

State Tribal Economic Development Commission

301 S. Park Ave., Room 226

Helena, MT 59620

9:01 a.m.-2:46 p.m.

Friday, Feb. 6, 2026

The official meeting minutes may be accessed on the [recording](#).

Commissioners' Present: Gerald Gray (Chair), Delina Cuts The Rope, Ted Whitford, Sr., Mark Blasdel and Marta Bertoglio.

Commissioners Present Virtually: Yolanda OldDwarf

Montana Department of Commerce Staff Present: Bryan Singer, Rachelle Brown, TJ Altekruse, Marilyn Willson, Aaron Luster, Pat Doyle, Amy Barnes and Jada Maynor.

Montana Department of Commerce Staff Present Virtually: Mackenzie Espeland

Guests Present:

- Tash Wisemiller – United States Department of Agriculture, Rural Development
- Heather Sobrepena – Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, Center for Indian Country Development

Call Meeting to Order

00:07 Chair Gray called the meeting to order.

Roll Call

00:44 Ms. Willson called the roll for Commission members.

Opening Prayer

02:00 Commissioner Whitford, Sr.

Welcome

02:26 Chair Gray welcomed everyone to the meeting.

Public Comment on Non-Agenda Items

02:17 Chair Gray requested public comment on non-agenda items.

Ms. Sobrepena provided handouts regarding the Center for Indian Country Development of the Minneapolis Federal Reserve to the Commissioners. Ms. Sobrepena stated they are undertaking a project called the Survey of Native Nations. This project is to be able to provide tribal governments with tribal finance data similar to the Census of Governments. The survey itself is online and done through a secure, encrypted system and is confidential. Ms. Sobrepena provided a demo report to show what type of information a tribal government could receive if they participated in the survey. Ms. Sobrepena stated they are hosting a webinar on March 3 from 12 to 1 p.m. which will cover the basics of the survey. She also explained that she will be traveling across the state to visit with tribes to brief them on the Survey of Native Nations.

Mr. Wisemiller stated that the USDA is not shutting down and has a budget through the end of the fiscal year. Mr. Wisemiller stated that the USDA has funds available and they are here to continue to serve the public's needs and the goals in their community. Mr. Wisemiller stated that if there are any communication gaps, to contact him and he will connect them with the program staff.

Approval of Minutes

01:27:13 Presenter: Chair Gray

Motion to approve: Commissioner Cuts The Rope

Second: Commissioner Whitford, Sr.

Chair Gray called for a vote.

All commissioners present voted yes. Motion passed.

Fort Belknap's Event Center and Hotel Expansion Project Update

15:09 Commissioner Cuts The Rope stated that Jay Dusty Bull's was unable to attend to provide this presentation. Commissioner Cuts The Rope stated that this project is in the development stages. Fort Belknap is looking at the possibility of an event center and hotel at Fort Belknap to increase jobs and stimulate the economy.

Commissioner Round Robin Discussion

16:29 Commissioner Cuts The Rope stated that the Fort Belknap Indian Community was able to complete the construction of a new food distribution warehouse at Fort Belknap. It's approximately a 5,127 square metal building. They completed it within a 3-month time frame.

Commissioner Cuts The Rope stated they have homes that were recently permitted for electrical connection at the Eagle Valley Housing Development which is about 24 homes. Those are being vetted for application for use right now. It will be up to the housing authority how those houses will be let out. Commissioner Cuts The Rope reported that they are almost done with an environmental assessment on the Lodgepole Leggins' housing which is 11 homes south in the Lodgepole area.

20:50 Commissioner Whitford, Sr. stated that the Chippewa Cree Tribe they are working on Route 6, which is the new main street. The tribe applied for a planning grant several years ago and was successful in getting \$2.1 million to hire an engineering firm to plan the entire corridor. The tribe applied for a \$28.3 million grant to redo the road and a \$45,000 grant to zone the area.

Commissioner Whitford, Sr. reported that recently the Miyo Health Center, which is going to be a children's health center which is a \$31 million project and is a 32,000 plus square feet facility. Commissioner Whitford, Sr. stated that he believed they are planning a soft opening this month. There will be an application process where students will apply and be selected.

Commissioner Whitford, Sr. reported that the Rocky Boy Health Center built some professional housing units. Two of them are smaller quarters for individuals there for a short period of time and three larger quarters professional housing units. They are looking at building a 20-bed long-term health care facility. They've done a feasibility study and a business plan. The cost is approximately \$28 million. There is also a daycare on site mainly for their staff and a maintenance building. They are currently funding the Newtown Sewer Main Extension which was sole sourced to the Tribal Water Resources Department construction company. They are planning on building a new tribal office that will be just under 32,000 square foot facility which is estimated to cost about \$26 million. Commissioner Whitford, Sr., also stated they are building two wastewater lagoon systems. They sole sourced another project to Tribal Water Resources and purchased them the dredging machine and then paid them to dredge that area.

Commissioner Whitford, Sr., reported they are building a cultural building that will begin later this spring. This is a \$1.2 million project. They also spent \$300,000 on a park. They have all the equipment, have done the site work and must install the equipment in the park area now. They are remodeling their 90,000 square foot clinic facility. They also redid their roof which was a \$1.5 million project. They are going to dredge another lagoon next. It is currently in the design phase. Commissioner Whitford, Sr. stated if they do not dredge it, then they will redo it. They are looking at it now to see what it is going to take. They also completed two water tanks.

Commissioner Whitford, Sr. also stated they are currently upgrading a section of the water system that is one of the first water systems which is old and volatile.

Commissioner Whitford, Sr. reported they just completed 25 homes for senior citizens. They also completed two additional water storage tanks, both over 150,000 gallons. He stated that in the tribe's water settlement, they received funds to get water from Tiber to the reservation. They are allowed up to 10,000-acre feet a year. They have the intake structure which takes the water from the lake and pumps it up to the water treatment plant. It is not open yet because they still must complete the core pipeline for the reservation. Once it is completed, it will be one of the largest rural water systems in the nation. At the water treatment plant, they completed a 3-million-gallon storage tank.

Commissioner Whitford, Sr. stated that there was a solid waste problem. They applied for and received over a million dollars from the EPA's SWIFR grant to buy various items, including but not limited to, a shipping container converted office to put on site for their monitor and redo the fence around the transfer site.

Commissioner Whitford, Sr. reported that Stone Child College recently got their first four-year programs going. They received a donation from Melinda Gates of \$11 million. There are no plans, yet, for what they will do with that money.

Commissioner Whitford, Sr. reported that the buffalo project that was started back in 2021 with 11 buffalo has now grown to 60. They will be harvesting another buffalo on Feb. 11 for a community round dance and feed on Valentine's Day. They did complete a five-year buffalo management and

restoration plan, and they also have a financial plan in place and completed with the help of American Prairie.

Commissioner Whitford, Sr. provided further updates which can be found on the recording.

- 43:29 Chair Gray reported that the Little Shell Tribe will have a ribbon cutting ceremony for their Ceremony Center on Feb. 28, 2026. Chair Gray also reported that the Good Medicine project, which is their 18-acre housing development, is in the process of getting annexed with the city to be able to use the city's water and sewer.
- 44:42 Commissioner Bertoglio reported that she did not have anything to report on in particular. She stated she is happy to hear everything that is going on and glad to be a part of it. Commissioner Bertoglio stated she wants Commerce to be a partner in any way they can.
- 45:03 Commissioner OldDwarf reported that the Crow Tribe received a grant to restart their Head Start program which she believed was officially closed in 2019. They were going to wait until the fall to open, however, they reevaluated and will be doing a custom local option. Commissioner OldDwarf stated that they will be going into the community much like Home Base, but they will be bringing their own classroom. They will have a mobile classroom in RVs. Commissioner OldDwarf reported that in Crow Agency, they will be adding four classrooms to the daycare center hopefully by the end of the year. Commissioner OldDwarf reported that in Lodge Grass the school district has an extra classroom for a Head Start program. Commissioner OldDwarf reported that in Pryor they must start from the ground up.

Commissioner OldDwarf stated that they are working on their LFPA, which they have been stalled on for over a year, and they are now looking at getting it started. This is to get processed beef products to their enrolled members.

Commissioner OldDwarf reported they applied for the SWIFR program. She stated this is an intensive program. They are looking at recycling, especially regarding their mobile homes. Commissioner OldDwarf stated they have a lot of mobile homes that are unoccupied and hazardous.

Commissioner OldDwarf stated that she personally has been working on their CTAS, which is the Community Tribal Assessment Survey. They are trying to do a comprehensive analysis for their justice system. They will be finishing that at the end of the year.

Commissioner OldDwarf reported they are working on a tribal administration building. They will be breaking ground in 2027. The Crow Tribe has never had a tribal administration building.

90-1-105 MCA (Formerly HB19)

57:11 TJ Altekruse provided an update on 90-1-105 MCA. Mr. Altekruse reported that they have been working on this project this past year on how to develop this program. He stated they had a meeting with Heather and Casey Lozar from the Center for Indian Country Development of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis to discuss the Survey of Native Nations project. Mr. Altekruse discussed the metrics, reports, data visualizations, charts and high aggregate data provided by their system. Mr. Altekruse stated the Native American Trends dashboard may be featured on the Office of Indian Country's webpage. Mr. Altekruse provided an example of what the dashboard would look like on the Office of Indian Country's webpage. There was further discussion.

OICED Program Update

56:00 TJ Altekruise provided an update on the Tribal Business Development Grant. Mr. Altekruise reported that the application dates were Nov. 17 through Dec. 31. There were two applications received and they are still in review status. Mr. Altekruise reported that applications were received from Fort Belknap and Chippewa Cree. One application was deemed ineligible. Mr. Altekruise stated they are still in the process of reviewing Chippewa Cree's application and getting legal's assessment. He stated they might start the awarding process in a couple of weeks.

IEF and NABA Programs

01:05:33 Bryan Singer provided an update on the Indian Equity Fund Grant and Native American Business Advisor programs. Mr. Singer stated they are completing the review of the Indian Equity Fund Grant applications. Mr. Singer reported they received 118 completed applications. Mr. Singer stated he worked with the NABAs to weed out some of the low scoring applications and narrowed it down to 41. Then, the OICED team reviewed those applications and graded them. Mr. Singer stated that the selections should be very soon as he has narrowed it down to the top 25 businesses that will receive the Indian Equity Fund.

Mr. Singer suggested increasing the award cap to \$40,000 instead of \$14,000 to draw in bigger businesses that create more jobs. Mr. Singer stated that the focus would be on expansion and startups. There was discussion regarding Mr. Singer's suggestion.

Mr. Singer also explained that currently the grant is a dollar-for-dollar match which is cash and in-kind. Mr. Singer asked for feedback regarding the match requirement.

Marketing and Communications

1:27:58 Patrick Doyle with the Department of Commerce discussed the new Montana Brand. Mr. Doyle spoke about why they got a new brand, why it is important to businesses across the state, and how they came to getting a new brand. Mr. Doyle explained that this is the first time Montana has had a new consumer marketing brand in 16 years. Mr. Doyle stated that one thing missing from the old brand was people around the landscape.

Mr. Doyle stated the purpose of the consumer brand is to increase visitation to rural and under-visited areas while maintaining economic vibrancy in well-known areas. Mr. Doyle stated that the out-of-stater said the core Montana strengths were untamed landscapes, genuine culture, and a strong sense of place. Also, Montana needed to differentiate itself from competing destinations. Mr. Doyle stated that to have a brand and imagery that sets it apart, that is where the people, place and story come in because of the amazing people in this state. Mr. Doyle showed the new font, the new outline of the state, the wordmark, the graphic element, and the colors.

Mr. Doyle stated that the imagery was to show Montana like it is. He explained that what we want to do is move away from overly polished, empty landscapes to show people experiencing our state. He stated they want to balance adventure and peacefulness, highlight community warmth alongside nature, and use authentic storytelling. Mr. Doyle provided a video clip of the brand launch. Mr. Doyle reported that Governor Gianforte helped at the official brand launch on May 16 in Miles City at the Bucking Horse Sale.

Mr. Doyle provided information about the voice and tone of the brand. He also showed the new VisitMT website. Mr. Doyle reported they had something called a "Montana Tour". Mr. Doyle explained the tour objective. Mr. Doyle reported they took the truck all over the state and had a booth to

engage people in the brand. He explained they wanted to educate residents about the new brand and wanted to visually represent the direction and movement of the brand. Mr. Doyle reported they wanted to demonstrate how the brand aligns with Montana people and experiences across all regions. He explained they wanted to give Montanans a chance to interact with the brand, secure local media coverage, promote in-state travel dispersion, and support local events. Mr. Doyle explained that they had an antique truck with the new brand imagery and a booth. He stated the whole point of the booth was to tell a story of the brand. Mr. Doyle further explained the tour and the desired outcome.

Commissioner Training

02:00:37 Amy Barnes, attorney with the Department of Commerce, introduced herself and provided commissioner training. Ms. Barnes reviewed the statutes, Internal Management Procedures document, policies, and case law as it pertains to commissions.

FY 2022 Indian Equity Fund Recipient

02:31:47 Ms. Willson reported that Amber Terry from Central Machine and Ag Repair, LLC, was unable to present.

Other Business

02:31:52 There was no other business.
Recording ended.

STED Commission Tour at the Montana Heritage Center

Commissioner Ted Whitford, Sr. toured the Montana Heritage Center located at 558 Roberts Street in Helena.

Adjourn

Meeting adjourned without a quorum at 2:46 p.m.