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Mille Lacs Band Casinos Not Immune to Recession

The Mille Lacs Band's Grand Casino Mille Lacs and Grand Casino Hinckley have played a vital role in East Central Minnesota since they opened in the early 1990s, creating thousands of jobs in areas where steady jobs with good benefits were once in short supply. The casinos employ more than 2,900 Minnesotans, of whom about 92 percent are non-Indian. They provide health insurance plans that cover more than 4,300 people, along with other employment benefits. The Band also uses its casino income to provide programs and services that improve the lives of Band members and non-Indian neighbors in surrounding communities.

But with today's struggling economy, casinos across the nation – from Las Vegas to Indian Country – are feeling the effects of the economic downturn. Grand Casino Mille Lacs and Grand Casino Hinckley are no exception.

Economic stresses, such as those felt by the casinos, affect the Band's tribal government much in the same way they affect state governments. When the casinos bring in less revenue, the Band's




Casinos across the country, including the Mille Lacs Band's Grand Casino Mille Lacs and Grand Casino Hinckley, are feeling the effects of the recession just like other businesses are.

tribal government faces the difficult task of re-evaluating the programs and services it provides. For example, there are less funds to operate schools and clinics, provide assisted living care and other Elder services, and focus on homebuilding and business development.

Programs focus on economic development

The Mille Lacs Band and its Corporate Commission, which manages the Band's businesses, have many programs that help spur economic development and support job growth. For example, the Corporate Commission has a Small Business Development Program that works with Band members to help them start their own business or grow their existing business. The Mille Lacs Band has a Workforce Center that helps Band members obtain training and education needed to gain and maintain employment. And the Band's youth summer employment program provides work experience to youth ages 14-20.

These are just a few of the valuable programs that are needed to help support local economies and build healthy communities. 



The Band's casinos are important for local economies, supplying thousands of jobs and supporting many programs and services that benefit East Central Minnesota.

Economic Development

Band's Corporate Commission Invests in Wind Power to Create Jobs in Rural Minnesota

Last summer, a group of Mille Lacs Band members who live in District II of the Mille Lacs Reservation (which includes areas near McGregor and Isle) came together to help identify and pursue potential business opportunities that would create economic development in their community. The group helped organize an economic summit in November 2008 to examine potential business opportunities and gather community input. The summit was hosted by the Corporate Commission of the Mille Lacs Band, which manages all Band-owned businesses.



Photo courtesy of Sara Treiber

During the Corporate Commission's District II Economic Summit, Band members examined potential business opportunities and decided to pursue investment in a wind turbine company that will create new jobs in their community.


Based on feedback from the summit, the Corporate Commission has invested in a wind turbine company, called Mariah Power, which will create new jobs. The investment allows the Corporate Commission to produce generators for the wind turbines, which are called Windspires, at a facility in McGregor. About seven employees will be needed for the facility's startup – expected to take place in May – with possibilities to add more employees in the future as production expands to other Windspire parts. The products assembled at the McGregor facility will be

shipped to Michigan, where they will be assembled into the Windspires.

“I could not be more pleased with the path we took to get to this investment. Band members chose this endeavor, which will further their long-awaited goal of bringing economic development to the East Lake community,” said Sarah Oquist, Commissioner of Corporate Affairs for the Mille Lacs Band. “In addition to being a community selection, this investment aligns with our overall value of environmental responsibility.”

Along with the investment in Mariah Power, the Band's Department of Natural Resources (DNR) will install one of Mariah Power's Windspires by its East Lake Community Center. The low-cost vertical wind turbine is unlike traditional styles that feature rotating blades, but is propeller-free and generates wind power by spinning on a center pole. The DNR will initially study the Windspire's energy output at this location and examine possibilities for using the technology with Band homes and facilities.

Economic development exploration continues

While the District II Economic Advisory Committee continues to explore other opportunities to increase economic development in the area, the Corporate Commission is preparing for its annual East Central Minnesota Business Development Summit on April 29. The summit brings together businesses, government agencies, and other organizations to generate ideas to work together on ensuring healthy, prosperous economies. This year's summit – called “Hope for the Road Ahead: Living Lean and Working Together” – will be held from 8:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. at Grand Casino Hinckley. The event is open to the public and costs \$55 to attend. For more information or to register, contact Pam Wegner at 320/384-4645. 

Healthy Children

Band Works to Improve Kids' Total Health – Physical, Mental and Spiritual

The Mille Lacs Band knows that its children are the key to a successful future for the tribe. But with growing health problems among its children, such as obesity and other behavioral health issues, the Band is taking steps to overcome these challenges.

In 2008, a group of Mille Lacs Band members and employees developed the Healthy Child Initiative to find ways to help improve the health of Band youth and their families. The committee – which includes family services staff, school teachers and staff, nutritionists, mental health professionals, fitness coordinators, and other health care providers – not only works to improve children's physical health, but also their emotional, behavioral, and spiritual health.

A few years ago, the University of Minnesota-Duluth conducted a three-year project to examine measures for raising healthy American Indian children such as instilling in them a positive self-image, providing them with stable environments, and connecting them to their culture, in addition to good nutrition and exercise. The Band's committee sees this as an example in developing its goals to enhance all areas of children's health.

"The Healthy Child Initiative is designed to not only teach children and their families about the dangers of obesity and other health problems, but to also inspire and motivate them to make healthy lifestyle choices," said Samuel Moose, Commissioner of Health and Human Services for the Mille Lacs Band.

“ The Healthy Child Initiative is designed to not only teach children and their families about the dangers of obesity, but to also inspire and motivate them to make healthy lifestyle choices. ”

– Samuel Moose, Mille Lacs Band
Commissioner of Health and Human Services



The Healthy Child Initiative is led by representatives from the Band's Family Services Department, schools, and Behavioral Health Services Department, as well as fitness coordinators, nutritionists, and other health care professionals

Screenings at the Band's Nay Ah Shing Schools in December 2008 showed that approximately 60% of the students had an elevated Body Mass Index (BMI), compared to a 32% national average among students. An elevated BMI is one of the leading risk factors for developing diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and other health problems, making it a priority of the Healthy Child Initiative to monitor and reduce.

Even before the creation of the Healthy Child Initiative, Nay Ah Shing was taking steps to improve nutrition, including reducing sugary foods and high-calorie foods in school lunches and removing vending machines. This spring, the schools will plant a garden to give students a hands-on experience in growing produce and help them learn about healthy foods.

But the Healthy Child Initiative recognizes that education goes beyond the schools and clinics. It also means educating Band families about establishing healthy habits at home and providing environments that promote positive values.

"Changing habits can take time, but it is important that we give our children the education and skills they need to lead healthy, successful lives," said Moose.

Tribal Government

Mille Lacs Band Chief Executive Marge Anderson Returns

Mille Lacs Band Chief Executive Marge Anderson, who previously served as Chief Executive from 1991-2000, was sworn in to office again on January 13, before delivering the 25th annual State of the Band Address. Anderson is known locally and nationally for her service to the Band and American Indians. During her previous tenure as Chief Executive, Anderson led the development of Grand Casino Mille Lacs and Grand Casino Hinckley and the rebuilding of the reservation through new schools, clinics, community centers, housing, a water treatment plant, and other infrastructure.



Kelly Sam

Marge Anderson (right) was sworn in to office first in Ojibwe by former Chief Justice Dorothy Sam (center) and then in English by Chief Justice Alvena Aubele (left).


Anderson has also been a state and national leader on economic opportunities for Indian tribes, child welfare, and other American Indian issues. As Chief Executive, Anderson leads the Band's executive branch, which implements Band laws and administers programs and services.

In her State of the Band Address, Anderson discussed priorities including combating violence on the reservation, enhancing accountability in tribal government, and meeting the challenges of a struggling economy.

She told the more than 1,000 Band members, tribal government employees, state dignitaries, and tribal leaders in attendance that the Band's casinos are not "recession-proof," but that the Band's leaders are being proactive to get through this difficult economic time. Despite these challenges, Anderson cited the Band's progress in developing a healthy community.

"In recent memory, the Mille Lacs Band experience has been one of healing. After generations of poverty, we are operating successful businesses, giving our children access to excellent education opportunities, and using our own clinics to address some of our most serious health problems," said Anderson.

Band accomplishments and projects

Other speakers at the event included Mille Lacs Band Chief Justice Alvena Aubele, who provided an update on the Band's Tribal Court, and Interim Mille Lacs Band Secretary/Treasurer Sandra Blake, who returned to her post as District I Representative following Anderson's swearing-in. Blake highlighted some of the Band's accomplishments and projects, including new houses, a half-way house, and a wind turbine facility (see page 2 for more details). 



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