



## Notes from the Chief

*What I'm working on for You*

The new state legislative session is one we will all be watching closely. Our policymakers in Oklahoma City have a challenging task ahead as they try to create an operational budget for the state while being millions of dollars in the hole. Unfortunately, most state agencies remain funded at more than 20 percent below pre-recession funding levels because budgets have not kept up with inflation.

It's a tough situation, and state leaders must make difficult decisions to balance the budget. Consecutive years of making tax reductions, coupled with oil and gas, will hamper what can be achieved. Collectively, Oklahoma's elected leaders have some hard decisions to make on critical issues like education and health care. I hope they leave all the options on the table this year.

In contrast, Oklahoma's tribal governments are investing more and more every year in education, while the state decreases its investment. I think Oklahoma would be wise to look at tribal governments as a model for growth and deliverables. Robust Indian nations add to the vitality of life in our great state, and our tribal governments are investing in Oklahoma's future.

When you look closely at what Cherokee Nation and all tribal governments in Oklahoma are doing, you will see we are fighting poverty, expanding business, creating jobs and offering better health care. At Cherokee Nation we have raised paychecks to a living wage while providing paid maternity leave and expanding opportunities for our citizens to go to college.

Through gaming compacts over the past decade, tribes have invested more than \$1billion

in Oklahoma education. From 2005 to 2015, the Cherokee Nation has allocated \$159.9 million to Oklahoma through gaming fees.

Locally, we also invest in education through our car tag compact. Thirty-eight cents of every dollar in tag sales goes to public education. Last year, 109 schools received \$4 million from the Cherokee Nation's license plate sales. Our contribution to education from car tag sales has increased 34.2 percent since 2008. During that same six-year period, the state's investment in education has declined by 11 percent. A new record contribution to local schools from car tags will be announced in the next week or two.

While we are contributing more, it may not seem like it because state tax cuts offset those dollars. As more tribal gaming and car tag dollars go into state coffers, less is invested at the state level. In essence, tribes help fill the gap created by the tax cuts. As tribal governments, it's disappointing to see our investments in education eroded by the state budget process as we are trying to build a better future within our communities.

Sadly, the state budget is being balanced at the cost of our children. We need more education funding, not less. In Oklahoma, we rank 49th in teacher pay, 44th in pupil funding and 41st in K-12 achievement rates. Success for Oklahoma public education means success for all our children, not just Cherokees, so proper funding is imperative.

Our legislature is responsible to the will of the people, so while tax cuts sound fine to the average citizen, they are devastating to the programs that build a healthy state with an educated workforce. The sweeping tax breaks have not spurred growth and have hurt Oklahoma.

At Cherokee Nation we have invested our funds into education, health care and the wellbeing of our people. Our gaming and business profits stay in Oklahoma. A full 65 percent is reinvested into our diverse business portfolio, and 35 percent goes to services for the people.

That means our citizens are able to live in decent housing and become homeowners, raise their children safely, and ensure their kids get a quality education. Being able to contribute to the local economy and community is an empowering feeling. Cherokee Nation citizens are able to share in the tribe's prosperity.

What if state leaders worked off that blueprint? What if a bold, new path were forged? I hope state leaders look at the richness and diversity of Oklahoma's tribes and say, "We should be more like that; we should invest more money in education, health care, infrastructure and the social programs that lift people up."

I believe that if we want to build a better Oklahoma, we must work together. I hope our leaders at the state level think about our collective, long-term future. Implore them to do so, and we will all see a greater return on investment and people leading brighter and better lives.

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