

## **Chairwoman Tracie Stevens to step down as NIGC Chairwoman**

During the Northwest Indian Gaming Conference and Tradeshow in Tulalip, Wash. on July 16, National Indian Gaming Chairwoman Tracie Stevens announced she would be stepping down as Chairwoman of the Commission in September. Indian Gaming Magazine recently had an opportunity to ask Chairwoman Stevens to reflect on her tenure at the NIGC.

### ***What accomplishments are you most proud of as the Chairwoman of the NIGC?***

I'm most proud of upholding the President's commitment to government-to-government relationships with tribes. At the start, this commission made consultation and relationship building its priority. All three of the Commissioners previously worked for tribes and were aware of the need to improve relationships between the NIGC and tribal leaders. Revamping the consultation process was critical to our work. Tribes, as primary regulators, are on the front line of gaming operations and have a practical, first-hand perspective that can inform our decisions and ultimately aid in ensuring the protection and integrity of the gaming industry. But more importantly, if the process doesn't work, then it's nearly impossible to get the substance to work either. The NIGC had to change how we communicated and consulted with tribes and afford tribes ample opportunity to provide meaningful input before NIGC finalized changes that would directly affect tribal gaming operations.

### ***NIGA Chairman Ernie Stevens has publicly stated there was much needed reform at the NIGC—what has been the biggest reform challenge at the Agency?***

The biggest reform at the NIGC has been our approach to safeguarding the industry. While we are a regulatory agency with enforcement authority, we took an approach of prevention first through our A.C.E. initiative: Assistance, Compliance then Enforcement. Certainly enforcement action is necessary in the face of willful non-compliance, but what we discovered was that many tribes could maintain compliance with IGRA and NIGC regulations through training and technical assistance. Providing tribes with the necessary tools to maintain compliance helped to prevent enforcement actions given proper assistance.

### ***You are the first non-lawyer and female Chair of the NIGC, how do you think that has helped you lead the Commission?***

Throughout my nomination process and initially as Chairwoman, I was asked frequently about not being an attorney. Certainly IGRA doesn't require that the Chair be an attorney, but when the NIGC was first formed, I can imagine that having a law degree was helpful in drafting and establishing NIGC's initial regulations. After 22 years of IGRA, the position is about leadership, management and understanding gaming operations. Moreover, like many federal agencies, the NIGC has a robust General Counsel's office to act as legal advisor and representative for the Agency and the Commission. As a non-attorney and as a former operations manager, I brought a perspective to the Chairmanship that didn't exist before: hands-on, practical gaming experience, which I believe ultimately helped to inform our priorities, focus our

communication with tribes and aid our staff in better understanding the tribes and their gaming operations.

As for being the first female Chair, I didn't really think about that when I took the position. I am fortunate that I come from a very long line of strong, independent Indian women, so most times I don't think about being the first female of anything. However, being out front is not usually the place I prefer to be and I knew that this position would require that. I was reminded by a colleague that I needed to be an example to my daughter, my future granddaughters, nieces, cousins and all Native girls that women in leadership is not only possible, but is expected and normal. My tribal upbringing and dedication to Indian country had more to do with the Commission's accomplishments than my being female. I was taught about humility and service to your family and community. That it is our purpose to look out for the generations that follow us. I hope that is reflected in my work these past three plus years. I am so fortunate to have served as the NIGC Chair and to positively affect change for tribal communities.

***Why are you leaving the Obama Administration after so much progress at the NIGC since your arrival?***

My decision to leave was a very difficult and deeply personal one. I'm a mom and a wife. In the end, I had to consider what was best for my family, especially my daughter. She's going into high school this year and we decided as a family that her last four years should be at home in the Northwest. Because this Commission has made so much progress and positive changes, I can leave my post knowing that we did the very best we could and left the Agency better than the way we found it. That should always be the goal, leaving things better than the way we found them.

***Is there anything you wish you could have addressed that you didn't have an opportunity?***

We accomplished so much in three years through our four priority areas of Consultation and Relationship Building, Technical Assistance and Training, Regulatory Review and Agency Operations. We have revamped the Consultation process, making it more open and added informal processes to ensure tribal inclusion; worked cooperatively with other federal agencies; adjusted our Technical Assistance and Training to suit the needs of the industry; reviewed over 20 regulations or potential regulations and finalized 17; and really overhauled the management of the Agency so that our staff could better do their jobs and work with tribes to protect the industry. We did all of this through open communication with tribes. In thinking back now, I recall that when we first announced our four objectives, people literally laughed at us. They told us there was no way we could accomplish so much in just three years. We took that as a bit of a challenge and advanced the Commission's agenda. By working as a team and collaborating with tribes that actively engaged in the process, we achieved all of our objectives and more.

***How instrumental were the other Commissioners in the success of the NIGC? Associate Commissioner Dan Little and Stephanie Cochran?***

Given the monumental agenda with which we began, we had to coordinate and share the workload. We each took on particular initiatives and worked closely with the staff. Vice

Chair Steffani Cochran and Associate Commissioner Dan Little were absolutely instrumental in achieving the Commission's goals, especially the regulatory review. We were all involved deeply throughout the entire process, reading all comments, and each regulation, draft after draft after draft. We worked together to make decisions as a Commission and implement regulations that further protect the industry, yet were realistic and achievable by tribes. As a Commission, I'm proud of how we worked together to better the Agency and further protect the industry.

***How important was the restoration of government to government relationship between the NIGC and Tribes?***

IGRA provides for a three tiered regulatory system comprised of federal, state and tribal governments. Coordination and communication between the regulatory bodies is essential to maintaining the integrity of the industry, especially given that tribes are the primary regulators at their facilities. They have hands-on, practical experience that informs how we fulfill our authorities under IGRA. Plus, not all gaming operations are the same in terms of games, size, location, and regulatory needs. We must listen to tribes to understand those differences, so that we can better do our jobs and meet the needs of varying tribal operations and regulatory bodies.

***You have now been an operator and a regulator – How important is it to have a strong regulated Indian gaming industry?***

The federal policy goal of IGRA is to provide a statutory basis for the operation of gaming by Indian tribes as a means of promoting tribal economic development, tribal self-sufficiency, and strong tribal governments. With proceeds of gaming going to their own tribal communities to benefit the welfare of their own people, tribes have a vested interest in ensuring that they are the primary beneficiaries of their own gaming operations. Maintaining strong regulations is critical to ensuring the protection of those tribal funds. By working collaboratively with Tribes, the NIGC can further protect the industry and help meet the policy goal of IGRA.

***You recently announced the highest gross gaming revenues in the Indian gaming industry and the third consecutive year of growth—what does that mean to you?***

From all my years working for and with tribes, I have seen and lived through some of the worst poverty and socio-economic disparity that exists in this country. Gaming revenues have made historic impacts for tribal economies that a generation ago was steeped in deep poverty. Today, gaming has helped restore tribal homelands, provide education dollars, revive cultural and language programs, build homes and provide jobs. But while gaming has been integral to infusing tribal economies with much needed revenue, it doesn't resolve centuries of economic despair. For most tribes, their gaming facilities don't provide sufficient revenues to make significant economic changes, but rather, simply provide jobs for their community. I should point out, not all tribes have gaming—only about half of the federally recognized tribes game. All and all, gaming has made a tremendous difference to the next generation of tribal people that have gaming.

***You are a member of the Tulalip Tribes of Washington and your Chairman is a very strong supporter of yours. What does it mean to have your Tribes support and to represent the Tulalip Tribe in Washington, D.C.?***

Like any Indian person, we thrive on the support and confidence of our community, in particular, our leaders who are held in high esteem by our people. My council has been incredibly supportive of my position as Chair for which I am grateful. As a federal official, I have striven to be a positive and good representative of Tulalip. That I display the humility and honor that my people, including my family and relations, have taught me during my lifetime. My council's support provides me with assurance that I have done so. The support of my fellow tribal and community members has also meant a great deal to me. I hope my people are proud of how I have represented Tulalip and our ways.

***Are there any additional authorities you wish you had to more effectively carry out your mission?***

I came into the position as Chairwoman with the intent of following the law as it existed. We have focused on administering the authorities that IGRA grants us.

***You have strengthened relationships with the Department of the Interior and other federal agencies, including the FBI and IRS. Why is that important and how has that helped the Commission?***

Federal Indian law has a long, complex history with authorities administered in varying degrees by federal, state and tribal governments. IGRA in particular makes clear that authorities are shared between the Chair and the Secretary of the Interior, states, and tribes. Working exclusively or in a vacuum by any one entity does not support a functional regulatory system. In addition, NIGC only has civil regulatory authority. Criminal jurisdiction is with law enforcement agencies at the federal, state and tribal levels. In order to properly protect the Indian gaming industry, NIGC must work and collaborate with other agencies. Plus, when the federal family works together on common goals, compliance is more likely to be achieved.

***What advice would you give to the new Chair of the NIGC?***

Communication. Communication. Communication. Internally and externally. It worked well for us, so I pass along that advice to the next Chair.