

Taxation is community issue, TITAC says, not G.R.E. issue

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Writers

Six Nations Band Council wants to start talking about collecting a portion of the \$150 million in excises taxes cigarette manufacturing giant Grand River Enterprises (GRE) pays annually, while still protecting community.

"It's something we need to start talking about," said elected Chief Ava Hill at a band council meeting last Tuesday. "I know it's been on our table before, that it (the money) should come here instead of going to the government. Let's start talking about it. Let's start talking about the implications - both for your company, if that's done - and for us as a community and the effect that may be on other businesses in the community," she told CEO Jerry Montour, who was making a presentation to band council.

CEO Jerry Montour and Steve Williams, GRE president, spoke during a meeting at band council last week.

Chief Hill said council should form an ad-hoc committee during the newly-elected council's orientation session last week in order to tackle the issue.

"Let's start having a frank discussion about that," said Chief Hill. "We know we're experiencing cuts every day. We need more money. One of our goals is starting to generate our own revenue. We know the government owes us a tremendous amount of money and they're never going to be able to pay that and the fact that you, as a private business, have to give them so much money and we get no return is something we can't stand for anymore.

"We need to work together to see how we can accommodate that and ensure everybody is still pro-

ected," said Chief Hill.

Turtle Island Trade and Commerce (TITAC) spokesperson Audrey Hill said she hopes Chief Ava Hill will be forming a community committee, not just a band GRE committee.

"I think there are a lot of groups within the community who have a vested interest in this entire issue."

TITAC has been holding regular community taxation meetings.

"We are still doing our taxation meetings that band council, under former Chief Bill Montour had asked us to hold to tackle this tax issue. We joined forces with the band to do this."

She said the results of the meetings are people want to see a community taxation committee formed.

"Out of those meeting came the idea of a community taxation committee and that is in the process. We have a petition going."

She said the group wants to see band council involved. "We do want band council involved," including councillor Lewis Staats who has been involved in this in the past."

She said she wants to discuss with band council holding community meetings "where Lewis (councillor Staats) can bring the community up to date on what is this Indian Taxation issue that is part of the Harper (Prime Minister Stephen Harper) package. We need a united front."

She said there have been quiet discussions with community businesses on the issue of not paying a "tax" like GRE does, but a contribution to the community.

"This is another issue, the taxation from our businesses. Yes we are very much interested in that. I know former Chief Montour referred to internal taxes, and I have had little discussions with people in the community that say

they would not be opposed to making a contribution to the community, but not a tax."

She said the issue of taxation is not a court issue. "This is a diplomacy issue and our strategy needs to be based on diplomacy."

She said there are about a dozen tobacco manufacturers in the community employing about 300 people.

"But there are also off-shoot businesses that are developing because of those plants that you have to take into consideration, gas stations, restaurants, bakeries. They may not have high employee numbers but they have a high impact."

She said any discussion on taxes, of any kind, need to take place in the open.

"If there is any talk about forming any kind of a committee, or discussion on taxation of any kind, we need to have the community involved, it needs to be in the open and we need to be kept up to date and be able to read it your paper."

During the hour-long discussion at council, an admittedly nervous Montour said he would work with council to tackle the issue in a way that wouldn't affect "sovereign" cigarette manufacturers on Six Nations - that is, manufacturers that don't pay any excise taxes.

"We already wear the brunt of collecting federal tax," he said. "To date, GRE has probably paid a billion dollars to the federal government and it hasn't been returned to the community. We always felt that the taxes should be paid to our own community but it evolved into us paying the federal government."

He said, in the beginning, GRE tried not to pay taxes. "Let's get past that," he said, adding that, "We often talk to sovereign manufacturers. They create



Grand River Enterprises CEO Jerry Montour and President Steve Williams meet with new band council. (Photo by Donna Duric)

a lot of jobs in our community, too, and they're a very important part of our community."

He said he doesn't want the solution to GRE's taxation issues to "destroy their (sovereign manufacturers) opportunities to be in business, too. We started out pretty small, too. I don't want to be stepping on anybody that could be just starting out. I think we can figure out a way to get it done without harming the bigger picture."

GRE employs about 380 people at its Six Nations plant in Ohsweken.

Chief Ava Hill said during the council meeting that she had recently signed two export certificates of sale for GRE in order to allow them to export cigarettes to Mexico.

She said she received approval through a council resolution and said from now on, "before we sign anything...it's going to come to council for council approval so everybody here is in the loop whenever we (council and GRE) have any kind of dealings in the future. Council passed a resolution yesterday (Jan. 13) for me to sign those two certificates so I did."

Williams said the company is, "the largest exporter (in terms of cigarettes) out of Canada."

He and Montour said GRE

is here to help the community. The company started a charity called The Dreamcatcher Fund, which, said Williams, has given out close to \$16 million in donations nation wide to date.

"We didn't have to do that but we did anyway because people need that kind of service for the kids," said Williams.

"We're here to help the community however we can."

GRE had humble beginnings, with partners selling cigarettes out of the backs of trunks, said Montour.

He said the shareholders would not have reached their current level of success if not for the people of Six Nations.

"We're not aristocrats," said Montour, who admitted he only had a grade eight education. "So many people have helped us. One of the greatest untapped resources of First Nation communities is the extremely well-educated people who were never given opportunity. We were blessed enough to start off here and that's who built our business. We would never be anywhere without the people of Six Nations."

He asked band council for a closed meeting to discuss the excise tax issue, a potential donation to the incinerator and another possible \$1 million dona-

tion (GRE has promised \$2 million) to the much needed firehall.

Chief Hill thanked GRE for its donation to the fire hall. "Let's work together on how we can continue to try and make our community a better place for all our citizens," said Hill. "With respect to the fire hall, thank you very much for the contribution of \$2 million."

Regarding the issue with excise taxes, she said, "We need to both make a commitment that we're going to meet regularly to get these things resolved. You pay a lot of money in federal taxes."