

**Secretary Treasurer's Report to the People of the Leech Lake Reservation  
From Michael J. Bongo, Secretary Treasurer  
January 2010**

Greeting Fellow Band Members:

I sincerely hope that everyone had a joyous, happy and safe holiday season. I also want to apologize for not reporting sooner however with all of my other duties and responsibilities as Secretary Treasurer sometimes finding the time to write is difficult.

In early November I was able to take a few days off to spend a little time out in the woods deer hunting. I guess I am not quite sure how to explain it but as long as I can remember when the leaves begin to fall from the trees for reasons I can not explain something inside of me calls me to the woods. It is a magical time for me and it gives me a chance to get away from ringing telephones and the hustle and bustle of every day life and all of its challenges and problems and it allows me some quiet time to re-charge my batteries. As I said I really can not explain it, maybe its just the time that I get to spend some time with my brothers, family and friends enjoying a little quality time together in the woods hunting and teasing one another about the big buck that somehow always seems to out smart us and get away. In any event its an enjoyable and fun time and brings back many fond memories year after year.

One of the main reasons I enjoy being out in the woods is that it gives me time to think and contemplate my thoughts. As a person I tend to be a very logical, practical and analytical person and I try to think things through before I make decisions. My experience in life has always taught me to not make decisions based upon emotions; emotions from my perspective tend to cloud our judgment and we tend to make poor decisions when we base our decisions on emotions.

One of the other things about me is that I tend to be a very optimistic person. Where others see problems and difficulties, I see opportunity and hope. A few weeks ago Richard Johnson, a Band member stopped by my office to visit. Even though Richard enjoys giving me a hard time, I always enjoy visiting with him because he challenges my thinking. In our recent visit I shared with Richard that there are days when the job as Secretary Treasurer is extremely challenging and at times I feel as if I have my finger in the dam and it can be a bit overwhelming. Richard asked me how I deal with these feelings and I responded that "I try to be mindful of something my mother use to always tell me, "never feel sorry for your self because no matter how bad things may seem there is always someone who has it tougher then you. Rather then feel sorry for yourself because of all the things you don't have, be thankful for the things you do have."

When some people look at the Leech Lake Reservation they tend to only see the problems and yes granted we are not without our fair share of problems and issues. However when I look at the Leech Lake Reservation I see so much hope and opportunity for a brighter future for our Reservation.

However to achieve our full potential as a nation, reservation and people we must start by letting go of our own selfishness and rather than feel sorry or angry about the things we don't have we must be thankful for the things that we do have.

As a reservation and people we have much to be thankful for and we have so much opportunity and potential.

We have an opportunity to secure funding for a new Bug-O-Nay-Gee-Shig High School to better our children's future, we have an opportunity to secure funding for a new hospital to improve the healthcare of our people, we have an opportunity to settle the Nelson Act and in the process truly exercise our self-determination as Indian people by obtaining long term management control of the Chippewa National Forrest. These are but a few of the many opportunities that lie before us.

For many years the Leech Lake Reservation has been characterized by some as a sleeping economic giant. During this same time the Leech Lake Reservation has also been characterized as having been its own worst enemy because of the political turmoil, infighting and instability in quality leadership.

Today as we try to move forward and attempt to fully embrace and achieve the many opportunities that have been put before us and achieve our full social and economic potential there are many, many people watching to see if we can conduct ourselves and our business affairs in a professional, ethical and responsible manner. Officials from the halls of congress, to the state legislature, to the county commissioners, to the surrounding local communities, everyone is watching to see what we do and how we do it and given the state of our nation's economy there is much at stake.

We live in a rural area with a rural economy and even under the best of circumstances rural economies by their very nature are tricky at best. Considering the fact that the Leech Lake Reservation encompasses four surrounding counties and with the continued development of Indian gaming these surrounding communities as well as others on a national scale are looking to tribes like the Leech Lake Reservation to become an increasing part of the local rural economic solution.

In our case the Leech Lake Reservation with an annual operating budget in excess of \$200 million a year we have the potential to be a huge contributing economic engine and a significant part of the economic solution especially on a local level. However if that economic engine is broken it becomes part of the problem as opposed to part of the solution.

Our challenge is to prove that we can move forward economically and begin to achieve our full economic potential. If we can virtually all of these institutions are ready, willing and anxiously waiting to invest in the future of the Leech Lake Reservation. They understand our economic potential as well as our ability to become a significant economic leader in the region.

As an example to achieve one of our goals of obtaining management control of the Chippewa National Forrest we will need the support of local units of government, namely that of the local surrounding county commissioners. As the counties contemplate this support they are evaluating questions and issues about the Reservation. Questions like: does tribal government on the Leech Lake Reservation possess stability in government and leadership; is tribal government properly managing the business affairs, assets and resources of the tribe; is tribal government open, honest and accountable; can tribal government on the Leech Lake Reservation work cooperatively with surrounding units of government in a government to government relationship?

We must be able to demonstrate our ability to properly manage the assets and resources of the Leech Lake Reservation. We must establish our financial priorities and then budget and allocate our resources based upon these established priorities and properly manage our budgets and in the process and most importantly deliver quality programs and services within the constraints of our limited resources.

Very soon the Leech Lake Reservation will begin receiving the Enbridge funds for the recently negotiated lease agreement. This is a one time windfall for the Leech Lake Reservation. However the question remains whether we can be responsible and properly manage these assets. Recently I sent a memo to the Tribal Council proposing various options how on to best manage these resources which total approximately \$9 million. Some options that I have proposed include using the money to pay down some of our long term debt, namely the \$40 million loan with the Shakopee Sioux Community. The benefit of this long term is that it will save the Leech Lake Reservation millions of dollars in interest on the loan agreement. An additional option is to invest these resources in long term investments. As the Secretary Treasurer I have taken the liberty of securing three different bids from various banks and investment firms each with different investment strategies. Based upon these proposals investing the Enbridge funds could potentially return as much as \$500,000 per year in interest income to the Leech Lake Reservation.

The third option is to do a combination of the two, pay down some of the debt, invest some of the funds and allocate a portion of the funds as a one time payment to our Band members.

Regardless of what we do, I firmly believe that we must consult our Band members through the public meeting process to discuss the various options and gain the input, support and consensus of our Band members. However the one thing I would caution against is to infuse these funds into our existing operating budget. To do so in my opinion would be disastrous from the standpoint that these are one time funds and once this money is spent we will have nothing to show for it. If memory serves me correctly, ten years ago Leech Lake was in a similar position with a budget surplus, at that time the surplus was infused into the operating budget. Once the surplus was spent we had effectively increased our operating budget but no longer had the surplus funds to meet the increased budget needs. If nothing else I am hopeful that we can learn from our passed mistakes and not continue to make the same mistakes over and over again.

In closing as I have indicate we have a tremendous opportunity to move the Leech Lake Reservation forward and become a model tribe and economic leader both locally and regionally. However to accomplish and achieve our full economic goals will take all of us working together. It will require everyone to do their jobs to the very best of their ability, it will require all of us to be accountable and put the needs of the Reservation ahead of our own personal needs and agendas. It will require each and every one of us to be more responsible and to take responsibility for our own actions. We have the capacity and capability to achieve all of our economic goals and objectives and in the process greatly improve the lives of our people economically. However we must also be mindful of the fact that no one can do it for us, but ourselves. I always try to be mindful of what many of my elders taught me growing up, “you should never ask another man to do for you what you can do for yourself.”

Thank you

Sincerely,

Michael J. Bongo  
Secretary Treasurer  
Leech Lake Reservation