

Thinking outside the box: Shoshones rely on intellectual resources to grow an economy

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Fourth in a five-part series

BRIGHAM CITY — Shoshone legend suggests that Itsappe — Old Coyote — disguised in a shredded juniper wig, stole fire from a distant desert tribe and brought it north to the Bear River Valley.

The Northwestern Band of the Shoshone Nation today has no reason to steal. It caught fire on its own. The tribe expects revenues this year from its numerous business enterprises to hit \$10 million.

It's a large figure for a band of 464 that only a few years ago had nothing.

"We started out zero," said tribal leader Bruce Parry, CEO and chairman of the board of the NWB Shoshone Economic Development Corp.

"We did not have even a penny to start."

The Northwestern Shoshone tribe, based in Brigham City, does not have a reservation, though it owns some land and is trying to acquire more.

With essentially no land base in Utah, the Northern Band of the Shoshone has relied on intellectual resources and creativity to grow an economy.

Creative economic development includes foreign language translations for the FBI, CIA and other government agencies; construction companies; and energy development. Tribal leaders want to train their young people to take over these enterprises.

And the tribe has big plans for the property it is amassing, including an industrial park, an interpretive center, a travel plaza and a casino resort just across the border in Idaho.

One of its more ambitious projects is a mixed-use development in a former Shoshone community 50 miles north of Brigham City called Washakie. The town died out during the World War II era. The new Washakie would include housing, schools, medical facilities and a business park.

All told, the tribe's proposals exceed \$340 million.

Outside the box

Lacking natural resources, the Shoshones began "asset mining," or looking for something to capitalize on.

"What we've had to do is think out of the box," said chief operating officer Mike Devine. "That's why we've been successful with some of those more resourceful things."

Recognizing that Utah has many speakers of foreign languages, the tribe settled on translation services. It secured a federal contract and top-secret clearance to provide translation for agencies in the Department of Justice and the



Keith Johnson, Deseret Morning News
Bruce Parry, left, and Mike Devine stand in front of a home in the So-So-Goi Meadows, a housing development for qualified tribal members in Ogden.

Federal Bureau of Investigation.

"Sure enough," Devine said, "we struck gold."

Because of its tribal status, the Northwestern Shoshone gets special consideration through the Small Business Administration for federal contracts. The government reserves a percentage for historically disadvantaged people.

The Shoshones also now own a construction company doing dozens of government projects and an interior design firm specializing in LDS Church temples. The tribe also is working on biodiesel and geothermal power projects.

"We believe energy is going to be bigger than gaming ever was for the tribe," Devine said. (The Shoshone-Bannock tribe in Idaho operates a casino at Fort Hall.)

The business ventures don't necessarily provide jobs for Shoshones, but Parry said that's not the tribe's focus.

"Our main interest was to create wealth as well as train young people to take over the businesses we are operating," Parry said. Three of his grandsons are currently studying business in college.

Half of the revenues go back into the businesses. The other half is used for housing, health care, education and other services. The Shoshones do not issue royalty checks to individual tribal members as some tribes do.

Given the tribe did no economic development for 140 years, it is not looking for short-term gratification.

"For many years we would watch the other tribes succeed," said Patty Timbimboo-Madsen. "But (there was) never really any progress in (our) tribe."

When the current leadership came in about four years ago, she said, "You saw hope. I mean you saw a dream."

'Nation building'

The Northwestern Shoshone band subscribes to concepts developed by the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development.

Rather than take a quick jobs-and-income approach as many tribes do, the Shoshones strive for long-term prosperity through "nation building." The idea is to build an environment that encourages investment, helps businesses last and allows investments to pay off.

"Along with sovereignty, it is the key to economic development," according to the Harvard Project.

The Shoshones also found that placing economic decisions in the hands of a committee that excludes elected tribal leaders makes for a better-managed operation.

"The tribe had the political will to set economic development aside from tribal government. That's the key. We've really benefitted from that separation between business and politics," Devine said.

"We've saved ourselves from ourselves."

Underlying everything the Northwestern Shoshone do economically is the desire to preserve and enhance its culture. Their language is nearly extinct. Fewer than 25 native speakers remain, said Timbimboo-Madsen, tribal director of cultural and natural resources.

Becoming lost too are traditional songs and dances. Pine nuts, a staple of the old Shoshone diet, and chokecherries aren't gathered much anymore.

"There's lots of reasons for Native Americans to bemoan their fate. Nobody has greater reason to complain about the circumstances they've been placed in than the Northwestern Band of the Shoshone," said Devine said, who is not a tribe member.

Tragic legacy

The Northwestern Shoshone were victims of one of the worst American Indian slaughters in history.

On Jan. 29, 1863, U.S. Army troops, with Mormon guides, attacked the tribe at its winter campsite along the Bear River near present-day Preston, Idaho. An estimated 300 men, women and children were killed.

Shoshone raids on prospectors and immigrants traveling through the area prompted the assault. The raids, however, had been conducted by a different Shoshone band.

"We had about as many members killed up there as we have members today," Parry said.

The massacre remains a tender spot among Shoshones today.

"It kind of taught us not to trust the federal government," said Parry, a former director of the state Indian affairs office. "That's probably why we threw in with the Mormons rather than the BIA (Bureau of Indian Affairs)."

In the 1870s, every member of the tribe, except one who was afraid of water, was baptized into the The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

In the past couple years, the tribe has acquired 33 acres at the massacre site. It has received pledges from congressional and other sponsors to build a \$25 million visitors center, memorial park and monument.

Timbimboo-Madsen says the young people need to know about their ancestors. "I think with each generation you move away from that," she said.

► Proposed Shoshone projects in Utah, Idaho

Northwestern Band of the Shoshone Nation proposed projects in Utah and Idaho:

Bear River Massacre memorial	\$25 million
Geothermal plant	\$280 million
Washakie planned community	cost undetermined
Bear Lodge Casino Resort	\$150 million
Interpretive center	\$25 million
Tribal offices	\$10 million
Power plant/biomass facility	\$120 million
Travel plaza	\$10 million
Housing development	\$1.2 million

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