

Tribe's most compelling question: When is enough — enough?



**LANA CAUSLEY,
DIRECTOR, UNIT II**

I'm writing this unit report in the last week of January. Many reports have been framed to protect and insulate the membership from nonsense and daily politics we are imbedded in at the board level. This report will not be the same. As I write today, I am compelled to ask members when enough is enough. After reading many threatening emails from leadership, I have to express my frustration as an official about the road we once again are on. It's like turning the clock back.

As I have stated many times, leadership is going to lead in a way that they see fit. It's up to each individual to make that choice. My choice has been to live and let live, fight my chosen battles and attempt to keep the membership clear of this part of my job. I hear from so many members about the constant negative words that are stated about our tribe and the constant conspiracy theories, innuendos and flat out lies. While we are slowly turning the clocks back in this leadership — bullying, personal hatefulness and plain out threatening is becoming the norm again. All the while we have so many real true priorities and problems that we must face. We watch our people lose homes, our people battle drugs and alcohol, our people frustrated over getting jobs and keeping them, our people's health care needs not being met and our casinos infrastructure crumbling around us all due to inability to lead and have any vision for the future. I see it as a weakness that says, "If you cannot lead some, choose to constantly cause distrust and conflict."

I've been part of this for many years. I have worked side by side with many people I worked with whom I have debated and from whom I've learned. It's been a constant struggle to balance what to battle and let go of and what will not matter tomorrow. I've advised, spoken out and begged for the past to be laid to rest, for the attacks to stop and the political games to end. I've spoken and heard from many members of our tribe who want to see TRUE changes with leadership and a tribe that they can be proud of. That's why I'm framing this report in this way; I want you to know I identify with all about this. I'm not saying I'm not at fault with decisions I've made because I have made bad choices, my path has been misguided at times and assure you it didn't pass without hard lessons. In the last two weeks I've spent at our headquarters in the Sault, the many issues and examples of

"what is going on" is staggering. We are failing to prioritize our members' needs and failing to set a direction for the tribe. This is not staffs' problem — they do what they are told and it's usually reactive with no real plan by administration. In this report, I will be giving examples because I have no other alternative at this point. I do have vision about our future, sometimes the inability from some on the board who lack the mere thought of discussing a concern, idea or issue just because someone else "brought it up" its really quite sickening. All you have to do is simply watch the board meetings or read words that leadership post on social media to get a picture of who wants to move forward and who can't or won't. I've had enough of this mentality and enough is enough.

In attempting to move forward in a new direction we hired an executive casino director. I've supported a new direction for our casino operation, this alone came with sleepless nights and hesitation and questioning on the changes that are coming and all the remodeling that needs to be completed. We have been told that our casinos CANNOT and WILL not sustain without upgrade to infrastructure, management training, policy rewrites, identified costs savings and our employees being recognized and rewarded for their front line work and dedication. I've known all this (see my past reports) because I have a connection with many casino employees, customers and managers who are a part of this business. It's not hard to identify the areas we lack and the morale that has been struggling.

At the end of the day, our board had to make a decision for our casinos, leave things just as they are or identify and make a plan to move forward. This will come with changes and true separation of those who want to stay stagnant and those who want things better for our business. I'm not saying we won't have hiccups, but in the end, professional advice is simply what is needed. I spoke directly to every manager on this subject and all agree they are up for the challenge and want better than we have now. I also want to state that I do not hold 100 percent trust to anyone who advises us but experience and expertise is the key component to running a successful business and the board simply does not have the role to manage day to day and that would be a catastrophe, anyway.

Make no mistake, though, I question, discuss and educate myself on what is needed to protect us. I've been through the "saving graces" for our tribe and really have learned a thing or two. At this point, I have full confidence in the abilities demonstrated through presentations and managers' input. We have all asked for this. Keep in mind that this will be a long road and changes and decisions will be ongoing and I support movement. We, as the board, have scheduled weekly meetings with the casino executive to monitor benchmarks and outcomes per his recommendations. This is the separation from the old way into a new way. I will make monthly reports on

our status for better businesses standards and operations.

Among my most important priorities are the problems we have with access to resources for our members in the outlying areas as well as headquarter areas. The greatest concern (demonstrated through many conversations with members) is the problem of drug abuse and suicide in our communities. I had requested, more than once, initiated and then insisted on holding a full department meeting with the board and department heads to discuss and educate ourselves on the services we have to offer for the immense problem and gaps in services for our members to get the resources needed in a crisis situation and ongoing assistance through the process. We met and were presented the services we have. Many times the word "lacking" was brought up. That frustrated me, and I spoke about it. I offered input and asked that we take a look at those areas to improve and prioritize those lacking areas for needed results (I will request a follow-up meeting again in the coming months to see where we are at). Also, recently, by my request as well as other board members, we held a much needed Tribal Action Plan (TAP) meeting to get the status and update on our progress with this much needed plan. We have been working on this for over two years with very little movement that the members can benefit from. The truth is, we went from about 30 identified individuals in the tribe's leadership and staff participating to around eight to 10. Again, I requested the meeting and had many questions to ask for this report. One of the main questions was, "where are all the surveys and hard data from membership on the census survey, community forums, elders' input and video/audio interviews that we collected to create a plan with members input?" This was a concern as where is our chain of custody of data? The answer was, most material and data was given to an outside contracted individual to process and analyze. The project coordinator did not know when it was expected back, didn't know exactly what was given and was not really given direction on what to expect (Not his fault, he is attempting to get direction and I recognize the problems he is having). In the meantime, we made magnets with MOST telephone numbers listed of our tribal centers. We are way beyond magnets at this point.

Yep, I'm frustrated. As I talk with families and literally have sat at kitchen tables watching loved ones cry about their own and their community with the problems we are facing with drug abuse, we await information collected with no real plan, at least no real plan identified to me! I'm sure I will get something after this report, though. It's going to take this kind of calling out to get any results; it will also come with attacks and bullying as well. So, please bear with me and please don't believe everything you read on social media (humor intended). That's the problem I spoke about in the beginning of this report. I'm not a successful leader if vision is not agreed to and worked toward with help.

I've given my full support to the chairperson of our tribe to have all authority he needs to direct day-to-day governmental programs, but attention needs to be priority to our needs here at home. I'm supportive of all the Washington trips to testify on behalf of all tribes in the nation but make some serious attempts to assist us here where we are failing our members. We have some serious issues that need attention, direction and vision. Please don't get me wrong, before anyone states I want to strip the chair of authority. I absolutely will not do that. The chair asked for the authority and I will not take that away, he wants it, he's got it, he has a responsibility in the highest seat in our tribe. I'm expecting results there. This is all stated to solidify my attempt to lead, help me out, work with me. Set some direction and vision for us to follow!

This report is pretty critical and I want to assure all that we have dedicated, smart, hard-working staff but they NEED direction, too, and it's not forthcoming here at home. We are in a reaction mode and off the cuff kind of legislation. The staff do what they are told and make no mistake, the board does not direct the day-to-day activity or direction; we have granted that to the chair of this tribe. Again, the Washington trips are very important and I will state I appreciate all the testimony and activity at the federal level. I've demonstrated that by my support of travel funds and words of kudos in his efforts and support his endeavors. Every single board member has recognized his leadership at the federal level in his speaking abilities, we are grateful for that but, again, we need some real direction set here at home.

Here is another example of some serious issues we have with communication: I need to remind members about the recommended plan and reduction presented to the board from our Communications Department. We were presented a plan to reduce costs by asking members to complete a sign up-sheet to receive hard copies of the paper as we had hundreds of bad addresses (We have had this problem for a very long time). I am starting to get many calls that people are NOT receiving the paper; we didn't communicate this sufficiently enough and I have reported this to administration through an email as to the concern by members. It was reported we only have 500 or so members who have signed up for the tribal paper (elders will automatically receive the paper), it seems it was not communicated for a significant amount of time and we are at about a 75 percent reduction on papers getting into tribal homes (that's a 75 percent reduction in cost, I would like to see that used to have a solution for bad addresses but not just settle for members not having a paper mailed). This is truly the only avenue some have for communication from your reps and our tribe. I've requested that we send out a pre-paid post card to remind people to sign up. We have a true savings with mailings with the reduction in mailed papers so there is money

available for this. Elders and members, please remind your family members that they have to call and sign up with a correct address to send a paper out again. If you would like to get a hard copy of the paper, please call (906) 635-6050 and ask for the Communications Department. A step backwards in communication to our people is not the outcome I expected and we have to fix that, I'm confident that if our Communication staff has direction to fix it, they will.

One last issue that is very concerning to me is our Lansing Project Committee (I was not selected to be part of that committee). Recently, we had an update with very little change on our status but many questions about the commitment from our investors by board members. I'm not sure what should be said on this, but I will say that our chair resigned from the Lansing Project Committee. I'm not sure what this means or who will head this, but the discussion is on my board concerns for the very next meeting. I am concerned either way as who has authority to take lead for our project. This is a real concern no matter what position you hold with the project. In a means to identify and come up with a solution on huge concerns such as this, I have an item on the agenda for our next meeting.

In "board concerns" in the past, we have always had a section of meeting where we could bring those forward in a public session. Recently, it has changed to a discussion for the next morning. I have a real problem with this as there is no record or process for follow up to even be done. I was even demanded an answer as to "what I was up to" when I requested the item be added, even though I followed all rules. With the five-day notification to have an item added that is a concern in itself, but I won't go there in this report. This paralyzes me as a leader as I can request or ask with no real documentation of concerns. So, in the attempt to document and track priority issues or requests, I will ask the board to make this a permanent part of the business agenda so we can assure follow up and have transparency. I will say staff attempts to follow up, but if it's not a direction of some sort, their hands are simply tied. I don't have the luxury of calling administration and getting what I want, I have to request and await the response therefore I want all these ideas, issues, concerns documented in our minutes (the board concerns and membership concerns had been part of the official record in the past and I'm not sure why that changed). Again, to be effective, I have to have process and assistance in my role through the administration. The Lansing project is a prime example of lack of priority — I simply cannot answer who is leading the project. As you can see, I've hit a roadblock, picking and choosing what unit reps to help and which to ignore just does not work for me or the people I represent. Many members will know exactly what I'm speaking of as these are your issues, we have to have an avenue to address and this is my solution.

From “Causley,” continued from page 20 —

In conclusion, as you can see, I have real concerns on some very serious paths that we need to have a plan for, communication to our membership from us as a tribe, the economical development project in Lansing, the Tribal Action Plan project, casino infrastructure and management plan and an unbiased, fair avenue to have issues spoken about and addressed (board concerns) are just a few of the things I high-

lighted this time. I have no other option at this point other than to write about them.

Other areas of concern are the request for a disabilities workgroup, veterans advocate, policy changes, scheduling priority workshop items, economical development (other than casinos) and grant writing.

I am going to end this report on a positive note; I do like writing the following much better. I

witnessed our staff this past week come together with presentation and input that made me so grateful for them.

We have had great concern from the onset about the Graymont land mining proposal. After discussion and conversation with members, I requested at the board level to secure travel for any interested members to have transportation to a public meet

See “Causley,” page 22

From “Causley,” page 21 —

ing in Newberry so they would have opportunity to attend and I appreciate all who did (this was an item I insisted be a “board concern” last month).

On the same day and in conjunction with that meeting on Jan. 28, board members and staff met directly with officials from the Department of Natural Resources on the Graymont Inc. request to acquire state-owned land for the mining operation. We had a lengthy discussion face to face about our position and the commitment the DNR should have to our rights as Indian people and the blatant interference of our rights in the 1836 Treaty to hunt, fish and gather in our treaty ceded territory. This meeting was a benchmark of how effective we can be as a team here at home. The staff and board members present respectfully demanded a rejection when the decision is made next month by the director of the DNR. Many members contacted me on this concern and some spoke about the economic value of this proposal. We asked that question to officials many times with vague answers and certain unknowns how it would directly benefit our people but, in the end, the protection to our ceded land and the disregard of our rights to our people truly outweigh the revenue or

changes we would see from the Graymont project. Miigwech to our staff, it was not unrecognized your commitment to hold our position on this.

In closing, I’ve been advised both ways on the communication I put out in my reports, some want me to come out swinging (been there) and some want me to keep it positive. I’ve tried to balance this, but in the end, frustra
See Causley, Page
tion at some of the current actions and inactions have forced me to bring you all up to date on just a few of the items. In our unit, and within our whole tribe, we have serious priorities to address. I’m tired of playing the games or hearing the same ol’ whining I’ve heard for the last 20 years. Make a plan, hold a vision for our people here in our communities and cut the politics. I’m willing and able to commit to moving forward and always have been. I simply cannot state that enough. So when is enough, enough?

As always, please contact me to meet or talk about any ideas, issues and concerns you have.

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Lana Causley, Unit II Board Representative/Director
lcausley@saulttribe.net
Home: (906) 484-2954
Cell: (906) 322-3818.