



MUSCOGEE (CREEK) NATIONAL COUNCIL

Statement from Speaker William Lowe Regarding Oklahoma Governor veto of Compact Legislation

June 7th, 2023, 9:00 am CST
Okmulgee, Oklahoma

As the Speaker of the Muscogee (Creek) National Council, the legislative branch of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation tribal government, I am engaged in ongoing communication with my legislative counterparts throughout the State of Oklahoma. State Congressional leaders, county officials, city councilors and elected tribal leaders routinely engage in discussions that are a part of building government-to-government relationships. These efforts are a part of a good faith effort to produce beneficial results for tribal and Oklahoma state citizens.

The State of Oklahoma and tribal nations within the state enter *compacts*, as a way of engaging in commercial, and other, activities. In the recent legislative session, state House and Senate leaders guided legislation through the respective bodies to extend tobacco agreements with certain tribal nations. SB 26X (tobacco compact extension) and HB 1005X (vehicle tag compact extension) provided the state and affected tribes with an extension of time to address more long-term concerns.

Governor Kevin Stitt's recent veto of those two bills, is troubling, in many respects. By vetoing the bills, the Governor has, once again continued an ongoing pattern of obstructing tribal/state relations; actions that do not survive review. State and federal courts, have repeatedly "schooled" the Governor on his errant actions related to compacts, and ruled against those actions: his power to negotiate new gaming compacts is not unilateral; state executive branch-proposed compact terms must adhere to Model Tribal Gaming Compact standards; proposed terms must be approved by the Joint Committee on State-Tribal Relations; and, bypassing elected state leadership involvement is not a part of any "best practices" that are embodied in bills that reach his desk for final approval. His actions cause unnecessary and added expenses to the State's cost of doing business with tribes in Oklahoma.

I am an enrolled tribal citizen of one of the four tribes who remit the most in tribal gaming/exclusivity payments to the state, and an Oklahoma citizen and veteran who pays state taxes. The Governor's ongoing objections to the mutually beneficial results of compact activities, is, in my view, poor business and leadership practice. Frivolous legal challenges to the process, using state funds to pay the price tag for those challenges, and not being transparent with state legislative leaders on those efforts, represent a waste of taxpayer funds. Couple this with a possible lack of negotiating expertise in complex matters, causes all residents of our great state to end up losing. How many health costs for underinsured or uninsured Oklahomans could have been covered, had the first term of Governor Stitt's administration avoided frivolous, unsuccessful legal efforts, and devoted resources to negotiation and progress in developing existing agreements instead? The successful defense of tribal rights against such actions represent a cost for tribal citizens and benefits as well.

It is my hope that Governor Stitt, in the second term of his administration, will eliminate wasteful efforts to advance unrealistic practices and views relating to business in Indian country, and will engage in real business negotiation on issues benefitting all Oklahoma. In the meantime, I support the Oklahoma legislative leadership in overriding the most recent vetoes.