



THE HARVARD PROJECT ON AMERICAN INDIAN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

John F. Kennedy School of Government • Harvard University

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Grand Traverse Band Planning and Development Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians (Suttons Bay, Michigan)

Contact:

2605 N. West Bayshore Drive

Suttons Bay, MI 49682

Tel. (231) 271-3538 Fax (231) 271-7715

Website: www.gtb.nsn.us

Faced with a growing land base and population, ongoing economic development, an increasing number of visitors to its reservation and new pressures from outside interests, the Grand Traverse Band created a Planning and Development Department, which subsequently embarked on a comprehensive and participatory land use planning process. The process and its outcomes have been instrumental in guiding the Department's diverse initiatives in public works, housing, public-interest building and regulatory standard setting and in establishing the Band as a respected partner in regional development.

Despite its long-time presence on Michigan's Leelanau Peninsula in Suttons Bay, the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians did not receive federal recognition until 1980. During the long period leading up to recognition, many tribal citizens suffered in poverty, tribal membership declined, and through both economic necessity and fraudulent appropriation, much of the Band's land was lost. Since 1980, however, the Band was engaged in a process of nation-building. Its land base and population have grown dramatically (from 12.5 to over 1,300 acres and from 18 families to more than 3,800 enrolled members respectively), it has developed a thriving economy (grounded by a highly successful gaming enterprise), and it has formed a sophisticated and competent system of government.

By the early 1990s, however, success had yielded its own set of problems. With land, money and a larger population to serve, the Band's government felt pressure to move quickly to meet its citizens' long-standing infrastructure needs. It needed to respond to planning issues arising from its desirable waterfront location and increased visitation to its gaming and resort businesses. And it needed to address outsiders' concerns about the Band's growing economic, demographic and political presence. Since the Band's land holdings are scattered throughout six communities, a significant number of non-Indian stakeholders were worried about the effect that tribal projects would have on the character of their communities, about the impact on tax rolls of placing Indian land in trust and about the possible negative consequences of expanded tribal infrastructure development. Together, these forces placed a premium on sound tribal planning and development. Thus, in 1997, the Grand Traverse Band Tribal Council authorized the creation of the Planning and Development Department as a sovereign means of improving and preserving of the Band's land base.

The Planning and Development Department performs a wide range of functions, which is reflective of its dual mission. For example, Department staff are responsible for land

acquisition, lot planning, code development, regulation, project planning and marketing. With regard to project development, the Department acts as the general contractor on most of the Band's major construction projects. Over the past three years, its initiatives have included housing development and a variety of public works projects. Currently, the Department is completing construction of a turtle-shaped civic center, which will serve as a community forum, gathering place and recreation center.

This range of activity is impressive. Yet it fails to describe one of the most innovative aspects of the Department's work – that all of its initiatives are the result of participatory community planning. Before the Department was established, project planning was not only less organized, but also more arbitrary. Projects were developed and “handed down” to the Band's communities, sometimes even in the face of majority opposition from local tribal members. By contrast, the Department has been committed to gaining a strong sense of community priorities.

Its Vision Quest program, launched in April 1997, is illustrative. Vision Quest was a bottom-up planning process that involved monthly meetings of 15-35 volunteer tribal members over the course of a year. To gauge community-wide development priorities, the group created mailing lists, sent a survey to every Grand Traverse Band member and used the tribal newspaper to keep members informed of its activities and preliminary findings. With the help of a facilitator from a nearby university, the group worked with the Department to identify key stakeholders, reach out to them and gather their opinions and ideas. For example, Vision Quest members and Department employees worked together to gain the support and buy-in of elected officials, eventually achieving the passage of a Council resolution that advocated a participatory planning approach. Similarly, the Vision Quest team planned a series of workshops and public relations events targeted at specific sub-populations, such as youth and elder groups. The program culminated in an all-day community-planning event in April 1998, at which 200 tribal members helped plan the Band's future by categorizing and ranking development priorities. Significantly, Department representatives used the opportunity to share information – including financial projections – that allowed members to make wise choices.

The most tangible result of the Vision Quest program has been the development of the Band's Eagle Valley community, where new community-planned and approved construction includes a civic center, athletic facilities, tribal offices and ceremonial buildings and grounds. Other results of the participatory planning project are notable as well. For example, Vision Quest team members and the Planning and Development Department continue to use the priorities developed at the original 1998 Vision Quest meeting as a guide to decision-making, as do other departments in the Band's government. The process also created a model for ongoing community input. For instance, tribal members subsequently worked with the Department to select and advise the civic center architect.

Taking a broad view, the Grand Traverse Planning and Development Department's real successes are twofold. First, it has met the challenge of pursuing sound development head-on. As one staff member explains, the Department does not emphasize or focus on ribbon-cutting ceremonies, which may serve individual political purposes more than community needs. Rather, the Department aims to develop lasting projects embraced by the tribal membership. It has implemented a string of quality projects, particularly in the area of basic infrastructure (housing, sewage and water supply), and has done so in a way that respects the views and values of tribal citizens. While the Department believes strongly in community participation, it has not allowed planning to “stall out.” Instead, it is committed to turning talk into action, and to making sure that participatory planning results in necessary and desired

development. The Department's engagement of the tribal community in the planning process also has laid a strong foundation for future planning and development successes.

Second, and of equal importance, the Department has helped reshape outsiders' opinions of the Band. Given its recent and rapid ascendance as an economic power, landowner and political player in local, regional and state affairs, the surrounding non-Indian community was justifiably wary. Yet today, the Band's well-planned development has earned the respect and admiration of local residents and government organizations. Moving forward, the strong relationships the Department has forged with non-Indian organizations, such as the local Chambers of Commerce and town planning departments, and the communication and trust arising out of these relationships, should help minimize future conflicts over regional planning decisions. In essence, the Department has invested in building the Grand Traverse Band's reputation, and in so doing, has helped consolidate its sovereignty gains.

The Grand Traverse Band Planning and Development Department has demonstrated that strategic planning, community participation and prudent development are an important and often overlooked means of promoting self-determination and self-governance. Since many Indian nations face development pressures similar to those at Grand Traverse, these are tools that could – and should – be adopted by others.

Lessons:

- By creating mechanisms for community participation, tribal governments can better identify community concerns, foster public sector accountability, and promote appropriate governmental responses to local needs
- Enhancing governmental transparency is a desirable goal. Difficult decisions are often easier to make when tribal governments provide the broader community with more, not less, information.
- Both intra- and inter-government communication strengthens tribal governments. It provides tribal officials with a clearer sense of their government's purposes and can help build beneficial relationships with non-tribal politicians and officials.

79 John F. Kennedy Street • Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138
telephone: (617) 495-1480 • facsimile: (617) 496-3900
website: www.hks.harvard.edu/hpaied