other health programs on the reservation. This helps make up for the State's disregard for our members "health fee" needs.

I have been appointed to represent the Reservation Business Council on the five-member Leech Lake Tax Commission. The Tax Commission itself has honored me by electing me Chair of the Commission. At this point we plan to impose only one more tax and that is on lodging at our casinos. We will tax no further unless the state forces us to.

With that I will close this letter by reiterating that we are no longer doing business as usual, but are acting like a sovereign nation because steps like imposing taxes are only done by Nations.

Respectfully,  
Eugene "Ribs" Whitebird  
Dist. III Representative