

Tribes Are About Much More Than Casinos

Some Minnesotans refer to tribes not by their official names but by their casinos' names, such as "Grand Casino" for the Mille Lacs Band or "Black Bear" for Fond du Lac. Perhaps that is why many people seem to mistakenly believe that the main purpose of tribes is to operate casinos. This could not be further from reality.

Tribes are governments, with all the same duties and responsibilities that state governments have. Minnesota is home to 11 American Indian tribal governments, whose main job is to serve the needs of our members through health care, education, and other services. Our people count on us to help them when they are sick, prepare their children for college and careers, make quality housing available, care for the elderly, and be responsible stewards of the lakes and lands on our reservations. They want their voices heard in government, and they want to see solutions to community problems. In short, they expect their governments to meet their needs and make wise use of their resources.

This is a daunting task that didn't garner a single mention in Tony Kennedy's article in the January 15 *Star Tribune*. The misleading use of a \$15 billion "guesstimate" only further feeds the misconception of tribes as nothing more than casino owners spending excessive amounts of money to keep others out of the business. Kennedy's number could only represent total wager before prize payouts and has absolutely no relation to actual revenue. In fact, Minnesota tribes earn nowhere near such an amount in actual net revenue available for tribal government purposes. Well over 90 percent of the amount wagered is returned to bettors in prize payments, under the terms of Minnesota's compacts.

Meeting the needs and expectations of our people takes dedication, time and money. Most of our work is done on our own reservations, but some of the work has to be done in Saint Paul, where decisions are made that affect nearly every category of work that we do. Tribal leaders, along with the lobbyists we have hired to represent our best interests, work with elected officials and state departments on issues ranging from child welfare and law enforcement to helping fight invasive species in Minnesota lakes.

Working with lobbyists is the responsible thing to do when so many issues are at stake. Of course gaming is one of those issues. Gaming revenues are critical to our governments' ability to provide essential programs and services to our members. Without gaming, we could not come close to meeting our people's needs. Even with gaming, tribal governments still struggle to meet important needs, and some tribal members still go without the basics that most Minnesotans take for granted.

But gaming is only one of the many issues that require Minnesota's tribes to spend time and money at the Capitol. The "battalion of 30 lobbyists" mentioned by Kennedy also represent other non-tribal clients and interests. Tribal gaming is far from being their only issue, and it is not the only issue they advocate for on behalf of tribes.

As tribal governments, we would prefer to spend all of our revenues on directly helping our members, our employees, our neighbors, and worthy causes. We'd be happy if we never had to

spend another nickel on lobbying. But the reality is that we must protect our best interests at the state and federal levels – using the system that has been created for that purpose – because our tribal members are counting on us to do so.

In addition to providing programs and services to our members, the tribes are also major job providers. Statewide, tribes are the sixth largest employer in the state. Many of us are the largest employers in our regions. We provide 20,550 direct casino jobs alone and another 21,000 people work for Minnesota companies that rely on our casinos and tribal governments for business.

Because most of these jobs are in rural areas, they will not be replaced if tribal gaming is harmed. We anticipate a loss of at least 5,000 casino jobs if gaming expands in the metro area, and we know that many more jobs will be at risk among our vendors and neighbors.

Protecting thousands of quality full-time jobs with benefits is worth our time and money at the Capitol. Giving a voice to the 60,000 American Indians in Minnesota is important. For our tribal governments, defending our peoples' interests is not a mere political game. It is our fundamental duty as tribal governments, whether our opponents acknowledge it or not.

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