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Ann Arbor

## Laura Spurr leads a Battle Creek tribe toward the long-awaited opening of its casino

by Lynn Stevens | Business Review Western Michigan  
Thursday December 04, 2008, 7:54 AM

The Nottawaseppi Huron Band of the Potawatomi is planning to open its FireKeepers Casino east of Battle Creek next summer.

The process of getting the land into federal trust took years, and Laura Spurr was the calm public voice of the tribe throughout. She represented the tribe with a killer sense of humor and an encyclopedic command of data.

And she can't be bullied.

What does a tribal chairman do?

"It's kind of similar to city or township government. We have a five-member council, all elected by the tribe, then the council selects the chairman.

"Not all tribes do it that way. Some elect the chairman  directly."

How long have you served as chairman?

"I was chairman from 2000 to 2001, then resumed it from 2003 to the present."

What's been most rewarding about the job?

"Just seeing the progress the tribe is making. We've established a health facility. We have members who, if they'd been sick 10 years ago, may not have survived because they didn't have that one-on-one care, they didn't have anybody to advocate for them."

What's been the most difficult?

"The hardest was going through the turmoil with the CETAC (Citizens Exposing Truth About Casinos) group. That began in 2003 and ended in 2007.

"The thing that was so hard, they wanted to keep people from having jobs and they offered no (economic) alternative. In November 2007, we had everything completed, and we were ready to go to market."

What do you envision for the tribe?

"Hopefully we will have communities that want to work jointly with the tribe, and potentially there are things we could do together down the road -- possibly small manufacturing for people who can't get into the gaming industry because of past history.

"Support education projects; support the schools. Child care is major. It should be on everybody's radar.

"Our hope, as we move forward, is to make sure our members are being prepared to work in those jobs that are going to be high tech.



Photo by Lynn Stevens

The Nottawaseppi Huron Band of the Potawatomi's Laura Spurr is a calm voice during a busy time for the Battle Creek tribe.

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"As we provide more education to our members, hopefully they're going to be ready to work in those areas. I think it's very important that everybody have the opportunity to have a job."

How did a graduate of tiny, rural Athens High School decide on University of Michigan?

"I think I just did it because I knew what was expected: four years of math, four years of history, foreign language -- Latin was the only language given. My mom had the same Latin teacher I did.

It was the family expectation to take these courses, be busy and do a lot of work. That was my upbringing at home and part of my education.

"I'd always wanted to be a nurse. I met somebody in seventh grade who was a student at U-M. She said if you graduate U-M in nursing, you can get a job anywhere. That was my goal.

"Actually it was true. There weren't a lot of baccalaureate programs at the time. I taught, I was a supervisor, I did all sorts of things."

And she did them in big markets. By 1971, she was teaching at St. Vincent's Hospital in New York City. Spurr and her husband later moved to Washington, D.C., where she continued her career as a nurse, teacher and nursing administrator.

The family returned to Michigan in 1987, and she worked in Detroit.

Where do you see the tribal economy in 10 years?

"We're going to use this (casino) as the source of funds to get involved in other kinds of economic development. We wouldn't like to open another casino, because it's just limited. We would want to get involved in other things that would provide long-term jobs and opportunity for tribal members.

"There's all kinds of things -- working in hospitals, doing research, becoming bankers if they want to do that. We're hoping to get them involved in those things, to expand horizons."

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