

State Tribal Economic Development Commission

Montana Little Shell Chippewa Tribal Office
511 Central Ave. W.
Great Falls, MT 59404
9:13 a.m. - 2:04 p.m.
Thursday, May 8, 2025

The official meeting minutes may be accessed on the recording.

Commissioners Present: Gerald Gray (Chair), Jennifer Finley (Vice-Chair), Richard Sangrey, Delina Cuts The Rope, Mark Blasdel, and Melissa Lonebear

Commissioners Present Virtually: Bryce Kirk

Montana Department of Commerce Staff Present: T.J. Altekruise, Bryan Singer, and Marilyn Willson

Montana Department of Commerce Staff Virtual: Rachelle Brown and Olivia Kettenring

Guests Present:

- Jim Brown – Montana State Auditor & Commissioner of Securities & Insurances
- Molly Plummer of the Office of the Montana State Auditor
- Tash Wisemiller of USDA Rural Development
- Erika Wimmer of Montana Department of Transportation

Guests Present Virtual:

- Frank Biasi from Go Good
- Ashley Woodward from Rose Hollow Catering

Call Meeting to Order

00:02 Chair Gray called the meeting to order.

00:40 Ms. Willson called the roll for Commission members.

Opening Prayer

01:34 Commissioner Sangrey

Welcome

02:56 Chair Gray welcomed everyone to the meeting.

Public Comment on Non-Agenda Items

04:13 Chair Gray requested public comment on non-agenda items. There were no public comments.

Approval of Minutes

03:02 Presenter: Chair Gray

Motion to approve: Commissioner Sangrey

Second: Commissioner Cuts The Rope

Chair Gray called for a vote.

Vice-Chair Finley abstained.

All other commissioners present voted yes. Motion passed.

Commissioner Round Robin Discussion

04:44 Chair Gray stated that Commissioner Sangrey would be resigning from the STED Commission. Commissioner Sangrey said the tribe has accepted his resignation and his last day will be the 30th of the month. He stated he has worked in tribal government for 46 years. They do have a nomination they will be sending to the Governor. Commissioner Sangrey stated he has not put in his resignation with the Governor yet. Commissioner Sangrey said Ty Watson will be his requested replacement. Commissioner Cuts The Rope stated that Fort Belknap appreciates Commissioner Sangrey's service and thanked him. Vice-Chair Finley also thanked Commissioner Sangrey for his service.

08:32 Commissioner Blasdel stated that he has had to attend the last few meetings remotely due to the legislative session. Commissioner Blasdel provided an update to the BEAD. He stated it has been stalled for a while due to the changes at the federal level. The Federal Government reviewed several things, and they are going to make a few adjustments, but not as significant as initially thought. Commissioner Blasdel stated the funding is still there to move forward. He stated that the entire plan with the changes was to be submitted by July 1, but all states were given a 90-day extension, and he stated they feel they will be able to submit everything on time and get the work done.

Commissioner Sangrey asked if the Federal budget will impact the state budget. Commissioner Blasdel stated that while the state is heavily dependent on federal money, so far, they are not seeing a significant number of changes on several things. He stated one of the main items they will be tracking is Medicaid expansion which was renewed in the statute itself. It states that if the Federal apportion goes below the 90/10 match, that the legislature will have to act on that.

12:08 Vice-Chair Finley stated Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribe just broke ground on their newest casino which will be located in Polson. It is called 400 Horses Casino. They are not sure how the tariffs will play into the cost of supplies including the lumber and steel.

Vice-Chair Finley also stated they broke ground on the meat processing facility. CSKT also just ended a hiring and travel freeze but may have to do that again based on the uncertainty. Vice-Chair Finley stated one thing she was interested in was nation to nation and perhaps international trading as a sovereign nation.

14:12 Chair Gray explained that the Little Shell Tribe broke ground on a new Ceremonial Center located on Stuckey Road in Great Falls. This will be a 200-person venue.

Chair Gray also said they are currently in the permitting process for their 18-acre housing development. It will be 35 single family homes, 18 duplexes and roughly 48 apartments. The Little Shell Tribe also donated 15 acres to be used as a regional fitness center.

16:22 Commissioner Lonebear stated the Northern Cheyenne Tribe completed their craft center. They are working on getting inventory. Commissioner Lonebear said she attended a Transportation meeting a few weeks ago where she learned there is tourism funding through Transportation. Each tribe has an opportunity for funding; however, only one tribe, which was Blackfeet, had applied for it. After learning that, the Northern Cheyenne Tribe also applied and received it. Commissioner Lonebear also reported the Tribe is still transitioning from the election.

17:47 Commissioner Kirk stated the Fort Peck Assiniboine & Sioux Tribes now has their casino and meat processing plant. The tribe is looking for additional funding through the State for tourism.

18:11 Commissioner Cuts The Rope stated the Fort Belknap Indian Community are working on housing development. They completed the water sewer infrastructure. The ultimate goal is for 45 homes, but they are starting with 24 because of the high cost of materials and building. The tribe has a large broadband connectivity grant from the Federal Government. They meet regularly with the Federal representatives. It will bring 20 local jobs to the community. Commissioner Cuts The Rope stated there is housing development taking place in the northeast corner that will be a community center with a few houses around it. The Lodge Pole area is getting some housing, and they are working on a Hays housing development.

CSI Overview & Financial Literacy Update

24:54 James Brown the Montana State Auditor and Commissioner of Securities and Insurance introduced himself. He also introduced Molly Plummer from the agency as well. Mr. Brown explained that his office helps to educate Montana consumers about their investment and insurance options and also regulate providers in those areas. Those items also include digital currencies which some can be considered securities which are regulated by his office. Mr. Brown stated that currently the number one area of fraud in the financial industry is fake bitcoins and cryptocurrencies.

Mr. Brown stated that the sophistication of fraud is getting greater due to the growing use of artificial intelligence. Another area of fraud is romance and friendship scams where people befriend people online and steal money from

them. Another area of fraud is Ponzi schemes. Mr. Brown stated that for more information to visit their website which is csi.mt.gov and select “Outreach”.

On the insurance side, Mr. Brown stated his office investigates insurance complaints and fraud. Mr. Brown stated the cost of insurance is increasing and insurance companies are cancelling policies due to the perceived wildfire risks. Mr. Brown reminded the Commission to remind those business owners they work with to ensure they have appropriate insurance to cover their investments taking into account the growing value of property in Montana.

Mr. Brown stated that he is continuing the financial literacy initiative that his predecessor Mr. Downing worked on. Mr. Brown stated the meetings regarding financial literacy initiative continued through 2024 and the work group concluded its work at the end of 2024 by providing interested parties and stakeholders with a compilation of available resources and information that can be used to help educate people on the importance of financial literacy. Part of that is targeted to financial literacy in Indian Country. There was participation from seven key members which included the Governor’s Office, the Department of Commerce, the North American Community Development Corporation, the Federal Reserve Bank, the Montana Manufacturing Extension Center, the Montana Council on Economic Education and the American Indian Governance and Policy Institute. There were three key findings from that working group. First, the initiative must be culturally relevant. Second, it must address the unique financial challenges within the tribal communities. Mr. Brown indicated that they still need help finding community champions and sponsors within each of the tribal communities.

Mr. Brown stated that he and his office want to continue to partner with the STED Commission in economic development. He stated that one of his office’s priorities

is to ensure Montana grows economically, which includes helping all communities.

Tribal Business Development Grant

46:18 TJ Altekruze discussed the current guidelines of the Tribal Business Development Grant along with previous applicants and awardees. He stated in 2023, Blackfeet, Little Shell, Fort Belknap and Fort Peck submitted applications. The awardees for 2023 were Blackfeet and Little Shell. In 2024, Northern Cheyenne and Little Shell applied. In 2025, Blackfeet, CSKT, and Little Shell applied. The awardees were Blackfeet and CSKT. In the previous STED Commission meeting there was discussion about ensuring the funding is rotating throughout the tribes. Mr. Altekruze stated that there is nothing in the guidelines stating that. Mr. Altekruze explained that the Department must review those applications submitted. So, if the Department only receives applications from certain tribes, the Department cannot award those who haven't applied. So, Mr. Altekruze stated that the Department, specifically the Office of Indian Country Economic Development, is looking at doing a better job of ensuring that all tribes are aware of this funding opportunity. In the past, emails have been sent to inform tribes of the TBDG. Mr. Altekruze discussed with the Commissioners possible other ways to inform tribes of the grant.

Commissioner Kirk recommended that the TBDG should be given to whoever applies for it with a shovel ready project.

Commissioner Cuts The Rope stated that Fort Belknap had applied for the TBDG but did not receive the grant. She stated that she commits to ensuring Fort Belknap applies for the TBDG with a shovel-ready project.

Mr. Altekruise offered a suggestion for the Commission to consider that if a tribe receives the TBDG funding they will not be eligible to apply for it for the next two years. Chair Gray stated if they do that and get no applications what would happen then? Commissioner Cuts The Rope provided a scenario to consider which was if a tribe applied and received the TBDG, but it was only enough to cover one phase of the project and the tribe needed more money to complete another phase of the project, that would not allow a tribe to reapply for the TBDG.

Mr. Altekruise offered another suggestion. The TBDG application cycle runs typically for 90-days. Mr. Altekruise suggested providing those tribes who have not previously received the award with a 45-day priority window to apply first.

Commissioner Sangrey stated he thought tribes were not supposed to receive the TBDG year after year. Mr. Altekruise stated that that is not currently in the guidelines. Chair Gray stated the issue with that is if the Department doesn't receive applications, then no tribe receives the TBDG funding.

Commissioner Cuts The Rope suggested requiring the tribe to submit a letter of intent, even multiple projects, with a deadline to declare a project that may be shovel ready.

Commissioner Blasdel asked how much the total TBDG amount is. Mr. Altekruise stated it is \$240,000. Mr. Altekruise explained in the past years, TBDG has been split between two tribes. Ms. Willson reminded the Commission that the current guidelines do not state the TBDG must be split. It is in guidelines that the grant can be awarded to just one tribe.

Commissioner Cuts The Rope stated that you would need to write the grant as if you would receive less as it has the potential to be split between 8 tribes. It is possible under the current guidelines to be split between eight tribes.

Mr. Altekruise suggested having previous year's TBDG recipients present at the STED Commission meetings. Mr. Altekruise stated the next TBDG application should start in October and remain open until December 2025.

01:06:19 Motion to Approve: Commissioner Cuts The Rope moved to include a letter of intent requirement to the Tribal Business Development Grant solicitation for eligible applicants to submit a letter of intent by identifying in advance shovel-ready projects 30 days prior to the opening of the grant cycle.

Seconded by Commissioner Lonebear.

Chair Gray called for a vote: All yes. Motion passed.

Chair Gray requested Mr. Altekruise to notify the tribes who have not received the TBDG of the grant.

Commissioner Sangrey requested to send a letter to all the tribal leaders of the tribes and CC the STED Commissioners.

Go Good

01:08:45 Frank Biasi is the founder of the non-profit Go Good. He and Go Good are collaborating with the Montana Indigenous Tourism Alliance. It is a mobile app, website, and sustainable travel guide to promote travel and local businesses including in indigenous communities. The app allows users to review places and provides opportunities for the users to donate and volunteer to support local nonprofit organizations.

Mr. Biasi explained that some of the goals of the app are to disperse tourism; to alleviate “over tourism” in some places; and promote tourism to those places that are having under tourism issues. It also provides guidance on how to respectfully visit places, people, and wildlife based on local knowledge and preferences.

Mr. Biasi provided a demonstration of the Go Good app. Chairman Gray asked how and when they plan to reach out to the native communities. Mr. Biasi stated he plans on starting this spring and summer. He stated he has already been working with and being provided guidance by Lailani Upham and the MITA group since he started. MITA applied and received the Pilot Community Tourism Grant to help support them in doing that. Mr. Biasi stated they plan to launch the Go Good App this fall.

Chairman Gray asked if the MITA group was still having meetings. Mr. Biasi stated that they are active. He explained that MITA received the Pilot Community Tourism Grant, but they are waiting to receive those funds to then hire people and build a website. Mr. Biasi stated that he believed they would be reaching out to the tribes. Mr. Biasi encouraged the Commission to reach out to Ms. Upham or their tribal representatives who are on the MITA group.

Commissioner Cuts The Rope asked Mr. Biasi where he is located at which Mr. Biasi replied that he was in Denver. He stated his plan is to have a local representative in every destination, but he doesn't have that person identified yet.

Commissioner Cuts The Rope explained to Mr. Biasi that the STED Commission, which he is presenting at, is comprised of Governor appointed members from their respective tribes. She explained that one of their responsibilities is to bring back information to their leadership. So, if he wanted to provide further

information to the Commissioners, they would then provide it to their leadership. Mr. Biasi stated he would send some talking points and links to share. He stated he will also follow up with Ms. Upham and his colleagues at MITA to make sure they communicate with the STED Commissioners as well.

Commissioner Lonebear requested Ms. Willson follow up with Mr. Biasi to ensure he provides a copy of his presentation and who their contact has been for each tribe.

MCA 90-1-105 (Formerly HB19)

1:39:27 TJ Altekruze presented on MCA 90-1-105 which is to show the economic contributions of the tribes to the Montana economy. Mr. Altekruze stated he and Mackenzie Espeland have had a few meetings and are establishing partnerships regarding this. They met with Dr. Jennifer Isern the CEO, and founder of Catalyze Global Impact, LLC. Mr. Altekruze stated she is in tune with data as it pertains to the State. She also presented at the Montana Economic Development Association regarding tribal data.

In April 2025, Mr. Altekruze also stated they met with Tom Stergios and Kate Pace, the lead consultants at Craton Consulting. Mr. Altekruze stated there was a study in July 2024 which was a data project completed by the Whole Group, which Mr. Altekruze stated is an off shoot to Craton Consulting. The project, which was completed for the Department of Commerce's Business Attraction team, provided a snapshot of each tribal economic development readiness. The data was compiled using public sources and includes, but is not limited to broadband capability, average square foot price of retail space, household income, and other different metrics. Mr. Altekruze stated this project included collecting data from a business attraction perspective for incoming businesses to see some of the key factors in certain communities if they would want to

come and set up their business there. Mr. Altekruise explained that some of that data could be used to apply to the MCA 90-1-105 project.

Mr. Altekruise also stated that in May 2025, he and Ms. Espeland met with Karen Dove who is the Director of Program Integration at Accelerate MT. They also met with the Digital Media Team at the Department of Commerce. Mr. Altekruise stated they are currently working with this team to bolster the OICED's webpage to accommodate a section on the site devoted to links and resources that show the economic contributions of Montana's tribes.

Commissioner Cuts The Rope asked if those working on the data will be working with people like the planning directors or similar positions to provide them with the tribe's Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) documents which also tracks projects and other similar things. Commissioner Cuts The Rope also stated that a lot of tribes spend almost all their payroll off the reservation for businesses, goods, supplies, etc. which she stated is also a contribution to the State of Montana's economy, which she does not see on the information provided by Mr. Altekruise.

Mr. Altekruise said the long-term goal of this project would include a robust dashboard that has mapping and shows all the economic contributions.

The Commission felt the study was missing a lot of data.

Mr. Altekruise stated the data on the spreadsheet completed by the interns at the Whole Group, compiled the data using public sources. Mr. Altekruise stated we need to get more specific as it is not completely accurate. Commissioner Blasdel told Mr. Altekruise that he may want to contact Adam Carpenter, the Chief Data Officer at the Montana Department of Administration, who could pull the most factual data. Commissioner

Blasdel also recommended working with Sarah Swanson who is the Commissioner of the Department of Labor and Industry. There was further discussion regarding the data.

SSBCI Update

02:03:51 Olivia Kettenring, who helps administer the State Small Business Credit Initiative for SSBCI on behalf of the Montana Department of Commerce stated there is another SSBCI Tribal Consortium award that NADC administers but this would be Montana's allocation as a participating jurisdiction as the State. She explained this is a federally funded initiative aimed at increasing access to capital for small businesses in Montana. Ms. Kettenring explained they have designed their program to ensure these funds reach businesses that matter most which include those in underserved and rural communities, including tribal nations. Ms. Kettenring stated that their scoring rubric gives direct prioritization to Montana Native American owned businesses. She stated the goal of SSBCI is to bridge the capital gap by partnering with local lenders to participate in a loan which helps reduce lender risk and unlock financing that may not otherwise be available to the borrower.

Ms. Kettenring presented the scoring mechanism which is also available online. Ms. Kettenring explained urban and rural designations and showed the map which is located on their website.

Ms. Kettenring provided the description of how to access the SSBCI funds. First, they need to determine where to send the prospective applicant. Then, identify local approved economic development organization. Discuss what the lender of CDFI/RLF may need from the business. Proceeding with an application submission. Finally, reaching out to the Montana SSBCI team.

Ms. Kettenring stated the next opening application round begins May 20, 2025, and ends on June 30, 2025. Ms. Kettenring provided success stories of those businesses who received SSBCI funds.

FY 2020 Indian Equity Fund Recipient

02:36:56 Ashley Woodward from Rose Hollow Catering presented on the Fiscal Year 2020 Indian Equity Fund Grant she received and shared how the grant has helped her business. She started cooking when she was 19 and worked in restaurants for a long time. She also worked in catering and liked that but there was a lot of equipment involved in that business. In 2019, she started her own catering business. She didn't make that much money because most of the money she made went back into buying equipment and paying people who helped her. Ms. Woodward stated she had to purchase poorer quality and cheaper equipment which would not necessarily last. She received the IEF Grant in 2020 which allowed her to invest in equipment including, but not limited to, large pots and pans, big racks, and an industrial food processor. Ms. Woodward said this grant allowed her to then take on different types of jobs. She stated she can now not only cater for private dinners but also allow her to cater for a conference with 150 people. Ms. Woodward stated that she doubts that she would be where she is in her career without the IEF Grant.

OICED Program Update

2:32:20 T.J. Altekruse provided a handout of the summary of the fiscal year 2025 Tribal Business Development Grant awardees and their projects.

IEF and NABA Programs

2:39:38 Bryan Singer stated they just completed contracting for the IEF Grants. They selected 25 businesses out of 123. The Commission was provided with a handout for the recipients of the IEF Grant. Commissioner Lonebear suggested there should be communication between the recipients and at least tribal leadership so they are aware. The Commissioners requested a list of the IEF applicants who did not receive the award so they can follow up with them and perhaps assist them.

Mr. Altekruise stated they are considering having a training event of some kind to better equip the NABAs and perhaps even the IEF Grant applicants who didn't receive the grant. Mr. Altekruise stated they could show them what makes a better application.

Commissioner Lonebear suggested having a business fair. There were further discussions regarding a possible business fair. Mr. Singer stated that he would like to visit each of the tribes to do outreach to assist. Commissioner Lonebear suggested doing that during the Little Bighorn Days.

Tribal Tourism Update

3:00:42 Rachelle Brown provided a Tribal Tourism Update. Ms. Brown provided the STED Commission with a list of the Tribal Tourism Grant Awards, Tribal Tourism Historic Preservation Grant, and the Tribal Tourism Small Business Grant Awards. Ms. Brown stated there were 23 submissions for the Tribal Tourism Small Business Grant. Six of those applicants were not awarded and Ms. Brown followed up with them.

Ms. Brown discussed the Indian Country Production. The Department has contracted with Scott Smoker and Jordan Lefler to be the videographer and

photographer for capturing content. Due to some unforeseen personal circumstances, Ms. Brown stated that her tribal tours and working groups have been stalled. So, it slowed down her consultation process. Ms. Brown stated they will be capturing content at each of the tribal nations. They will work with the tribes to ensure film permitting is in place.

Ms. Brown stated that she was awaiting the contract with the agencies of record so she can get a second scope of work, as well as an extension on this project so they can capture some shoulder season content. Ms. Brown stated that next summer that would include interviews and stories that each of the tribal tourism working groups determine that they want to include. Ms. Brown stated that the goal is to have it finalized in the spring 2027 and ready to launch with the 2027 summer campaign.

Ms. Brown stated that Visit Montana has done a rebrand they will be launching. They are having a brand launch party in Miles City on May 16, 2025. They are planning on taking the tour of the new brand across the state.

Ms. Brown stated the Production Assistant Training Program has been relaunched. The next training will be May 13, 2025 at Stone Child College. There will be multiple training courses coming up throughout the year. They are combining it with a production that is taking place. The film is called *Undefeated*. So, day one is training and day two will involve working on the production.

03:22:42 Ms. Brown requested from the Commission if they were interested in using the funding from the fiscal year 2026 Tribal Tourism money to cover the cost of commissioners or their delegates to attend the AIANTA conference. This conference is being held in Choctaw, Mississippi October 27 – 30, 2025.

03:23:05 Motion: Chair Gray

Second: Commissioner Lonebear

Chair Gray called for a vote. All yes. Motion passed.

Legislation

03:24:13 Mr. Altekruise received legislative information from Mackenzie Espeland (who was unable to attend the meeting) that he relayed to the Commission. The Native American Collateral Support Program has funding available. The NACS program is currently accepting applications. As of April 11, 2025, \$91,007.51 in cash funding is available, with an additional \$10,125.00 expected by the end of May.

Mr. Altekruise continued to relay the information provided by Ms. Espeland. The legislative session has ended. Senate Bill 379 was voted down in the house on April 15, 2025. Senate Bill 303 is pending the Governor's signature as of April 30, 2025.

Other Business

03:28:40 Commissioner Lonebear suggested having a business expo with tribal businesses in attendance the day prior to a future STED Commission meeting. Commissioner Lonebear suggesting also having a business expo during Little Bighorn Days.

03:31:22 Presenter: Chair Gray

Motion: Commissioner Lonebear

Second: Commissioner Sangrey

Chair Gray called for a vote: All yes. Motion passed