

GTB buys steel firm, diversifies

By Eric Carlson
of the *Enterprise* staff

The Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians is continuing to expand its economic development efforts beyond casino gaming and this week announced its acquisition of a steel fabrication firm in Charlevoix.

The firm, Bay Shore Steel Works, is described in a tribal news release as a "full-service component manufacturer and finisher with the capability to process components from raw plate to painted weldment or assembly."

The general manager of Bay Shore Steel Works, Anton Matye, said that 95 percent of the company's efforts focus on products for the U.S. defense industry, mostly as a subcontractor for firms such as General Dynamics and Raytheon. Among the company's most important products is armor plating for tanks and other armored vehicles.

"We hope to get even more business from government projects now that the tribe is involved," Matye told the *Enterprise* this week. He said the company has 40 employees but hopes to hire more under tribal leadership.

The federal government offers financial incentives for American Indian tribes to become government contractors. Since the tribe's economic development efforts have been reorganized over the past several years, the Grand Traverse Economic Development (GTED) has focused more effort in the area of government contracting, tribal officials said.

The economic development arm of the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians is not to be confused with the Grand Traverse Economic Development Corporation, an entity set up by Grand Traverse County. GTED is the tribe's "non-gaming economic development entity...formed to create wealth for the tribe and diversify the tribe's revenue streams," according to a news release.

In addition to Bay Shore Steel Works (BSSW), the tribe's GTED also owns a company called Grand Traverse Engineering and Construction (GTEC). Founded in 2015, GTEC specializes in civil engineering, construction and planning.

According to a GTED statement released this week, the tribe's economic development organization also hopes to form an Information Technology (IT) firm and a land holding company in the year ahead.

"All firms are primarily devoted to federal and state contracting," according to the news release.

The tribe's firms will take advantage of the Small Business Administration's Tribal "disadvantaged set-aside business development program" including a Department of Defense 5-percent "Indian Incentive Procurement Rebate

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Program, and other minority business enterprise programs, tribal officials said.

No one would say how much money the tribe paid to acquire BSSW. The Tribal Chairman, Thurlow "Sam" McClellan, did not return phone calls from an *Enterprise* reporter.

The Chief Executive Officer of GTED, Thomas Wilbur, said he believes the Grand Traverse Band may be the first Indian tribe in the U.S. to become so directly involved in U.S.

Department of Defense programs.

"The contracts Bay Shore Steel Works has with General Dynamics and others are directly related to putting the right tools in the hands of our nation's warfighters," Wilbur told the *Enterprise*.

A former Army special forces officer, a Native American and an experienced federal contracting executive, Wilbur was hired by the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians in Feb. 2018 to lead the tribe's newly-reconfigured GTED.

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