

State of the Band Address
By Chief Executive Marge Anderson
January 10, 2012

Aanin, Mr. Speaker, members of the Band Assembly, Madam Chief Justice, Justices, Commissioners, Band members, and guests. I am honored to be with you today.

Mii gwech – thank you – for coming. Your involvement today and every day is critical to the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe.

Coming together now – at the start of a new year – is a good time to assess where we are as a culture, community and government.

For 20 years, our lives have been tied to our businesses – most notably Grand Casinos. For more than 10 years, our lives have also been tied to our reaffirmed treaty rights.

But those two things are not all that we are – not even close. Our accomplishments and progress are much bigger than that. We as a people are much more than that.

Most importantly, we are going to become something even greater. We have not come this far to stop growing. We cannot afford to leave things the way they are.

I want to tell you about a few plans that are already underway.

Back in the 1990s, the Band developed a holding company to help us with economic development. It was the first all-Indian-owned holding company in the country, and it enabled us to create Woodlands National Bank in 1996. Today that bank has grown to seven locations.

As great as that is, our holding company could be used to accomplish much more. It was chartered by the Federal Reserve Board. This status provides us with many opportunities in the world of finance and investments. It provides us with the potential for many new business opportunities and jobs. It is time that we reach the potential we dreamed of when we established this holding company.

I won't get into the details, but I want you to know that we are exploring how to fully use this resource. This is an effort to help maximize and secure what we leave for our children and grandchildren.

Second, you may recall that the Mille Lacs Band Police Department became a professional law enforcement agency in 1991. In 1998, we formed our first mutual aid agreement with Mille Lacs County. This agreement enabled tribal police officers to assist local law enforcement officers on non-Indian land, and the county officers to enforce laws on Indian land. A similar agreement with Pine County was signed in 2004. And other tribes followed our example.

As great as all that is, we can do more. President Obama signed the Tribal Law and Order Act in 2010, primarily to prevent violence against women in Indian Country. This act has provisions that could also help the Mille Lacs Band in other key ways.

I've ordered the Solicitor General to pursue all the authority we can, under that act. Most importantly, the act may help us combat gangs and drugs on the Mille Lacs Reservation – a major problem that has taken the lives of too many people; brought sadness to too many families; and held our community back.

We have been through hard times before, and we have faced challenges before. Now we will do what it takes to fight this problem.

Of course we have to get to the root of the gang and drug problem. But step one must involve stopping criminals in their tracks and getting drugs off our reservation.

The Tribal Law and Order Act gives the Band an opportunity to request federal authority. If we are able to make an agreement between the Mille Lacs Band and the U.S. Attorney's Office, it could allow for federal prosecution of crimes committed on the Mille Lacs Reservation. In turn, we would be able to send the drug dealers and serious criminals on our reservation to federal prison.

That's right – federal prison.

I seldom resort to scare tactics. But if the prospect of federal prison can help turn someone's life around, I will use it with as many people as necessary.

Third, the Band government is constantly working to become more transparent and accountable. One measure that still needs work is our code of ethics.

I believe that your elected officials are all moral and honorable people who abide by a personal code of ethics.

But the Mille Lacs Band can do better. In fact, I want our tribal government to develop the best code of ethics in Indian Country.

I will be working with Band Assembly in the months ahead to make our code of ethics more enforceable. I also intend for us to build in more penalties for not abiding by the code.

By making our government officials more accountable, we will set the tone for making our members more accountable. This can only lead to positive outcomes in the years ahead.

As we start this new year, your Band commissioners are undertaking many initiatives. The 2012 directives to the commissioners are on your tables so that you can see what they will be doing.

In 2011, our government made progress in several key areas; here are just a few examples.

- One of the most visible signs of progress is the new early education building in District I. We look forward to its completion in August.
- We have worked with local public schools to make transportation more available to our Boys & Girls Club and to enhance Indian education. In fact, we were involved in helping the school district in Sandstone create an Indian Education Department. About 65 Indian students are enrolled there – most of whom are Band members or descendants.
- Last year we celebrated 20 years of Grand Casino Mille Lacs. This year we will celebrate 20 years of Grand Casino Hinckley.
- Band Assembly and I made a statute change that will prevent the use of per capita payments to satisfy bail bonds. The main goal of this change is to prevent Band members who are repeat offenders from being bailed out of jail using bonds against their per capita payments. If we can help keep repeat offenders in jail, we can help prevent additional crimes.

Now that I've told you about what the tribal government is doing, I want to ask you: What will you be doing in the next year? How can you help your family, your neighbors, and your tribe?

First, I encourage you to be self-reliant.

Economically, the recession still lingers. As a result, Grand Casinos continue to have lower revenues. That gives the tribal government less to work with for our programs and services. We had to make difficult budget cuts this fiscal year.

The threat of gaming expansion is always on the horizon. In 2011, the Mille Lacs Band and other tribal gaming supporters fought back harder than ever. And we were successful.

Many of you here today were involved in our fight against gaming expansion. Mii gwech for your support; we will need you again in 2012 and beyond.

But we need even more of you to sign up as supporters of our cause. There are support cards on your tables. Fill them out and drop them off in a specially marked box in the foyer.

If the push to expand gaming succeeds, the result will be far worse than the cuts we had to make in our tribal government budget this year.

Grand Casinos would have to scale back, and so would the tribal government. Our employees, Band members, and the entire region would feel the loss.

We all need to prepare for this possibility, even as we fight it. That is the only responsible thing to do.

Of course none of us have gotten rich from gaming revenues. But they have helped us live more comfortably, whether we need a home computer or a more dependable car.

Looking ahead, we cannot count on anything or anyone but ourselves. We must become even more self-reliant.

Second, I urge you to give of yourselves without expecting anything in return. This is the traditional Ojibwe way.

A few months ago in the Inaajimowin, you hopefully read the story about cultural leave being unpaid leave for tribal government employees. This is not a new policy; we just wanted to remind our employees.

When the reminder was sent, one of our Band Elders – Bette Sam – was quick to respond.

Bette said, “Years ago, we never got paid to do cultural stuff, ceremonies. Our fathers, mothers and grandparents never did anything for pay.”

Many others responded in support of Bette’s comments.

This was encouraging to me, because it seems like there has been a trend toward people expecting payment for almost everything they do. If they serve on a committee, they want money. If they give someone a ride, they want to be reimbursed for gas.

I’m not talking about everyone, but we cannot deny that many people have this expectation. I know this is not who we are.

Bette is right. Years ago, helping Elders, family, friends and neighbors was what everyone did. We counted on ourselves and each other. That was the foundation of our community.

Our community has many strengths, but our basic foundation is cracking. If we don't fix our foundation, what will this community stand on?

All around us we see role models of giving, and they expect nothing in return.

After the storm at Lake Lena this summer, there were people who checked on Elders to make sure no one was harmed. I know of a tribal government employee who has driven people to appointments during her lunch break. Another employee has patrolled his neighborhood all night – on top of the police presence – to help keep people safe.

Members of several Band committees refuse stipends. They say that serving on a Band committee is an honor, and that's enough of a reward.

Recently I've heard about a Band member who received a civil service award for helping save the lives of two motorcyclists after an accident... And about another Band member who has kept track of all the family plots at the Aazhoomog Cemetery since the 1970s.

Some of our Boys & Girls Club members have brought cakes and pies to Elders and asked if they need help with anything. You will also notice our youth serving meals today.

All of these volunteers I've talked about give us a strong community foundation. They know their reward isn't money, gas or food. Their reward is a feeling of pride in having helped someone else.

Now we need to fill the cracks in our foundation.

There are committees and boards that need members. We need helpers for field trips and events. And our Employee Assistance Program is seeking families to volunteer.

The community really does need each and every one of us. Envision how much better our community would be if we all volunteered our time, knowledge and skills.

Please make the time to volunteer in your community.

Imagine what our community would become if we let the gang members take over. Imagine if we allow drugs to rule our minds instead of our culture and education. Imagine if we leave things the way they are and mind our own business.

I told you earlier that I try to avoid scare tactics. I stand by that still... Because I'm not using scare tactics. I'm only seeing what the future will hold if we don't unite to protect our community and culture.

We need to stand up for what is good and right. We need to stand together. We need to fill in the cracks before they destroy our foundation.

As for your elected officials, we will continue to focus on strengthening the Band's government. And now, more than ever, we need to work together to solve problems like gangs, drugs and violence. And we need to set priorities and standards for fiscal responsibility.

We all have roles to play in our community. If we all do our part, I know we can become something greater than what we are today.

Mii gwech.