

Hoopa Tribal Members Show Solidarity on Settlement



At least a dozen signs were carried by Hoopa tribal members at the Tribe's annual General Membership meeting on Saturday. A group garnered 700 signatures with which they hope to gain the attention of the tribal council. / Photos by Allie Hostler, Two Rivers Tribune.

Group Seeks Tribal Council Attention

By Allie Hostler, Two Rivers Tribune

A group of about 40 Hoopa Tribal members, dressed in red and holding signs that read 'Members First,' 'No Program Bailouts,' and 'Give us a Choice,' gathered in front of the Neighborhood Facilities Building Saturday morning. Their plan—to present the tribal council with 700 signatures supporting a petition that aims to give tribal members an opportunity to vote on a plan for divvying up \$49.2 million expected from a settlement agreement with the U.S.

They did more than deliver the lists of signatures at the Tribe's annual General Membership Meeting held Saturday, May 19. Several people delivered emotional testimony that inspired others to grab hold of the microphone and rally the crowd to their feet.

But first the audience shifted in their seats and occasionally called out "settlement update" as the tribe's attorney, Tom Schlosser gave a half-hour update on tribal legal efforts at the forefront of the tribe's work.

“It’s not a final settlement,” Schlosser said. “This money may never be received. I think it will. But the person with the signatory authority for the U.S. has not signed (U.S. Assistant Attorney General, Ignacia Moreno).”

Even though Schlosser expressed confidence that the Tribe will obtain a settlement of some kind in the coming weeks or months, he said the amount could be different than what was previously announced.

According to Schlosser, the Tribe was first offered \$39 million to settle claims of trust fund and resource mismanagement by the federal government. The Hoopa Tribe and nearly 100 more tribes with similar claims said the settlement offers were inadequate. Later the Hoopa Tribe was offered \$47 million. Again, the Hoopa Tribe pushed for more. In early March, the Hoopa Tribe agreed to accept the U.S.’s offer of \$49.2 million. But, it still awaits final approval from the U.S., something that could take another month or more to achieve.

Schlosser believes the holdup could have something to do with the Yurok Tribe, one of the other 100 tribes working to settle past claims with the U.S. Although the Yurok Tribe has not intervened in the Hoopa Tribe’s case, some of the money in dispute originated from two accounts that were involved in a case with the Cheyenne Arapaho tribe. The U.S. settled that case and from it the Hoopa Tribe received about \$680,000. That was prior to the Hoopa Yurok Settlement Act.

“I believe the feds are saying, wait a minute, we forgot about the Jessie Short case,” Schlosser said. He said the same two accounts are involved in the Yurok Tribe’s claim against the U.S. “They [the feds] are saying, we already settled those claims with Hoopa. Until Yurok and U.S. work out their settlement, I believe they won’t settle with us.”

In two weeks the Hoopa Tribe will make a report to the court on the settlement process thus far. Schlosser estimates that it will be at least one month before the U.S. is ready to sign a final settlement.

The crowd stirred and became impatient. Schlosser concluded his report, which included brief updates about Klamath and Trinity river restoration efforts and the Tribe’s recent efforts to achieve federal resumption of concurrent criminal jurisdiction—a law enforcement initiative that could potentially bring more funding to Hoopa Valley Tribal Police as well as allow HVTPD officers to enforce federal law and seek prosecution in federal court.

Immediately following Schlosser’s 30-minute presentation, a crowd of people wearing red assembled at the center of the room near the one microphone provided. Frank Horn was first to speak. Wearing a red button up shirt with a red ribbon tied onto his arm, he said, “We’ve struggled a lot for the things we have. We have a lot of bills. We have a hard time making a living. Even in our own homes, we have a hard time making food available. I believe our group today is concerned about our elders and the needs of the Hoopa people.



Hoopa elder Frank Horn addresses the crowd. / Photo by Allie Hostler, Two Rivers Tribune.

Danielle Vigil-Masten first thanked the Council for the opportunity to speak and then thanked Schlosser for his work and presentation. She read from a PowerPoint presentation that outlined the purpose of the group's petition.

The petition, signed by more than 700 adult tribal members (there are currently 3028 tribal members total), makes claims that the Tribal Council has violated its constitution and bylaws by holding private meetings on plans to spend unidentified tribal funding over \$100,000 on unidentified projects. Later, the group asks for the opportunity to vote on the issue prior to any final decisions. They also offer up a disbursement plan that would equally divide the money amongst all tribal members.

As Vigil-Masten continued to speak, members of the group interrupted with a holler here and a holler there that intimidated some and inspired others. The volume increased 10-fold when Vigil-Masten pointed to an organizational chart used to organize the tribal government structure on paper. At the top of the chart is the Hoopa Valley Tribal Membership, above the tribal court, above the council and above the chairman.

Glenna Starritt addressed the council next saying she was proud to stand with the group in red that day.

“There are some of our tribal members who feel they have no voice; they feel they are not able to articulate their feelings and ideas to you all,” she said. “I attended a council meeting back in March. There was going to be a discussion, so a lot of people showed up and, I have to say, they were really treated like second class citizens...How do we get to this place where there’s such a separation between the government and the people? You are here to represent us.”

Tribal member, Cinnamon Rodgers accused the council of abusing its power and said that many tribal members feel downgraded. “If you were measuring our wealth by dollars, we probably are ‘poor,’” she said. “It’s almost embarrassing for us to be members of the Hoopa Tribe because of our leadership. I may be only one voice, but what I have to say needs to be heard.”

She thanked them in the Hupa language, “Tsediya,” then concluded.

Tribal member Karen Starkey took the microphone, something she says is out of character for her. “We need to be a team,” she said. “We’re standing up so we as a people can be heard. We are very sincere. We need to be one.”

Their message was received quietly by the council, the eight-member governing body of the Tribe. There was a long pause and silence. Then Jackie Martins grabbed the microphone and paced in front of the room calling the crowd of more than 150 to their feet.

“What we are seeing here today is solidarity. This is a cry! This is our people!,” she said. “What I’d like to see is our people stand up for solidarity, for unity. Stand up! Are you proud to be Hoopa? This is who we are.” She turned to the Council “This is your people. Stand up for us!”

Most in the crowd rose from their chairs, hollered or applauded the message. When the moment passed there was near silence as Chairman, Leonard Masten Jr. thanked the crowd for their input and closed the public comment portion of the meeting. There were no comments or responses from council members.

The meeting was arranged differently than General Meetings from years past. The meeting was postponed about four weeks past the date initially set. According to Facebook reports from a council member, the meeting was postponed due to scheduling conflicts and the council’s work to agree on an agenda for the meeting. Although some assumed the meeting was called in response to the settlement stir, it was also a chance for the various tribal departments to provide information about their programs and services. Instead of each department manager delivering a speech and update, they instead tabled the perimeter of the room with raffles, displays and

handouts for the crowd.

After an hour was allotted to perusing the tables, the Vice Chairman brought the meeting back to order and asked the Sergeant at Arms, Billy Carpenter to say a closing prayer.