Indian Country Response to Cobell Payments Overwhelmingly Positive

WASHINGTON, Dec. 28 – The response of Native Americans to the distribution of individual checks settling the long-running Cobell lawsuit over the government's mismanagement of individual Indian trust accounts and trust lands has been overwhelmingly positive and highly gratifying, lawyers handling the settlement said today. Approximately 263,500 individuals have been sent their Historical Accounting payments. This includes 208,500 checks mailed within a few days of the court's approval on December 12 and 54,950 payments wired to the Treasury Department for deposit into Individual Indian Money accounts. Over two-thirds of checks have been cashed within 10 days of their arrival and over 80% of class members have received their Historical Accounting payments.

That is a success rate much higher than seen in most class-action settlements, said David Smith, an attorney with Kilpatrick Townsend, the law firm representing the class members.

Jennifer Kenough of the Garden City Group Inc. (GCG), the court-appointed claims administrator handling the distribution, confirmed that view. “In our experience this is an extraordinarily high percentage of awards received and cashed in a very short time,” she said.

A call center, handling inquiries from Native Americans about the payments has received 425,000 calls in the past 10 days, Smith said.

That’s about 50,000 calls a day, a huge volume considering that about 329,000 individuals were believed to be in theHistorical Accounting class and about 500,000 in the total settlement class.

In order to help more individuals to resolve their questions, the call centers hours of operation have been expanded into the evening, Ms. Kenough said.

This class action has been overwhelming positive with many calling the center to update their contact information, she said. “GCG has added operators to help handle the call volume and they are determined to see that all remaining checks get into the beneficiaries’ hands as quickly as possible,” she said.

“We are heartened and gratified that there is such strong interest in Indian Country in the Cobell settlement,” Smith said.

“The addresses we were using were supplied to us by the Department of Interior,” he said. “As we learned during the 16 years that this case was in the courts, not all of Interior’s account information was accurate.”

“However, beneficiaries who did not receive checks have contacted us providing accurate contact information, and we are doing everything we can to expeditiously mail and, when necessary, the forwarding of checks to the correct addresses,” Smith said. “An additional 16,500 checks will be delivered in the next few days. Updated addresses received recently.

Any checks sent to a deceased individual should be returned for a new check that will be sent to that individual’s estate so it can go directly to the heirs, he said.

The strong call volume and the cashing of the checks show that Indian Country was overwhelmingly supportive of the settlement, Smith said.

The Cobell lawsuit was filed in 1996 by Eloise Cobell, a member of the Black-Foot Nation, over the federal government’s handling of individual Indian money accounts. Ms. Cobell died last year before the settlement checks could be delivered to the estimated 500,000 account holders.

For additional information, visit http://cobellsettlement.com. The toll free information number is 1-800-961-6109.

For CopyFast, one of Oklahoma City’s premier print companies, while attending evening courses to finish his degree at OCCC.

A letter from Virginia Conallis

I am not Sac and Fox, sometimes feel like I am, you see I was married to Clifford Conallis, a Sac and Fox for 10 years and 8 months. We had 6 children: Clifford Carl, Judy Kay, Jay Von, Bettina Gaul, Gloria Gav, and Martha Ann. Their grandparents were Joe and Mattie Conallis. We lived at the Sac and Fox agency for a good while. I made my daughters and daughters-in-law Indian should (to make frybread and corn soup, game and go to the Pow Wow and visit with our Indian friends, so you see how I am part Sac and Fox.

My children went to school with their friends and I made many friends over the years with Sac and Fox people. Most of my children dance at the Pow Wow and we really enjoy it.

I am now 89 years old, so I’ve enjoyed them many years. I feel Sac and Fox, even though I only married one.

I am wife of Clifford (Pete) Conallis, Virginia Conallis. I have made many friends among the Indian people.

A letter from Virginia Conallis

ATTENTION TRIBAL MEMBERS

A MEMBER OF THE TAX COMMISSION STAFF WILL NOW BE AT 1ST BAPTIST CHURCH CUSHING OKLAHOMA 1034 EAST WALNUT ONCE A MONTH.

THE TAX COMMISSION WILL BE THERE 2ND THURSDAY OF EACH MONTH WE WILL BE ABLE TO BETTER SERVE TRIBAL MEMBERS LIVING IN THE CUSHING AREA WITH MOTOR VEHICLE REGISTRATION AND ANY OTHER SERVICE THAT WE CAN ASSIST YOU WITH.

Sac and Fox Tribal Member Alex E. Smith has been accepted into the Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society at OCCC in Oklahoma City. Currently, Alex holds a 4.0 GPA and is pursuing an Associate of Applied Science degree while majoring in Interactive Multimedia Graphic Design through the Graphic Communications courses at Oklahoma City Community College and will graduate next spring.

Formerly the Graphic Designer for Sac and Fox Nation Casino in Shawnee (and Stroud), Alex is now designing full-time for CopyFast, one of Oklahoma City’s premier print companies, while attending evening courses to finish his degree at OCCC.

Alex Lives in OKC with his wife Stacy, son Nathan Eugene and step-daughters Ryanne and Romy. Alex is the son of Virginia Riley of Shawnee and the Grandson of deceased Sac and Fox Tribal Member Charlie Smith.

New Building Accepted: The new Cultural Center was recently accepted from Muska Builders. The new facility should be in use in a few weeks. The open house will be announced soon (staff photo)