

State of the Tribal-State Relationship

Myra Pearson, Chairwoman

Spirit Lake Tribe

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Thank you, Mr. Speaker, Senate Majority Leader, Bob Stenehjem, Senate Minority Leader David O'Connell, House Majority Leader, Al Carlson, House Minority Leader Merle Boucher, Governor John Hoeven, Lt. Governor Jack Dalrymple, members of the North Dakota State Legislature, Tribal Leaders, and distinguished guests. My name is Myra Pearson, Chairwoman for the Spirit Lake Tribe and it is an honor to be invited to speak before the joint legislative session.

On behalf of the Five Tribal Nations of North Dakota, I would like to take a moment to recognize the veterans that are in the audience today, our brave soldiers serving throughout the world and those who have made the ultimate sacrifice in service of our nation. These people protect our precious freedoms enabling us to build healthier and stronger communities. The sacrifices of our service men and women and their families will never be forgotten by the Spirit Lake Tribe and all the other Tribal Nations throughout Native America.

I would also like to take this opportunity to commend Governor Hoeven for the excellent work he has done during his time in office to promote and maintain a viable and stable economy throughout the state of North Dakota. The opportunities that have been created in the state have been of great benefit to all North Dakotans including those who reside on reservations. During my lifetime I have witnessed many changes within my own tribal community. I remember a time, not so long ago, when everyday services like running water and electricity were nonexistent within the majority of reservation homes and in fact were considered luxuries. Today as I drive through my community and visit my constituents I see that reservation homes are finally receiving many of these same services that have been enjoyed in state communities for generations. While we continue to face issues relating to substandard housing and excessively high utility costs, the fact remains that while change is not always fast, and not always apparent, it is inevitable. As our tribal communities grow, as our economies grow and as our families move from one tribe to another and into communities off the reservation it is increasingly important that tribal-state relations continue to improve.

As I think of Tribal-State relations in this state the word "change" is extremely important and relevant. It is through our common goals that we will effectuate change in the truest sense. We must continue to work together, sharing our resources whenever possible, to make positive change happen whether that be on issues of education, healthcare, child welfare, criminal justice or our environment. We will continue to serve as an example throughout the nation so long as we commit ourselves to learn from one another and so long as we continue to address our issues with a sense of mutual respect.

The positive relationship that has been forged between the Tribal Nations and the state of North Dakota has in recent times produced legislation resulting in positive changes and a continuing strengthening of our relationship. The Tribal Nations of North Dakota will continue to work with an attitude of mutual respect and understanding with the state of North Dakota to improve our educational systems, law enforcement services, health care, oil and natural gas development, alternative energy development and our overall economies.

We invite state representatives to visit our communities to foster this mutual understanding as we believe that together we will improve the standard of living for all of our citizens.

In reflecting back it is worthy to note that during the 2007 Legislative Session, the North Dakota Legislature passed legislation which reflects the on-going positive relationship between the Five Tribal Nations and the elected representatives of the State of North Dakota. Some examples include:

- Legislation which provided funding for the North Dakota Indian Affairs Commission, whose staff does an outstanding job in communicating with the Five Tribal Nations of North Dakota and the state as a whole.
- Amendments to the North Dakota Century Code so that the Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyaté are represented on the North Dakota Indian Affairs Commission.
- Tribal College financial assistance, which provides funding for non-Indian students attending a North Dakota Tribal College including United Tribes Technical College.
- Amendments to the North Dakota Century Code to allow North Dakota tribes to be eligible for emergency drinking water grants so that an adequate quantity of quality water can be provided to people served by rural water systems.
- Authorization of an oil and gas tax revenue sharing agreement between the state of North Dakota and the Three Affiliated Tribes. This legislation has resulted in an approved agreement and already has had a significant positive impact on all parties.
- Legislation that put in place permanent state income tax exemptions for enrolled members of any federally recognized Indian Tribe who reside within the boundaries of any reservation in this state and who derive their income within the boundaries of any reservation in this state. This exemption assists the tribes in their ongoing programs of recruiting and retaining Native American health professionals, teachers, executive managers and other employees.
- Reestablishment and extension of a loan guarantee program through the Bank of North Dakota for four more years. The legislation directs the Industrial Commission to establish at the Bank of North Dakota a loan guarantee program for any business located in the state which either contracts with a business owned by one of the Five North Dakota Tribes or which is an American Indian-owned small business located in this state.

Much of the legislation and other initiatives I have reflected upon were the result of the hard work of the Tribal/State Relations Interim Committee of the Legislative Council. The Tribal/State Relations Committee endeavors to offer solutions to the many issues that face the State of North Dakota and the Five Tribes of North Dakota. It is no surprise that we were pleased to learn that this Committee was extended for an additional two-year term in the 2007 legislature. We look forward to making this important Interim Committee permanent.

In looking forward to the upcoming 61st Legislative Assembly, the Five Tribal Nations will be busy working through their Tribal Councils with the North Dakota Legislature and the North Dakota Executive Branch to continue to find solutions to problems that face our citizens. We will continue to work on issues relating to education, substance abuse, energy development, housing and healthcare. To be more specific we need to work collaboratively on issues such as:

- Combating the devastating effects of drug and alcohol abuse in our society. Substances such as "meth" have devastated many tribal and state communities alike. If we are to tackle this issue we need cooperation among our law enforcement agencies, prevention programs, and rehabilitation services. The Five Tribal Nations are well aware that this plague knows no jurisdictional boundaries, and we pledge to work with state officials to defeat this malady.
- The Five Tribal Nations of North Dakota will continue to work with the North Dakota Legislature to seek solutions to the ongoing problem of educational funding throughout the state. The Tribal nations feel strongly that an educated and skilled workforce is the ultimate solution to many of our on-reservation problems. We have a young and growing population who are an asset to our state and our tribes. Over half of our population is under the age of 24. Our Native American youth are a critical part of our state's future. We need relevant and effective education for all our citizens.

We also want to thank the Governor for his emphasis on education in his state of the state address to the legislature on Tuesday.

- I also want to take this opportunity to support an initiative being proposed by the Chief Justice of the North Dakota Supreme Court to study how people of different races are treated in our North Dakota court system. I believe this is a timely study that can help lead to solutions that will create a more positive environment in our law enforcement and court systems, both within our tribes and for all Native Americans in North Dakota.
- Education is also a key factor in economic development. New economic development strategies are in play on the North Dakota Reservations concerning oil and gas development and alternative energy programs, among other things. We are looking forward to working with the North Dakota Legislature on these issues.
- Additionally, much improvement is needed concerning rural health care, both on and off the reservation throughout North Dakota and we will be discussing these and other issues in 2009.
- Finally, I want to request the state of North Dakota to think about our Tribal Nations as the economic recovery plans are being developed in Washington, D.C. We know a great deal of money will be given to the states to use for economic recovery. We believe that the state should also be concerned about the economic well-being of the Tribal Nations within its borders.

In closing I want to recognize the tremendous efforts of our elected tribal leadership in North Dakota. Our tribal chairs deal with many jurisdictions, tribal, local, state and federal in carrying out their duties. Chairman Ron His Horse Is Thunder of Standing Rock Sioux Tribe; Chairman Richard Marcellais of Turtle Mountain (also a State senator from District 9), Chairman Marcus Levings of the Three Affiliated Tribes (the Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara Nation); and Chairman Michael Selvage of the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate are all hard working individuals who are working for the betterment of their people. Some of the Tribal Chairs are in the audience. I would like them to stand and be recognized.

I would also like to recognize our Tribal College Presidents. And in particular, I want to recognize President David M. Gipp of United Tribes Technical College as well as J. Kurt Luger, Executive Director of the North Dakota/Great Plains Indian Gaming Association. These individuals have dedicated themselves to serving Indian Country. All of us will be working diligently with the legislature to always maintain our good relationship and move forward our important issues in this honorable body. Again I thank you for your time and I would like to welcome you to a traditional appreciation ceremony, which will begin immediately after this wonderful occasion. You have my prayers of thanks and safety, now and in the future.

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