

**TESTIMONY OF SANDRA M. LEWIS, TRIBAL COUNCILOR**

**LITTLE RIVER BAND OF OTTAWA INDIANS**

**BEFORE THE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERIOR  
ENVIRONMENT and RELATED AGENCIES**

**UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**MARCH 18, 2016**

Chairman Calvert, Respected Members of the Committee:

I am Sandra Lewis, Tribal Councilor of the Little River Band of Ottawa Indians (LRBOI). I am honored to present this testimony on behalf of the Little River Band of Ottawa Indians, regarding our views and priorities for the fiscal year (FY) 2017 President's Annual Budget Request.

LRBOI is pleased with the ongoing commitment of the Administration to Indian Country. President Obama's commitment to establishing a legacy respecting the sacred relationship forged by our treaties is evident in the appropriations requests for the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) at \$2.9 billion, and the Indian Health Services (IHS) of \$5.2 billion; fully \$138 million and \$377 million above the FY 2016 enacted levels. The increases demonstrate a long-standing commitment to promoting tribal sovereignty, and for LRBOI, it aligns with our mission to secure and promote the prosperity of future generations. LRBOI would like to thank the Committee for hearing the concerns of tribal leadership and our views regarding the impact of the Administration's budget requests on our nation's efforts to reach the outcomes we are all wishing to achieve – successful, safer and prospering 'Native First Nations'.

LRBOI would like to acknowledge the importance of the recently signed MOU between the Census Bureau and the BIA. We believe tribal communities have long been undercounted and inaccurately represented in Census data. We support the \$12 million increase to the BIA to address these gaps in Indian Country and believe this measure is a key component to formulating a realistic budget.

Since Reaffirmation in 1994, LRBOI has prioritized its economic development efforts, programs, and service delivery to enhance the standard of living of its members. Assisting LRBOI members to achieve a middle class economic standard has been an overarching goal since reaffirmation, and while gains are being made, persistent issues remain as reported in the previous fiscal year:

- over half (56%) of Tribal member households earn less than \$30,000 annually, compared to a mean household income of just over \$64,500 for Michigan residents;
- less than 40% of LRBOI tribal members adults have achieved education beyond a high school diploma, compared to nearly 60% of Michigan adults reporting some degree of higher education;
- 1/3 of tribal members access one or more tribal assistance programs annually – current enrollment stands at just over 4200 persons.

LRBOI understands the challenges we face to assist our population out of poverty and into true individual self-determination. LRBOI is pleased with the ongoing commitment to make affordable housing available through the Native American Housing Assistance and Self-Determination Act (NAHASDA); we have built 55 high quality housing opportunities as a result of this Act to address the needs of our Elders, lower income and working families. LRBOI requests that the Committee continue to make these funds available to us, as our needs are increasing year to year with the return of our people to our homelands; we presently have an unmet need of 35 homes for our returning families.

LRBOI was also pleased with the increases to health care, specifically the commitment to fully fund contract support costs, which reduces the need to redirect other program funds to meet our costs of providing services. LRBOI appreciates the Administration's move of Contract Support Costs from discretionary to a mandatory appropriation. This change presents an opportunity for the Federal Government to comply at long last with the decisions in the Cherokee, Arctic Slope and Ramah Supreme Court cases. LRBOI cautions that the proposed proviso limiting carry-over is not consistent with the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act and should be eliminated. In addition, the increases to patient services will allow us to continue to implement direct services; we are on schedule to implement pharmacy service to our members in 2016—a direct result of services and contract support cost increases.

LRBOI also notes that funds dedicated to Generation Indigenous, “Gen-I” will assist us to build stronger programs to address our at-risk youth populations and strengthen our family support systems. You heard us when we asked that these types of funds become a formula-based tribal priority allocation putting all tribes within reach of this needed assistance. Creating government-wide collaboration placing priority on “all of the federal government” to assist in the preservation of our most precious resource, Native American Youth, is achievable and commendable.

There are some areas that are near and dear to this councilor; and I wish to bring them to the attention of the Committee.

Language and culture are the cornerstone of the unique identity of Indian peoples; the protection of our way of life is critical to our individual identities, our Community prosperity and most importantly, our children's future. These are the guides of our governance as nations. The preservation of our sacred lands and objects, including the repatriation of our ancestors to our homelands is our highest responsibility. LRBOI would like to see future appropriations for the Tribal Historic Preservation Officer (THPO) increase to allow Tribes to

appropriately staff and more importantly, continue to provide opportunities for our people to engage in language-immersion instruction and culturally based community events that reinforce our identity as Little River Band Ottawa; the Anishinabek peoples. The beauty of our culture is found in our language; it guides our daily life, preserves our identity and provides a foundation for our youth in the development of who they are as individual Anishinabek persons. Our language and culture keeps us strong, drug and alcohol free and family oriented. The present budget request of \$15 million towards language and culture preservation is not enough for 566 federally recognized Tribes. LRBOI must write a successful grant proposal to even access funds to assist our efforts. A better approach to ensuring the preservation of the unique language, culture, sacred lands and objects that make us who we are, would be to implement a government wide initiative similar to Gen-I. It's time to rewrite the priorities and place emphasis on the United States' 'First Nations.' It's time to restore the very things that were taken from us by assimilation. It's time to repatriate our language and ceremonies back to us by increasing the appropriation to \$30 million. We also need a set aside to allow our THPO officer to meet our requirements and respond to inquiries regarding the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) Section 106 matters. I am pleased to inform the Committee that our THPO Officer has been recognized by the Governor of Michigan for our government to government collaboration. LRBOI responds to nearly 300 inquiries annually with one THPO Officer and two staff. Section 106 requirements are a full-time obligation that could easily employ the skills of an engineer and archaeologist. I'm proud to say our staff fill those roles, and manage to provide cultural education, ceremonial and language opportunities for our people in addition to Section 106 compliance.

Our LRBOI Anishinabek culture's foundation is in the "KchiiGaamii" or Great Lakes that surround our lands. LRBOI is part of the Three Fires Nations; we live in the area on our 'Turtle Island' as directed to us long ago—"settle in the place where food grows on water." This food is critical to our people; it is known as wild rice. Our current efforts to preserve wild rice beds, restore wild rice habitat and enhance growing opportunities for LRBOI member harvests is also impacted by three factors; the quality of the fresh water it grows in, the overall climate of the region and the invasion of non-native plant species such as purple loose-strife and phragmites. Presently, LRBOI receives an Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) multi-year grant under the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) that assists our wild rice re-introduction, restoration and existing source management efforts. Combined with Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) funds, LRBOI is making an effort to protect existing wild rice beds within our Ceded Territory watersheds, establish harvesting education programs and reduce the incidence of invasive species and their impact on the habitat. LRBOI recommends increasing the existing EPA GLRI appropriation to \$10 million from the \$3 million requested in the FY 2017 budget as there are 36 Tribes in our region with similar cultural preservation aspirations. LRBOI also recommends increasing the BIA Invasive Species Program from \$10 million to \$15 million. The biologists working on our wild rice and habitat restoration efforts have indicated the biggest threats to our region for all Natural Resources are climate change, land management, farming and the siphoning of fresh water for activities such as fracking for gas and oil exploration. LRBOI asks the Committee to consider the protection of water quality to be a long-term priority. We are very aware of the crisis this year in Flint, Michigan and the threat to clean, safe drinking water—LRBOI donated \$10,000.00 to the Flint

Children’s Fund to assist with ongoing lead testing for Flint’s children as they continue to discover the far reaching impact of the contaminated water the people of Flint were consuming. We are very proud of our effort to assist the children of Flint and ask the Committee to take measures in this budget request to protect the fresh water resource that is the Great Lakes Basin.

Finally, by its own admission, the Administration’s funding request for the Road Maintenance Program for FY 2017 will permit tribes to maintain only 16 percent of BIA-owned roads and 62 percent of BIA-owned bridges in “acceptable” condition. In Michigan, the condition of our roads and bridge infrastructures impacts our economy, the quality of life in or territory and the communities surrounding it. The current appropriation requests would leave 8 out of 10 BIA-owned roads and nearly 4 out of 10 BIA-owned bridges with funds to maintain them in their current poor or failing condition. This is a life-safety issue. Most of these routes are gravel and earthen school bus routes that require more frequent maintenance than paved roads. We urge the Committee to add an additional \$9 million to the Road Maintenance Program out of planned increases for the Interior Department for FY 2017. Doing so will increase the percentage of BIA-owned roads and bridges maintained to an “acceptable” condition. In our territory, encompassing over 70,000 ‘reservation set-aside’ acres, and just over 13 million acres of ‘Ceded Territory’ over which we have Natural Resources enforcement jurisdiction, failing roads impact our watersheds and habitats. The additional funds if appropriated would do much to protect those resources and habitats.

LRBOI appreciates many of the proposed increases in the President’s fiscal year 2017 budget. We see the positive impact of ongoing meaningful consultation that is occurring through the Tribal Interior Budget Council and National Budget Formulation Workgroup. We urge the Committee to continue to support the efforts of these tribally- driven bodies to inform the work of the Administration and, ultimately, Congress. We also believe in the partnership that continues to evolve out of the federal Indian trust relationship. The United States and its ‘Native First Nations’ truly do share a “sacred bond” borne from treaties – a mutual exchange for the benefit of both, our respective lands and nations.

Little River Band appreciates the opportunity to present this testimony to the Committee on these important matters. I am happy to answer any questions the Members of the Committee may have.

KchiMiigwech (Many Thanks)  
Gdagaanaaganik (All Our Relations)