

SB 2376

Testimony of Chairman Jamie Azure

TURTLE MOUNTAIN RESERVATION

I am Jamie Azure, the Chairman of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians.

We are here seeking permission to potentially conduct Indian Gaming in Grand Forks County. We are not asking for money or special tax incentives. We come with opportunity and a spirit of partnership.

We seek to capture the dollars that have been bypassing Grand Forks and help to revitalize the community.

The Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians (TMBCI) is a federally recognized Tribe located on the Turtle Mountain Indian Reservation in Rolette County in north central North Dakota. The Reservation is located on a six mile by twelve-mile land base and is considered one of the most densely populated reservations with 86 people per square mile versus 15 people per square mile throughout the rest of the US. The Reservation/Rolette County poverty rates range 29.4% to 40.9% by town. TMBCI's enrollment is approximately 32,925 enrolled members, of which 14,500 reside on or adjacent to the Turtle Mountain Reservation.

The Tribe has strong, historical ties to the Grand Forks area. The Turtle Mountain Tribe is the only Tribe that has solid, well-documented historical ties to this area. In fact, the Red River Valley is the aboriginal territory of the Tribe, then known as the Pembina bands of Chippewa, Ms. LaCounte will discuss this in more detail. We hold trust allotments North of Grand Forks and as recently as 2000 we held trust allotments in Cass County. The State condemned that land for a damn.

TRIBAL USE OF GAMING REVENUES

The Tribe currently has two casinos that primarily used to address the extremely high unemployment numbers on the Reservation at Turtle Mountain, and in Trenton, North Dakota on the Tribe's trust allotments. Because of the socio-economic limitations the Tribe is faced with, any casino revenues are used to address much need infrastructure needs of the Tribe. The Tribe does not make per capita payments to its membership. The following are examples of what the Tribe has been able to use these revenues for:

1. Purchase of 2 ambulances for the Dunseith Emergency Response Center, which is an off-reservation facility that provides services to all citizens in the area. The Tribe also provided an additional \$700,000.00 to the entity for staffing and other needs.
2. Utilized revenues to supplement the Bureau of Indian Affairs' wages for the Tribe's social workers, to ensure their wages were at least equivalent to off-reservation wages.
3. Purchased a 2024 Mini-Bus for St. John Public Schools an off-reservation schools.
4. Distributed over \$400,000 to the Trenton Indian Service Area, to address needs of Tribal members living in the Trenton Service Area annually.
5. Purchased (4) buses for Turtle Mountain Community Schools and Dunseith Public Schools in the amount of \$965,327.00.
6. Provided \$ 6,650,000.00 to construct the Byron Dorgan Youth Wellness Center an indoor recreation facility that offers basketball courts, football field, track and other amenities for youth in the community.
7. Provided \$4,500,000.00 to Home Improvement Project to improve the quality of individuals residences and to provide ramps for disabled individuals.
8. Provided \$614,842.00 to purchase a new bus for the Trenton School, the recent North Dakota High School nine man football champions..

9. Provided over \$6,000,000.00 to construct an Equine Center to provide equine and animal husbandry, equine therapy and other opportunities to Tribal community and school systems.
10. In addition, the Tribe has used the revenues to provide needed funds for community programs, traditional celebrations such as pow wows, and other needs of the community at large.
11. We have provided grants to the Grand Forks School District for support of Native Children in the District for \$15,000.
12. We use Grand Treasure Casino's revenue to partially fund the Catholic School in the community, grant of annually \$90,000.
13. We have used Gaming revenue to support a food pantry in Dunseith to feed that community.
14. We have opened soup kitchens in Belcourt and Dunseith, along with homeless shelters I both communities.

INFRASTRUCTURE AND GOVERNMENT SERVICES

As we indicate we have a large populations to serve and are in need of infrastructure capital. Much of our water and sewer lines need to be updated. Our roads are often impassable, with firetrucks getting stuck on the way to calls.

HISTORIC ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT OF TURTLE MOUNTAIN

For more than a century, TMBCI members have endured persistent economic, social, and cultural stresses which have undermined the basic strengths, values and resilience of Tribal members. Rolette County has been named one of the poorest counties in the United States (US) and is the poorest county in North Dakota (ND). Unemployment in 2022, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics was 6.6% for Rolette County compared to 3.1% for the State. The Tribe and surrounding communities are struggling with rural isolation, generational poverty, and lack of economic

opportunities. In 2018 the State of North Dakota designated the Turtle Mountain Reservation as an Opportunity Zone due to the high poverty of this area.

We are not on a major thoroughfare or a major body of water, which are essentially for capitalistic economic development.

INCOME LEVEL OF TURTLE MOUNTAIN TRIBAL MEMBERS

Tribal members have long suffered from systemic poverty and social stresses. Data retrieved from the U.S. Census Bureau: State and County Quick Facts reveals that the median household income of \$31,336 is 59% of the state average of \$53,046 and the average per capita income of \$15,502.00 is 52% of the North Dakota average of \$29,732.00. The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) identifies it as a *persistent poverty area* from 1960 to 2021.

TURTLE MOUNTAIN COLLEGE

Turtle Mountain College, which is located in Belcourt along with the headquarters of TMBCI, is a Tribal College providing educational services to these same underserved populations. The College reinforces the rich Chippewa cultural heritage while maintaining academic quality with an enrollment of 94% Native American students and 55% First-Generation students. Chartered by the TMBCI Tribe in 1972, TMCC is one of the original tribal colleges and focuses on undergraduate and career and technical education. TMCC is a fully accredited postsecondary institution, 1994 Land Grant college, charter member of the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC), and member of the North Dakota Association of Tribal Colleges. TMCC is accredited by the Higher Learning Commission and has articulation agreements with the ND University System.

TURTLE MOUNTAIN SCHOOL SYSTEM

The Turtle Mountain Schools have a predominantly Native American student population, with nearly 100% of students classified as economically disadvantaged, and a student-teacher ratio around 14:1, indicating a relatively high number of students per teacher. Many students score

below the state average in standardized testing, with lower proficiency rates in math compared to reading.

Our children historically suffer from hunger which exasperates the situation. We have opened soup kitchens in Belcourt and Dunseith to address this need.

TURTLE MOUNTAIN HEALTHCARE

The Quentin N. Burdick Memorial Health Care Facility , located in Belcourt, North Dakota, is a 27 bed Indian Health Services hospital serving a population of approximately 14,550 Native Americans. We have significant need to contract health with off reservation facilities. We pay a stipend to members who need gas money just to get to appointments.

ECONOMIC BENEFITS FOR GRAND FORKS COMMUNITY

The proposed casino will create hundreds of jobs for local residents, both during the construction phase and after it is built, including positions in hospitality, security, and management, benefiting people of all backgrounds. The casino will contract for goods and services with existing local businesses and in similar projects, new businesses are drawn to the area. Local businesses will see increased tourism and economic growth, as visitors spend money at restaurants, hotels, and shops.

TRIBAL SOVEREIGNTY AND ECONOMIC SELF-SUFFICIENCY

The casino is a vital step toward the tribe's economic independence, reducing reliance on federal funding and strengthening self-governance. Native American tribes have a legal right to pursue economic development just like any other group. This project is about fairness and opportunity, not special treatment.

RESPONSIBLE GAMING AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The casino will implement strong responsible gaming measures, ensuring a safe and well-regulated entertainment venue. The tribe is dedicated to partnerships with local governments and organizations, ensuring that concerns are heard and addressed. The tribe is committed to being a good neighbor and working with the surrounding community to ensure mutual success.