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Sault Chippewa tribal leadership stifles dissent Tribe's board curbs critics, closes forums, defends record in ads.

By Melvin Claxton and Mark Puls / The Detroit News

SAULT STE. MARIE -- Sault Ste. Marie Chippewa tribal leaders, in response to a Nov. 11 Detroit News series of stories about their shortcomings, have begun a media campaign to defend their record and have taken steps to stifle dissent.

The campaign -- which includes a series of meetings with constituents, media interviews and half-page newspaper display ads -- followed revelations in The News that the tribe's 12-member governing board and its chairman hid million-dollar deals from tribal members, gave themselves large retroactive salary increases and created high-paying second jobs in the tribe for fellow board members.

Tribal chairman Bernard Bouschor has hosted meetings in each of the tribe's five voting districts. He has barred the media from these meetings and limited tribal members to three written questions. He has refused to take follow-up questions or allow any discussion, according to several tribal members.

Sault member Patty Chambers said when she demanded that Bouschor answer her question about recent pay raises for himself and the tribe's governing board, the chairman threatened to have her arrested and removed from the meeting. She said a tribal police officer tried to escort her out of the building but backed down when several other members present said he would have to remove them, too.

"My civil rights were clearly violated," Chambers said. "That building is on tribal land and Bouschor makes all the rules."

Tribal spokesman John Hatch declined to comment on events at the closed meetings.

The New's series showed how the power granted the 52-year-old Bouschor as the head of a tribal government far exceed that of most elected officials.

With no independent court, police, auditors or justice department within the tribe to answer to, he has amassed substantial economic and political clout over all tribal operations, including the tribe's six casinos that generated \$175 million in revenues last year.

Bouschor has used this unfettered power to keep tribal members in the dark about his financial dealings, co-opted fellow board members and compensated himself well.

Tribal leaders have cemented their hold on power by passing restrictive laws that prevent more than two-thirds of the tribe's membership from running for office.

They also gave themselves a 33-percent annual raise in 2000 at the same time they were considering a cost-cutting package that included layoffs at the tribe's businesses. The raises were retroactive going back five years.

Closed meetings

Sault Chippewa leaders blocked the media and all but tribal members from attending their recent community forums.

Scott Brand, a reporter for the Sault Ste. Marie Evening News, attempted to cover the meeting but wasn't allowed.

He reported on the incident in the Evening News: "In an ironic twist, the Sault Tribe of

Chippewa Indians Board of Directors unanimously chose to shut out the general public in a special open forum, billed as a "community gathering" Tuesday evening, as the body attempts to rebuild credibility in the wake of a Nov. 11 series of articles in The Detroit News," Brand wrote in a newspaper article.

"The meeting, which had originally been billed as open to the public, was set to address these allegations.

"In making his introductory comments, Chairman Bernard Bouschor said he would entertain a motion to exclude anyone in the audience who was not either a member of Unit I or a staff member with the Sault Tribe. Trustee Fred Paquin immediately made the motion which was promptly seconded by Trustee Martha Miller. The unanimous vote -- instituting the new exclusionary criteria -- effectively excluded a handful of people in attendance, including a reporter from The Evening News who had been assigned to cover the "community meeting."

Newspaper ads

Tribal leaders have responded to the articles by placing half-page ads in at least four Michigan newspapers, including The Detroit News.

The ad campaign, with a tab of about \$30,000 so far, isn't costing board members or Bouschor a penny of their own money. Sault Chippewa leaders are paying for the ads from the tribe's coffers, Hatch confirmed.


That has angered tribal member Terry Barr, who criticized Bouschor for using tribal funds to pay for ads to defend his record.

"It doesn't seem right," Barr said. "If he has caused problems for himself, he should pay for the ads. That's not what the tribal money is meant for. But this is typical of the way he handles the tribe's money."

Sault Chippewa leaders say their intention is to get the truth out about their record and accomplishments. But some tribal members say the ads are a continuation of an effort by tribal leaders to mask problems with the way they run the tribe.

"This is exactly what we have been telling people for years" said tribal member Tom Bruning. "Bouschor and board members use any means, including propaganda and misrepresentations, to stay in power. What The Detroit News wrote was the truth, but these guys can't handle it because they have always had control over the press."

The ads and media campaign are not the first attempt by tribal leaders to blunt the impact of the newspaper's report. Even before the articles were published, Bouschor attempted to head off potential criticism of his leadership by using the tribe-owned newspaper to attack the then unpublished stories.

 November 27, 2001

Tribal members see little benefit from casinos

ASSOCIATED PRESS

DETROIT -- The Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians has built a \$250-million-a-year financial empire out of casino profits, but critics claim the money is being squandered by tribal leaders and not making it to the members who need it most.

The tribe's 29,000 members have no control over how the money is spent, are unable to hold their leaders accountable and see little in tribe-funded services, the Detroit News reported.

Unlike other casino-rich tribes, the Sault Chippewa has no profit-sharing plan for members, and many of its services are federally subsidized.

Revenues from Detroit's Greektown Casino and five other Sault Chippewa casinos in the Upper Peninsula are controlled by a 13-member board, led by Chairman Bernard Bouschor.

The powers granted the 52-year-old Bouschor as the head of a tribal government far exceed that of most elected officials. With no independent court, police, auditors or justice department within the tribe to answer to, he has amassed incredible economic and political clout.

Civil rights and legal recourses taken for granted by many Americans are often nonexistent on reservations, where tribal leaders control everything.

Bouschor makes \$100,000 a year as tribal chairman and CEO. He gets another \$167,000 as the tribe's chief operating officer for casino operations.

The chairman's benefits are in sharp contrast with those of the people he serves. For most tribal members, the personal benefits from the tribe's newfound wealth have been few.

Fifteen years after the tribe opened its first casino, the majority of its members still qualify for some kind of federal assistance. There is no profit-sharing plan for distributing casino revenues to members, unlike the Saginaw Chippewas in Mount Pleasant whose adult members get \$52,000 a year from their tribe.

"The people living on the reservation have nothing," said Verna Lawrence, a former board member ousted in 1977. "The government owns the land that their houses sit on. If you don't own the land, you don't own anything. The tribal leaders like to keep the Indian people poor or they wouldn't get federal funds."

Sault leaders say they decided more than a decade ago to use casino revenues to build a diversified economy and pay for social services, not create a welfare state.

"We didn't want people waiting for handouts," said tribal spokesman John Hatch. "We wanted to help educate our members and create opportunities for people to get jobs."

Bouschor said the tribe's financial books are open to any tribal members who visited tribal offices.

"When individuals ask for information we provide as best we can," Bouschor said. "Obviously, it may not suit what they think is appropriate or enough."

The tribe now employs close to 7,000 people, nearly 2,900 of them in the Upper Peninsula. It has built five health clinics, a two-hockey-rink recreation center, a state-of-art elementary school and several housing developments.

The tribe also helps fund funerals, provides college scholarships and gives elders a \$100-a-month stipend.

But by the tribe's own accounting, much of the money for the services comes from federal and state funds, not business or casino profits. After paying operating costs and debts for its businesses, only \$30 million of the tribe's revenues actually go to run the government and provide services for members.

By contrast, the tribe got \$75 million from federal programs, state funding, land trust payments and other outside sources, Hatch confirmed.

