

# Tribe pays fair share - and more

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For the first time in decades, the Bureau of Indian Affairs has made a decision to place property into trust (tax exempt status) for the Coeur d'Alene Tribe. Once the process is finalized, Benewah County stands to lose about \$15,000 from the property tax rolls.

Instead of working with the tribe, Benewah County officials opposed and apparently will now appeal the tribe's request, primarily on the grounds that such a transaction would cause severe and irreparable financial harm to the county and its residents. This reckless and unfounded claim is toxic for everyone in Benewah County because it perpetuates misguided hostility toward the tribe.

The tribe placing land into tax exempt status is not about money n it is about reclaiming what was lost. A county position to oppose a tribe's fee-to-trust application illustrates the ignorance involved in such opposition. For the Coeur d'Alene Tribe, a decision by the US to take land into trust marks the final step in the recovery of ancestral lands that were lost at the hand of misguided federal policies.

The loss of property tax revenue from the Johnson and Bader properties is about \$15,000, which represents less than one half of one percent of all the property taxes collected by the county: totaling \$5.6 million. People need to understand that the federal government already has a mechanism to help counties offset property tax losses stemming from trust landn it's called Federal Impact Aid.

Everyone in the United States who pays federal income taxes -- including Indians -- helps fund this program, which is intended to help local school districts compensate for the loss of property tax revenue from tribal trust lands in the county. This year, the Plummer-Worley school district received \$1,085,865.82. Yes, over a million dollars in Federal Impact Aid was received as a direct result of tribal land on the Coeur d'Alene Reservation in tax exempt status. It is likely that this decision to take the Bader and Johnson properties into trust will result in even more dollars for Benewah County schools.

With one of the highest unemployment rates in the state (16 percent), why isn't Benewah County working with the tribe to create new opportunities for people? Do county officials understand the number of acres of private land in Benewah County that receives tax exemptions, which by the way, the lost tax revenue is not offset by any state or federal program? County officials need to understand the tribe is the fifth highest taxpayer in Benewah County at \$118,851 annually. That figure doesn't include individual tribal members living on fee land in the county who pay their taxes every year. Is the county representing them?

Benewah County officials have, once again, allowed their own personal opinions and bias against the tribe to cloud their judgment. If this situation involved a timber company attempting to place newly acquired lands into tax exempt status n would the county be singing the same tune or would officials be scrambling to accommodate them?

County officials tend to ignore tax exemptions to private industry, such as timber land, because of the jobs they provide or their economic impact in the region. As the county's leading employer and the largest employer in northern Idaho, many of you already know that the tribe provides quality jobs with competitive living wages and excellent health care benefits. The tribe's impact on the regional economy is \$309 million dollars annually.

A vocal minority n many of which hold key political positions -- continues to promote the ludicrous idea that the tribe doesn't do its fair share to make up for any tax losses in the

county. The unfounded and biased opposition to the tribe by such Benewah County officials has got to stop. After the misinformation and falsities are filtered out of the discussion the facts clearly show otherwise.

The tribe donated \$320,000 to the Plummer Gateway Fire District to help build a \$1.4 million fire station in Plummer. The station will be completed later this summer and serves residents living in Benewah County.

The tribe has spent \$200,000 on road maintenance in Benewah County this year.

The tribe will spend \$500,000 on a lake management plan this year. The county's contribution is zero n even though they insisted on being at the table to help guide the plan's execution.

The tribe has donated \$2,300 to local civic groups in St. Maries this year and averages about between \$3,000 and \$4,000 every year.

In addition to Federal Impact Aid the schools receive, the tribe has made generous contributions to schools in Benewah County, dollars that have a direct impact on taxpayers because they help minimize deep budget cuts by the state.

The tribe donated \$20,000 to the St. Maries school district in 2009 n and more than \$100,000 since 1994.

The tribe donated \$15,000 to the Kootenai School District in 2009 and more than \$80,000 since 1994.

The tribe donated \$200,000 to the Plummer Worley school district in 2009 n and more than \$2.5 million since 1994.

Apparently this goes unnoticed and unappreciated by Benewah County officials that continue to cut their nose to spite their face. These officials need to be reminded that the tribe has discretion over which schools receive donations and in what amount. This is done out of a philosophy of giving back and being a good neighbor.

While some in north Idaho choose to enrich themselves with their profits, the tribe remains committed to investing in people, education, affordable housing, roads, public safety and natural resources.