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American Rescue Plan's Historic Investment in Indian Country Is Funding Housing for Suquamish Tribal Members

One year after the largest appropriation for Indian Country in U.S. history, the Suquamish Tribe is investing its share of the funding primarily in creating affordable housing for its citizens.

The Biden Administration's American Rescue Plan, signed at the White House last year on March 11 in response to the COVID emergency, earmarked more than \$20 billion of the total \$1.9 trillion package for Native American Tribes.

"This historic investment in Tribal communities is a long over-due step towards meeting the federal government's trust responsibilities to the original peoples of this land," said Suquamish Chairman Leonard Forsman.

The Suquamish Tribe, one of 574 federally recognized Tribes, is using its share of the funding to address a chronic scarcity of affordable housing. Like many other Tribes, the Suquamish has struggled with the loss of reservation lands caused by federal policies that neglected trust responsibilities to Tribes and under-funded Tribal programs.

The need for housing on the Port Madison Indian Reservation, now a checkerboard of tribal and non-tribal properties, has recently become even more urgent as the prices of homes throughout the region, and on the reservation, have spiked. Many Tribal families are being priced out of living on their own homelands.

Among the projects moving forward with American Rescue Plan funding is the Little Hill housing development, which will provide a dozen lots, supplied with utility infrastructure, where Tribal families can build their own homes.

There will also be a 20-unit townhouse complex built across from the Suquamish Tribe Administration Building, on land that the Tribe recently re-acquired at the end of the "Suquamish Shores" second 25-year lease.

Bringing water, sewer, and electricity services to these projects is a major investment partially funded with American Rescue Plan dollars. In addition, the COVID pandemic showed that good internet service is a necessity, and the Tribe is making major investments in building out broadband connectivity to Tribal homes and public spaces.

The Tribe is using some of the funds to support Tribal members in purchasing homes through down payment assistance, and supporting the repair and maintenance of homes owned by Tribal families.

“The funding received through the American Rescue Plant Act means Suquamish Tribal members can afford to live on their own Reservation, or to return home. It means families will have access to 21st Century necessities, like broadband internet. And it means our children can be educated in a facility that is both safe and welcoming,” said Chairman Forsman.

How did a housing shortage happen on the Port Madison Indian Reservation?

Due to federal and local policies, much of the land on the Port Madison Indian Reservation had been taken out of Tribal hands during the long period of assimilation following the signing of the Treaty of Point Elliott of 1855. Much of the land that was allotted by the Indian Agent to individual Tribal members, was lost to tribal members through marriage, fraud, taxes that a subsistence way of life couldn't support, and, in at least one dramatic case, through US Military appropriation. Native people who were unable to pass bogus “competency” tests (like reading and writing in English, which, for them, was a second language), could find that the local Indian agent had assumed guardianship over the land and had sold it to whomever he pleased, at whatever price he determined.

In 1904, the US Military took much of the reservation's waterfront including the land where Old Man House, Chief Seattle's home, had stood, and where the main Suquamish village was located. The land was never used for fortification, the original justification for the taking. Instead, it was sold to developers, who divided the land into lots for waterfront homes for non-Natives. The original covenants on that land, still on file with Kitsap County, require that land owners only sell their land to Caucasians.

At the low point, the Tribe and Tribal members owned just one-third of the land and a fraction of the waterfront property on the reservation. Efforts to re-purchase land and build housing were often met with hostility from non-Native neighbors.

Today, through an arduous and expensive process of re-purchasing the land at market rates, the Tribe and its members own more than half of the land on the Port Madison Indian Reservation, allowing the Tribe to expand housing opportunities for Tribal citizens.

Although affordable housing is a priority, the Tribe is also using some of the American Rescue Plan funding for education. The Tribe is building a new multi-purpose building for its Tribal-state charter school Chief Kitsap Academy. During the COVID pandemic, it became clear that the cramped spaces now used for lunches and gatherings were inadequate, especially when physical distancing was a public health necessity. The new multi-purpose building will mean school assemblies, instead of taking place with students and staff standing outdoors, can now occur inside, and that some sports and other gatherings can be located on the school campus.

Next up for the Tribe – planning a new lodge for Elders and upgrading the infrastructure capacity at existing Tribal neighborhoods to allow growth.

“With the American Rescue Plant Act, the Biden Administration made a substantial down payment on promises made to Indian Country,” said Tribal chairman Leonard Forsman

“The nation’s Tribes have yet to recovery from centuries of disinvestment and broken promises,” Forsman said. “But, a year after this historic commitment to Indian Country, we are seeing real progress for our Suquamish families.”

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Media Contact:

Sarah van Gelder, Communications Manager
206 491-0196 (cell)
svangelder@Suquamish.nsn.us