

Robeson student to be allowed to wear feathers

By Venita Jenkins
Fayetteville Observer

LUMBERTON — A Purnell Swett High School student will be able to wear his ceremonial eagle feathers during graduation Friday, under an agreement reached Wednesday by lawyers for the Robeson County school board and the American Civil Liberties Union.

“It looks like the matter is going to be resolved informally,” said Katherine Parker, a legal director with the ACLU North Carolina.

The agreement allows Corey Bird to wear two eagle feathers during the ceremony. The ACLU and the school board are still negotiating about where Bird will be able to display the feathers. Bird plans to wear them in honor of his mother and grandfather, who are deceased. His cousin, Olivia Bird, also will be allowed to wear her eagle fathers in honor of her maternal grandparents, Parker said.

Samuel Bird, Corey’s father, referred comments to Parker.

“They are very happy that Corey will be able to wear his feathers,” Parker said. “This means so much to Corey and his father. I think that they are pleased that the school district agreed to negotiate informally rather than going through litigation.”

The school board spent about three hours in closed session Tuesday night discussing the issue. Board Chairman John Campbell announced that the board did not take action and that the lawyers were trying to reach an agreement.

“I think there was a willingness not to reject outright his request and to find a less distracting way to deal with their concerns so the graduation at Purnell Swett would not be disrupted by protesters or by having law enforcement there,” Campbell said Wednesday.

The board received an opinion Tuesday night from Allison Schafer, the lawyer for the N.C. School Boards Association. Schafer told the board that legal rulings allow requests such as Bird’s as long as they deal with specifically held spiritual beliefs.

“The courts have supported those plaintiffs that could demonstrate specifically held spiritual beliefs and required schools systems to make accommodations,” Campbell said. “What we were interested in was acceptable accommodations. That is why we charged our attorney to explore options with the Bird family. We are trying to work out a solution where everyone wins.”

Schafer told the board that the graduation ceremonies for Wake County schools will include students wearing the Star of David and some wearing veils because of their beliefs.

The Robeson County board has a policy against students wearing messages, signs, markings and ribbons on caps and gowns at graduation.

Parker said the ACLU plans to assist the board in revising its policy to address students who wish to wear ceremonial feathers. The organization has suggested that Bird participate in those discussions.

“My understanding is that the school board is not planning to change the wording of the policy right now,” she said. “We are negotiating a change in wording in the policy in the future. We applaud the school district for agreeing to accommodate Corey and agreeing to resolve this informally.”

The school board has not decided whether it will alter its policy to require students to have specifically held spiritual beliefs when making a request or whether it will deal with each request on a case-by-case basis, Campbell said. The board would not consider requests based on cultural or heritage beliefs, he said.

Prime minister apologizes to Native Canadians

OTTAWA (AP) — Canada’s native leaders say the government’s apology for a policy that forcibly removed aboriginal children from their homes to assimilate them into Canadian society makes it possible “to end our racial nightmare together.”

From the 19th century until the 1970s, more than 150,000 Indian children were required to attend state-funded Christian schools. Their treatment at the schools where they were often physically and sexually abused was a sad chapter in the country’s history, Prime Minister Stephen Harper said.

Harper apologized Wednesday from the House of Commons, with Indians packing the public galleries, gathered on the lawn of Parliament

Hill and watching the live broadcast across Canada.

The objectives of the program “were based on the assumption aboriginal cultures and spiritual beliefs were inferior and unequal,” Harper said. “Today, we recognize that this policy of assimilation was wrong, has caused great harm and has no place in our country.”

“We now recognize that it was wrong to separate children from rich and vibrant cultures and traditions, and that it created a void in many lives and communities and we apologize,” Harper said.

Harper also apologized for failing to prevent the children from being physically and sexually abused at the schools.

Hundreds of former stu-

dents witnessed what native leaders call a pivotal moment for Canada’s more than 1 million Indians, who remain the country’s poorest and most disadvantaged group. There are more than 80,000 surviving students. Among those attending was the oldest school survivor, 104-year-old Marguerite Wabano.

Phil Fontaine, the national chief of the Assembly of First Nations and one of the 11 aboriginal leaders seated near Harper, wore a traditional native headdress and he and other Indian leaders were allowed to speak from the floor after opposition parties demanded it. One man banged his drum inside the House of Commons during ovations after the day’s speeches.

“Finally, we heard Canada say it is sorry,” Fontaine said.

“The attempt to erase our identity hurt us deeply, but it also hurt all Canadians and impoverished the character of this nation. We must not falter in our duty now. Emboldened by this spectacle of history, it is possible to end our racial nightmare together,” he said.

The federal government earlier admitted that physical and sexual abuse in the schools was rampant. Many students recall being beaten for speaking their native languages and losing touch with their parents and customs.

In 1998, Canada’s former Indian affairs minister Jane Stewart expressed “profound regret” for the establishment of the schools, but some Indi-

an leaders didn’t consider that apology sufficient.

The First Nations Leadership Council said earlier this week that there had still been debate over whether Stewart’s statement constituted a full apology. Fontaine has said that it didn’t come from the nation’s top leader. And Michael Cachagee, president of the National Residential School Survivors’ Society, has complained that statement lacked detail on “children being ripped from their parents.”

That legacy of abuse and isolation has been cited by Indian leaders as the root cause of epidemic rates of alcoholism and drug addiction on reservations.

Fontaine was one of the first to go public with his past experiences of physical and sexual abuse.

Willie Blackwater, who said he was repeatedly raped and beaten by a dorm supervisor when he was 9 years old, called the apology a pivotal moment in his life.

“I think this is a start of a long healing relationship,” Blackwater said.

Cachagee, who was 4 years old when he was placed in a school where he was abused, said it was a sincere apology. “It was a good day for Canada.”

The apology comes months after Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd made a similar gesture to the so-called Stolen Generations — thousands of Aborigines forcibly taken from their families as children under assimilation policies that lasted from 1910 to 1970.

But Canada has gone a step farther, offering those who were taken from their families compensation for the years they attended the residential schools. The offer was part of a lawsuit settlement.

A truth and reconciliation commission will also examine government policy and take testimony from survivors. The goal is to give survivors a forum to tell their stories and educate Canadians about a grim period in the country’s history.

On the Net:
Assembly of First Nations:
<http://www.afn.ca>
Indian and Northern Affairs Canada:
<http://www.aicn-inac.gc.ca>
Truth and Reconciliation Commission: www.trc-cvr.ca



Associated Press

Assembly of First Nations Chief Phil Fontaine, right, wearing headdress, watches as Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper, left, officially apologizes to Native Canadians who were taken from their families and forced to attend state-funded schools aimed at assimilating them, at a ceremony in the House of Commons on Parliament Hill in Ottawa, Wednesday.

Oneida County lawmakers join Indian land trust

By Glenn Coin
Syracuse Post-Standard

SYRACUSE — Oneida County legislators on Wednesday unanimously voted to join a lawsuit against the federal government over a decision to put 13,000 acres of Oneida Indian Nation land into trust.

Madison County supervisors agreed Tuesday to join the suit with New York state.

The lawsuit will contain 20 arguments against the trust decision, said Madison County Attorney John Campanie. The decision, issued last month by the federal Department of Interior, would make 13,004 acres of Oneida Indian land tax-exempt and under sovereign control of the tribe.

In other legal action on the trust issue this week:

The Vernon Town Board on Monday voted unanimously to file a lawsuit with the town of Verona. The towns tried to join the lawsuit with the state and counties but were rebuffed, said Verona town Supervisor Owen Waller.

The towns will each chip in \$5,000 for the retainer of Cornelius Murray, an Albany lawyer who worked with citizens groups in their successful court battles to declare the Oneida and

Mohawk tribal casinos illegal.

The deadline for challenges to the trust decision is June 19.

Two citizens groups and several local officials have appealed the Department of Interior’s decision to take Oneida Indian Nation land into trust.

The Central New York Fair Business Association and Citizens Equal Rights Alliance claim the decision violates several federal laws and misconstrues court decisions.

Joining the suit are state Assemblyman David Townsend, Oneida County Legislators Mike Hennessy and Chad Davis, and Oneida Indian Melvin Phillips.

The state and several local governments plan to file suit in federal court next week challenging the trust decision. Bureau of Indian Affairs spokeswoman Nedra Darling said the only appeal of the Interior decision is to federal court.

The citizens groups aren’t taking any chances, said Judy Bachmann, a Vernon resident and a member of the rights alliance. She said the law is ambiguous on whether the decision must first be appealed to the Interior Board of Indian Appeals before a lawsuit can be filed.

CRIT resort and casino has employee lay offs

By Joan M. Travis
Parker Pioneer

PARKER, Ariz. — Approximately 70 employees of the Colorado River Indian Tribes’ BlueWater Resort & Casino were told May 30 by acting general manager Bill Beeson they were laid off.

A prepared statement handed out to the newly laid off employees stated the “staff reduction ... is necessary due to the declining economy and reduced patron counts at the BlueWater.”

The statement also said, “some departments will close, others will reduce staff. The criteria for reducing staff will be performance and seniority.”

The employees were given one week’s severance pay and were directed to the Re-Employment and Pre-Layoff Assistance Center.

About 30 tribal members met June 4 to discuss the financial standing of the tribe. Many voiced frustration about not knowing about the layoffs and how the CRIT Tribal Council was not forthcoming when it came to finances and the unexpected layoffs.

One tribal member, who wished to remain anonymous because of job retaliation,

stated, “There was a time when CRIT had the reputation of being successful. We had a council who listened to the people. Chairman Anthony Drennan asked us at a general membership meeting if we wanted a casino and we said ‘yes.’”

On Friday, an official statement from CRIT was issued noting “The combined impact of an economic downturn and higher gas prices are being felt throughout the gaming industry, including at the BlueWater Resort & Casino. The high gas prices add to the downturn, which particularly affect “destination” gaming sites such as the BlueWater, which relies heavily on people driving in from southern California and from the Phoenix area.”

The statement said the economic downturn is affecting every city and town in Arizona and this includes CRIT’s tribal government, which is experiencing lower sales tax and other revenues. The solution is budgets are being cut, however CRIT is facing the problem of balancing the tribal budget and further cuts at tribal facilities and operations will occur.

The statement elaborated, “Since early this year, casino management has been trying to eliminate positions through attrition - when an employee leaves, a replacement is not hired. However, in late May, the Tribal Council, upon recommendation from casino management, approved layoffs of a number of BlueWater employees, both tribal and non-tribal members.”

“Like nearly everyone we are feeling the effects of high gas prices and a struggling economy,” said Tribal Chairman Daniel Eddy Jr. “The BlueWater Resort and Casino is one of the primary revenue sources for our people and one of our top priorities must be to ensure that it is generating the revenue needed for important tribal services. Cutting expenses there helps achieve this.”

“Like any business we are taking prudent steps to get the job done. And we hope that in the future, when economic conditions improve and revenues increase, that we can rehire some of the affected individuals and positions,” Eddy said.

The BlueWater Resort & Casino is located north of Parker on State Route 95.