

BOIS FORTE NATION CELEBRATES REGENERATION OF ITS RESERVATION, COMMUNITY AND SPIRIT

TOWER, Minn. – More than 500 Bois Forte Band members gathered today for the 2009 State of the Band to celebrate their sovereign nation's tremendous rebuilding efforts.

The event, titled Regeneration of a Nation, offered Tribal Chairman Kevin Leecy an opportunity to review with Band members the steps they have taken to "renew, revive and revitalize" their communities, including the newly expanded Nett Lake school; a new health and dental clinic; a boys and girls club; a remodeled tribal court building, a new convenience store in Nett Lake; and a new urban office in Minneapolis.

Leecy also noted that the Band's investments in its Fortune Bay Resort Casino continue to pay off, even as the country struggles with economic problems. While gaming establishments across Indian Country have reported an average 7% decline in revenue and Las Vegas faces a 25% drop, "Fortune Bay just completed the year-end financial audit, and I am pleased to report that despite the odds, we had a 5% increase in revenue for the past year." Leecy reported.

"The economy is a huge challenge for governments providing programs and services, and for people who run businesses," said Band Secretary Treasurer David Morrison Sr., who updated Band members on Bois Forte's overall financial picture. "We do both, making things doubly hard. But our people have a long history of overcoming adversity, and we were ready for the current economic difficulties, so revenues, assets and distributions to tribal government programs and services remain strong."

New initiatives

Leecy announced several initiatives for 2009 and beyond, including a new \$10 million dollar community and government services building in Nett Lake that will include space for a credit union or bank branch.

He also announced a new loan program that will begin this spring to help Band members get through the current economic downturn. Loans of up to \$1,200 will be administered through a local bank and backed by the tribal government, and complemented by credit and financial education and counseling.

And underscoring the theme of regeneration, Leecy said that the Band's new urban office is already evolving – Bois Forte and other Minnesota Chippewa bands plan to open a Native American Embassy in the Twin Cities that will house all of their urban offices.

Full day and evening of events

Leecy and Morrison's remarks were bracketed by a series of events that spanned the day and continued into the evening.

During the morning, the tribal government's various departments hosted information booths, and Band members could procure Tribal I.D. cards onsite. Eight Band entrepreneurs who have started their own businesses with assistance from the Band's Small Business Development Program also hosted booths and answered questions.

The State of the Band formally opened in the afternoon with a traditional pipe ceremony and the prestigious Bois Forte Honor Guard. An invocation was led by Spiritual Advisor Gene Goodsky followed by the financial reports from Secretary Treasurer Morrison and the keynote address from Leecy.

And capping off the event, Band members were treated to a free evening concert by award-winning Nashville recording artist Crystal Shawanda.

More challenges met by more confidence

Near the end of his State of the Band address, Leecy juxtaposed a project from his first year in office – the installation of new playground equipment – with the multimillion-dollar initiatives that have marked subsequent years.

"Our plans have become more ambitious, and our confidence has increased as each year goes by," he said. "The projects are now much more complex, but we have taken on the challenges – economic or otherwise – and the changes in our communities have been amazing, and the strides we've taken are huge."