

State Tribal Economic Development Commission

Little Shell Tribe Ceremonial Center

1315 Stuckey Road

Great Falls, MT

9:08 a.m.-2:29 p.m.

May 1, 2026

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

Commissioners present: Gerald Gray (chair), Delina Cuts The Rope and Mark Blasdel.

Commissioners present virtually: Ted Whitford, Sr., Greg Dumontier, Yolanda OldDwarf and Marta Bertoglio.

Montana Department of Commerce staff present: Mackenzie Espeland, Bryan Singer, Rachelle Brown and Marilyn Willson.

Montana Department of Commerce staff present virtually: TJ Altekruise

Guests present:

- Avery Hughes — Central Montana Tourism
- Heather Sobrepena — Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, Center for Indian Country Development

[Call Meeting to Order](#)

0:35 Chairman Gray called the meeting to order.

Roll Call

01:37 Ms. Willson called the roll for commission members.

Opening Prayer

02:33 Commissioner Cuts The Rope

Welcome

03:16 Chair Gray welcomed everyone to the meeting.

Public Comment on Non-agenda Items

03:47 Avery Hughes introduced himself as working for the Central Montana Tourism Region. Mr. Hughes stated he has been asked to assist in finding places, ideas and stories to highlight on a tour for the Montana Governor's Conference being held in Great Falls in September. Mr. Hughes asked the commissioners to provide any of these ideas around the Rocky Boy, Box Elder and Havre areas.

Mr. Hughes also explained they are always looking for directors to serve on their board. Mr. Hughes stated the only stipulation is that they reside in central Montana or have some association with central Montana.

Approval of Minutes

11:49 Presenter: Chair Gray
Motion to Approve: Commissioner Cuts The Rope
Commissioner Whitford, Sr. stated he had changes to the minutes that he provided to Ms. Willson. Ms. Willson read those edits.
Second: Commissioner Blasdel
Commissioner Greg Dumontier abstained. All other commissioners present voted yes.

Commissioner Round Robin Discussion

- 15:03 Commissioner Whitford, Sr. from the Chippewa Cree Tribe reported that construction started on April 20 on the new administrative building. Commissioner Whitford, Sr. stated that the two lagoon projects were started and hopefully will be finished in June. He also stated that the Newtown extension will be starting up shortly and the Eagleman Water System upgrade is in progress. Commissioner Whitford, Sr. reported that the cultural building will be taking off very soon. When asked about the new youth center, Commissioner Whitford, Sr. reported they opened their new youth center and he believed the grand opening was held on March 27.
- 16:49 Commissioner OldDwarf from the Crow Tribe reported the beef distribution project has moved forward and they had their first successful one on the 24th and they were able to distribute 512 boxes, 25 pounds of ground beef and roasts to their tribal members. Commissioner OldDwarf explained that there are a lot of projects going on regarding their head start moving forward.
- 18:34 Commissioner Blasdel reported that the BEAD broadband funding went through the round, and they came in far lower on the cost than the \$632 million that had been allocated. Commissioner Blasdel stated they thought the federal government was going to claw that money back. However, it is looking like now they are going to be adding and giving them some ways that they can use those remaining funds, but they are waiting for direction from them. Then they will provide information to the Broadband Commission that is made up of legislators and executive branch entities on how those funds can be awarded out.
- 19:49 Commissioner Cuts The Rope from the Fort Belknap Indian Community reported that regarding the Fort Belknap transportation they are doing pretty good with a lot of planning projects that will set their base for future

construction. They were awarded the SS4A for \$319,000 which is for them to update their safety action plan for road safety. Commissioner Cuts The Rope stated they received the Tribal Transportation Program Safety Fund that will allow them to do some improvements on BIA Route 11 and sections of 15 on the reservation through the Department of Transportation Rural and Tribal Assistance Pilot Program for \$1.4 million. Commissioner Cuts The Rope stated they have been able to bring in about \$2.3 million to try to set the base for future construction.

Commissioner Cuts The Rope reported they will be attending the Tourism Steering Committee summit next week in Havre. They are excited about getting their content updated and getting strategies going for local tourism. Commissioner Cuts The Rope stated they received the Tribal Tourism Grant award for \$50,000 which will be used for repairs and mobility improvements and upgrades to their Milk River Indian Days Arbor site at Fort Belknap.

Commissioner Cuts The Rope reported they secured a Montana Healthcare Foundation grant for \$50,000. Commissioner Cuts The Rope stated they are trying to find money all over the place for assessment and emergency repairs to their municipal water storage tank at the Fort Belknap Agency. Commissioner Cuts The Rope stated this is a million-gallon tank that is losing about 150,000 gallons of water a day due to the windstorm in December. They have filed a claim with FEMA and it was also under a presidential declaration of emergency.

Commissioner Cuts The Rope reported they are still implementing a \$40,000 Montana Coal Endowment Grant for a preliminary engineering report for the Old Hayes housing site to improve the water system there.



23:58 Chair Gray from the Little Shell Tribe reported that they will be hosting the Rocky Mountain Tribal Transportation meeting here in this building on May 19-21. Chair Gray stated their 18-acre housing development they are working with the City of Great Falls to get it annexed into the city for water and sewer. Chair Gray stated that they are running into a lot of racism with the Valley View Neighborhood Association. Chair Gray stated they are putting up the typical stereotype comments. Chair Gray explained they are pushing forward with that. Chair Gray stated they don't want to put the land into trust.

Chair Gray stated they had 9,800 dozen eggs that they received for their food distribution. They delivered a bunch to Rocky Boy, Fort Belknap, Northern Cheyenne, Crow, Blackfeet and CSKT. Chair Gray reported this was their second round of that and hope to do it again. Chair Gray stated they get all these eggs donated by Wilcox Farms in Great Falls. So, they would like to work with the other tribes to give them eggs.

26:28 Commissioner Dumontier from the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes stated that after their water compact development, they are in the process of doing a substantial upgrade on the irrigation project. There is about \$90 million a year that is allocated towards that, primarily construction projects, both large and small. Commissioner Dumontier reported they have initiated a partnering meeting so that they can take some of the larger contractors that they have and sponsor subcontracts with smaller contractors, most of them being tribal.

Commissioner Dumontier stated on Tuesday they are opening the 400 Horses Casino in the Polson area. Commissioner Dumontier reported they are opening a meatpacking plant probably around July or August processing local beef, wild game, bison and other things. Commissioner Dumontier stated they are in the early stages of this growing season, and their

agricultural stimulus that they do for several producers. They are basically trying to build the capacity to be able to start getting into produce production and not just relying on the cow calf pair types of operations that they typically do from an agricultural standpoint. So, there is a significant opportunity available in produce, and they are just trying to assist tribal members to get into produce production.

Commissioner Dumontier reported they have several different healthcare facilities that are currently in the construction stage.

29:39 Commissioner Bertoglio stated she did not have any updates.

Possible Date and/or location Change to the Nov. 13, 2026, STED Commission Meeting

30:00 Ms. Willson explained that she had found a location for the next meeting at the Little Bighorn College in the Library; however, on Fridays they close at noon. Due to this, Ms. Willson asked the commissioners if they would be open to changing the date of the November meeting to another day that week. The commissioners changed the November meeting to Monday, Nov. 9.

Letter of Support Policy

32:03 Ms. Willson reported that letters of support flow through agency leadership for review by the Governor's Office. This process has had varying levels of compliance across state agencies, and so there has been movement towards making this policy both well-known and consistently applied across all programs. Ms. Willson explained that when Heather Sobrepena presents next, there is a copy of the draft letter that has been reviewed and gone through leadership.

Chair Gray asked who reviews the letters of support. Ms. Espeland responded that it goes through the communications team, the Director's Office and then the Governor's Office.

Request for Letter of Support Regarding Survey of Native Nations

35:16 Heather Sobrepena with the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis stated that the way they would use the letter of support is when they go and visit tribes, it is a way for them to have a warm introduction and a way to be able to say this is something that representatives from your government, that are on the STED Commission, have voted to support the program. Ms. Sobrepena reported that their first stop is with the council to make sure they are aware of the project first.

Motion to Approve: Commissioner Cuts The Rope

Second: Commissioner OldDwarf

All commissioners present voted yes.

MiskoRock

38:20 Brian Adkins introduced himself as an enrolled Little Shell citizen and the economic development director for his tribe. Mr. Adkins also explained he runs the daily businesses of which they own five. Mr. Adkins explained that it is difficult to find capital for a variety of reasons. Mr. Adkins stated that last summer they met these gentlemen from Entoro and decided to form a joint venture. Mr. Adkins explained that what they are trying to do is bring capital to Indian Country not only for their own ventures, but also to collaborate with the rest of Indian Country.

Jim Row introduced himself as the founder of Entoro, which is a Houston-based financial services group who has five regulated businesses. Mr. Row reported that MiskoRock is a joint venture between our two organizations to

facilitate growth capital, and catalyst capital for projects that we work on. Mr. Row introduced George Yepes and Billy Row who will also be presenting. Mr. Yepes explained that at MiskoRock they have three different economic silos. These silos are energy, infrastructure and finance. Mr. Row discussed these three silos more in-depth.

Billy Row reported that Entoro was founded in 2015 and based out of Houston. They originally started as an investment bank with a lot of focus on energy and slowly expanded over the next decade.

There was further discussion about MiskoRock and Entoro which can be found on the recording.

Mountain Plains Native CDFI Coalition and Update on Indigenous People's Day

1:19:49 Gerald Sherman introduced himself and explained that Indigenous Impact works with Native nonprofits and the big thing they have been working on for the last five years has been the Native CDFI Coalition. It is a coalition of Native CDFIs in Montana, Wyoming, South Dakota and North Dakota. Mr. Sherman, Kayla Gray and Jael Kampfe presented gifts.

Ms. Kampfe discussed more about the native CDFIs. Ms. Kampfe stated that they have been working together to strengthen the capacity of these institutions and to increase the scale of capital that are going to Native businesses. Ms. Kampfe stated that for every \$1 that a white household has, Natives have \$0.08. She stated that they have a responsibility to move that needle. She stated that 85% of reservations nationally do not have a financial institution within their boundaries. Ms. Kampfe further stated that without a financial institution, it is very hard to do economic development because of travel. Fifteen percent of Native Americans must travel 100 miles to access an ATM. So, that is part of what community development finance institutions are

designed to address. Ms. Kampfe stated they are unregulated so they can leverage creativity, innovation and culture in ways that banks can't. They can meet their clients and community where they are. There was further discussion.

02:03:19 Ms. Gray introduced herself as the project director for the Indigenous Impact Co. She explained they just created a nonprofit called the Indigenous Impact Foundation. Their first big event is going to be Indigenous Peoples' Day weekend celebration to be held in Red Lodge in October. Ms. Gray stated they want to make sure they are involving all communities so that this turns out to be a successful event. They want to have collaborators that they can work and build the event with. She stated the Indigenous Peoples' Day weekend celebration is going to be a Native market. They are going to have Native artists, vendors, panelists and chefs. Ms. Gray stated that this creates income for Native vendors and entrepreneurs, builds long-term pathways and strengthens relationships and the economy by bringing in Native artists. Ms. Gray provided ways that the tribes can engage in this to share with their local communities. There was further discussion.

Montana Department of Commerce's Division Updates

02:20:08 Mackenzie Espeland introduced herself as the Business MT Division administrator. Ms. Espeland reported that a lot of their economic development programs that are funded through her department are sunsetting in 2027 through the legislature. So, that is the state matching funds for the small business development centers across the state. This also includes the matching funds for their Export team. Ms. Espeland stated they will be doing a Commerce-led summer road show. They will be going out to communities. Ms. Espeland stated that it won't just be her division but that it will also include other divisions. Ms. Espeland stated that she will provide Ms. Willson with the dates and communities to send out. She stated that if they would like

to attend, they would be more than happy to have them there and to email her directly.

Honoring Richard Sangrey's Retirement from STEDC

02:32:20 Richard Sangrey was honored for his work on the STED Commission.

FY 2022 Indian Equity Fund Recipient

03:40:42 Carrie McCleary from Plains Soul presented on the Fiscal year 2022 Indian Equity Fund Grant she received. Ms. McCleary shared how the grant has helped her business.

FY 2021 Indian Equity Fund Recipient

03:30:03 Clayton KillEagle from KillEagle Construction presented on the Fiscal Year 2021 Indian Equity Fund Grant he received. Mr. KillEagle shared how the grant has helped his business.

Office of Indian Country Economic Development Program Update and 90-1-105, MCA Update

3:41:20 TJ Altekruise reported that the Fiscal Year 2026 Tribal Business Development Grant was awarded to C&C Agency Market and C&C Firehouse Market. They will be using those grant funds to upgrade aging infrastructure, improve accessibility and operational efficiency, reduce inventory loss and power-related disruptions and ensure reliable food and fuel access for 3,000-4,000 residents across the Rocky Boy Reservation and surrounding Box Elder area.

Mr. Altekruise reported they are already starting to think ahead to FY27 and make preparations for that funding cycle. They are expected to launch in October or November of this year for the new application cycle. Mr. Altekruise

stated they will be communicating with everyone on the dates when everything will open in ServiceNow.

Mr. Altekruise provided a review of the changes that were made last year regarding the TBDG Program.

Mr. Altekruise reported on the status of MCA 90-1-105. Mr. Altekruise stated that a key component of this statute is to develop a system for the gathering of data, allowing the department to quantify on an ongoing basis the economic contributions of the tribes. Mr. Altekruise reported that some of the recent actions that they have taken in regard to the OICED webpage is providing some links and resources. The current OICED webpage has a section titled, "Tribal Economic Data Resources" where they have linked the "Native Economic Trends" and Tribal Economic Zones from the Center for Indian Country Development website. Mr. Altekruise stated they will be linking more to this webpage in the coming months.

Tribal Tourism

3:51:23 Rachelle Brown reported that she and the whole team attended the Reservation Economic Summit in Las Vegas. Ms. Brown reported that there is an app that is developed out of Visit Native Nevada. It is something they are looking at for the future of Indian Country. Ms. Brown stated they wanted to field test the app. So, they visited the Red Rocks Canyon Conservation area in Nevada.

Ms. Brown reported that the Indian Country Production went out this last summer and captured the videography and photography across seven of the eight nations. Ms. Brown reported that unfortunately, they still have not been able to connect with Northern Cheyenne to get production out there. She

stated they are going to continue to try to work on that and see if they can get some content this summer.

Ms. Brown reported that event sponsorship agreements that the STED Commission approved went out last summer. Ms. Brown reported that they had two submissions to their annual grant which included one from Fort Belknap and one from Blackfeet which both were awarded at full amount.

Ms. Brown stated that in this cycle of the Tribal Tourism Small Business Grant, they have received 29 eligible submissions, and of those, they have awarded 21 awards. Ms. Brown stated there is a possibility of 24 awards, but it is really important that the applications receive a minimum score of 70 points or higher.

Ms. Brown reported that this year they have done the Montana Indigenous Tourism Trail Project with MITTP which are a Pilot Community Grant recipient. Ms. Brown stated they have created a partnership with them. In each one of these pilot communities, they have established a steering committee and the MITTP is massive compared to some of the other awardees in these cohorts. Ms. Brown reported they are combining efforts. Their product that their grant is funding is going to be complementary, cohesive and consistent, messaging with what we are doing at the state level. Ms. Brown reported she is meeting with these committees and they are doing a lot of in-depth work on developing what the future of this region is going to look like for products that are going to hit the market in a year from now. They are advising on the new guidebook, the design, content, image selection, messaging and videography that will be at visitmt.com. Ms. Brown reported there will be a summit this Monday and Tuesday which will be a combination of Little Shell, Rocky Boy and Fort Belknap steering committees.

Ms. Brown reported that ITRR, which is the institute for Tourism and Recreation Research, has two research projects they have been contracted to do. One of them is that they have talked about with them before in previous STED Commission meetings, and it is the economic contributions of the tribes to tourism in the state. Ms. Brown stated the second one is what they got contracted to do through Commerce, which is to get a baseline measure on these grant awardees, the MITTP and other pilot big money awardees. Ms. Brown continued that they would then do a community assessment with the steering committees. Then, turn that into a non-resident survey, deploy that within the first year of the grant, get a baseline measure and then repeat it in four to five years. Ms. Brown reported that it does not directly involve her but as a partner she is trying to assist in getting the word out, helping them to communicate it and to facilitate the collection of this data.

Ms. Brown reported that they also have the international program, the Office of Tourism and Marketing. The international asked her to do a presentation to them to promote to international booking agents the markets the state is directing the tourism towards.

Ms. Brown reported that their production continues for FY 2027. These summits are going to help identify where they need more content. In the spring is where they are meeting with the steering committees, and they are working on the design in the guidebook.

4:15:05 Ms. Brown provided slides that she stated for the benefit of people watching the meeting to know what Indian Country is about. There is further discussion on the recording.

Tribal Tourism Program Proposed Activities for FY 2027 Requiring Executive Action (Vote)

4:01:03 Ms. Brown discussed further on the recording the Tribal Tourism Program proposed program activities for FY 2027, but no action was taken as there was not a quorum. These agenda items will be placed on the August 2026 STED Commission meeting agenda.

Indian Equity Fund and Native American Business Advisor Programs

4:23:26 Bryan Singer reported that they awarded 26 small businesses with the award this current cycle. Mr. Singer stated that is \$320,000 across 26 projects with a broad range of businesses. Mr. Singer reported that this year, the application will open July 1 and close Sept. 30.

Mr. Singer reported that the NABAs couldn't be better right now. Mr. Singer stated that them helping with all of the businesses and them providing the services that they do already provide that it's going great. Mr. Singer reported that they are still maintaining monthly calls and communication with all of them. Mr. Singer stated that some of the businesses who receive the IEF grant must seek loans and they really enjoyed the fact that they already have their business plans ready, they are registered with the state and have a business bank account set up. Mr. Singer stated these are some requirements that he added to the guidelines last year.

Mr. Singer reported that they made some adjustments to the NABA guidelines. He reported they are installing a three-year term, so they don't have to apply every year. Mr. Singer stated that he did step up the reporting requirements to quarterly. Mr. Singer stated that for the Indian Equity Fund guidelines, he removed the \$14,000 so the grant recipients can receive up to \$40,000. There was further discussion which can be accessed on the recording.

Other Business

4:29:04 Ms. Willson reported the next STED Commission meeting will be held in Polson on Aug. 7, 2026.

Adjourn

The meeting was adjourned at 2:29 p.m. without a quorum.