Tribe pays off Wellness Center loan 16 years early

The tide indeed is coming back in.

As planning and construction for the Denai’n Wellness Center progressed, the tribe focused on the concept of Naqantugheyduł, the idea that the tide has turned, and with it, a return of the culture that had been eroded over the years.

Friday, July 27 marked a major milestone for the tribe as the Wellness Center construction loan was paid off in full. Tribal Council Chairperson Wayne Wilson Jr. and Treasurer Clinton Lageson signed a check for $9,462,511.19, covering the remaining balance on the $11 million loan.

“It’s an awesome day,” Wilson said after he and Lageson hand-delivered the check to First National Bank Alaska’s Kenai branch.

“I think it’s exciting that we’re paying off something we didn’t even envision being able to do when we started the project,” Wilson said.

Wilson said that when construction of the Wellness Center was under way, some wondered if this day would ever come — never mind that it came just four years in to the 20-year term of the loan.

“We had a strong vision, strong goals and a great plan, but there was still some doubt,” Wilson said.

Wilson emphasized that it has been a group effort for the tribe to be in a position to pay off the loan while still maintaining a healthy savings account. The early payoff will save the tribe $3.8 million in interest.

Wilson said one of the tribe’s concerns is sustaining services at the Wellness Center after the Indian Health Service Joint Venture expires. Joint Venture funding covers staffing costs for the Wellness Center for 20 years. The tribal council has made a motion to put the $834,829 per year that would have gone toward paying the loan into an account to be used for future projects which will continue to fund Wellness Center operations when the time comes.

“We need to be saving it for what happens in the future,” Wilson said.

As part of the Indian Health Service Joint Venture, Kenaitze Indian Tribe is wholly responsible for providing the facility. Because of this, Wilson explained, the Director of Financial Services and the Finance Committee have been exploring ways to manage the tribe’s assets that best maintain programs and services by passing a Treasury Policy, committing to long-term planning goals, and paying off the loan.

A number of factors allowed the tribe to be able to pay off the loan early. The tribe saw savings from careful budgeting, experienced greater-than-anticipated revenue growth, and favorable federal contract negotiations. Other factors include an increase in Medicaid

See LOAN, p. 4
Tribe's Health Council continues to improve the management of the tribe and its programs. As part of this process, the Council has restructured the organization to improve the management and focus of each of the tribe’s main responsibilities. There will now be two Executive Directors who will report directly to the Council. One of the leading priorities will be the Health Systems while others will focus on Tribal Administration. The Council has also created the K’alna’nu’t’a Dena’n/a Health Board which will advise the Council on all matters related to the health care services.

Both Executive Director positions are currently vacant. Dawn Nelson has been selected to serve as the Interim Executive Director as the Council pursues the recruitment and hiring process. Dawn has served in the role of Executive Director of Health Agencies for two years and has extensive experience in the health care field, which the Council feels will assist in this transition.

Recognizing the tribal members' concerns about the permanent placement of a physician, the Tribe’s Health Council has partnered with a physician recruiting firm to hire a physician for the Dena’n/a Health Center in Alaska Native primary care.

**Strategic Plan**

The Council has developed four long-term visionary statements to guide staff as they develop a detailed strategic and operations plan.

- **Campus Vision:** To provide a culturally appropriate home that provides a sense of belonging that fulfills the needs of the future generations of the K’alna’nu’t’a Dena’n/a.
- **Education Vision:** To provide a culturally appropriate educational environment that facilitates lifelong learning for all K’alna’nu’t’a Dena’n/a.
- **Health Vision:** To provide a culturally appropriate, sustainable and accessible health care system that empowers wellness throughout the generations.
- **Economic Development Vision:** To provide economic means to ensure self-determination through opportunities for all K’alna’nu’t’a Dena’n/a.

Through the support of the tribal membership, we have a strong foundation to assure that K’alna’nu’t’a Dena’n/a thrive forever!

Duk’al’i – Respectfully,
Wayne D. Wilson Jr.
Tribal Council Chairperson
There is strength in community, and rebuilding those connections is a crucial part of community healing. That was a clear takeaway for participants in the Gathering of Alaska Native People, hosted at the Dena’ina Wellness Center over three days in early June. “That’s the way we as indigenous people have survived, the interdependence we have with each other,” Estelle Thomson, a Traditional Healer at the Dena’ina Wellness Center, said. “It’s what gives us resilience and keeps our families and communities together.”

Audré Gifford, Project Coordinator in the Behavioral Health program, said it was the first Gathering of Alaska Native People held in this community. The curriculum for the event was adopted from the Gathering of Native Americans curriculum, developed in the early 1990s by the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

The goal of the program is to encourage community engagement by building on four themes: belonging, mastery, interdependence, and generosity. Discussions serve as a guide for prevention planning and community healing.

“We saw a need for healing in this tribe,” Gifford said of her inspiration to organize the event. Funding for the event came from a Native Connections grant from SAMSHA. The Ninilchik Traditional Council partnered for the event, and people came from Ninilchik to participate.

Gifford said the Alaska Native version of the curriculum includes a greater focus on spirituality, plants and animals. Instead of a medicine wheel, there is a wellness circle more specific to Alaska Native values. A recurring theme of the gathering was how to repair fractures in families and in the community. “A lot of the focus was on community.” Nowadays, that’s one of the fractured pieces. We’re not as interdependent as we used to be,” Gifford said.

Participants spent the first part of the event – Saturday in particular – taking a deep dive into the issues that have led to fractures within families and the community. Sunday was dedicated to pulling the pieces back together.

Gifford described an exercise in which participants laid out a blanket and placed some sage in the middle, representing the community’s ritual. Around it, people were arranged to represent children, parents, and grandparents. The exercise was symbolic of a healthy family, with spirituality at its center, surrounded by family. Gifford said that’s something that’s become fractured, whether it be from children being sent to boarding school, mothers forced to work outside the home, or fathers lost to alcohol or drug addiction.

“Even though there were different cultures together, it felt like one big family. I think that’s what everyone should be feeling like.”

— Nina Weatherly

“There was a really good visual representation of how our community was broken. Everyone said it was one of the most powerful exercises because you could see it, feel it, it was tangible.”

Thomson said she was drawn to the gathering for the discussion of historical and intergenerational trauma. “For the work I do, it’s important that people are aware that it exists, and how it can manifest in your body and in your community,” Thomson said.

Nina Weatherly said she wasn’t sure what to expect from the event, but the phrase “gathering of Alaskan Natives” grabbed her attention. She said many of the issues that were discussed, including suicide and substance abuse, touch close to home for her. “It’s changes that we need to know. … Instead of hiding it behind closed doors, and keeping silent, we’re trying to bring it out in the open,” Weatherly said. “… I wish there would be more (events) like this. … The awareness of suicide, drug and alcohol abuse is a big factor, and I think belonging er gathering, Thomson said the group’s size had benefits. “The intimacy of the event allowed us to get to know one another on a deeper level than a larger gathering,” she said.

Gifford said she was excited to see the group was open to sharing and committed to helping their community. “Everybody made a personal commitment to the community to what they believe their responsibility will be. We made personal commitment to help move toward healing.” Gifford said.

Gifford said her goal is to ensure youth are more involved in the community. “My commitment is to bring back the coming-of-age ceremony,” Gifford said. “When youth are supported by Elders, they know their place, they know their role; they have a better foundation to stand on.”

A good foundation, she said, means youth are less likely to engage in other risky behavior. Thomson said she would like to see gatherings on a regular basis, perhaps annually, and would encourage others to attend.

“I think education is really important to help people understand the ramifications of trauma in our lives, how it affects us and changes us, and things we can do to heal our bodies and our spirits,” Thomson said. “I encourage people to attend things like this to learn more about themselves.”
Sometimes digging into the past can give us insight into how we live today. Participants in the recent Susten Archaeology Camp, part of the Yaghanen Youth Program, were able to make that connection as they explored a site near the Swanson River and Rainbow Lake for possible future study.

“It’s definitely an important part of my heritage,” Judah Eason, a camp participant, said. “There’s so little we can find from remnants – (the Dena’ina) were such a clean type of people. It really opens up your eyes to how people need to focus on recycling – don’t pollute our area, don’t leave things behind that are going to be here for hundreds of years.”

Camp participants had just learned about “leave no trace” principles from Kenai National Wildlife Refuge Ranger Amber Krausberger-Linson, including details on how long it takes for everyday items, from banana peels to aluminum cans, to decompose. For prehistoric Dena’ina people, of whom camp participants were trying to find evidence, it was a very different story. “Their possessions, their things, when they were done with them, they would burn them or put them back in the ground or the water,” Kya Ahlers, another camp participant, said. Under the direction of archaeologist Debbie Corbett, camp participants spent part of their week mapping and recording in an area she thinks has a high probability of Dena’ina habitation. The site is on a knoll about 4,000 feet from the Swanson River and just above Rainbow Lake.

The high school-age campers make good archaeologists, Corbett said. “They’re young enough to crash through the brush and crawl around to look for things.”

Corbett said that in the past, potential sites could be hard to identify, but for this site, she was able to use LIDAR imagery to help hone in on good locations to search. LIDAR stands for Light Detection and Ranging, and generates three-dimensional imagery of the Earth’s surface. Corbett theorizes that the area around the Swanson River was heavily utilized by the Dena’ina, but the area has not received as much attention from researchers as the larger settlements along the Kenai River area. She theorizes that Dena’ina in the area lived on small homesteads with extended family groups, differing from the large villages located along the Kenai River.

“We’re putting together a picture of prehistoric use of this area – very, very slowly,” Corbett said. In addition to mapping potential cache pits or dwellings, camp participants identified the plants found around the site. When people inhabit a site, Corbett said, they alter the soil. “By identifying the plants, and identifying their Dena’ina names, they can look into traditional uses of those plants,” Corbett said.

Campers spent one morning studying soil samples taken during a previous Susten camp. Samples revealed fragments of charcoal, part of an insect, other yet to be identified substances, and as Eason put it, “more dirt.”

At left, Hanna Wilson practices digging a cathole as part of a “leave no trace” activity during the Susten Archaeology Camp near the Swanson River on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Above, Hanna Wilson examines material she found in a soil sample during a Susten Archaeology Camp activity at the Kenai National Wild.

At top, Judah Eason weighs a soil sample sample during a camp activity. Campers found charcoal, a part of an insect, and yet to be identified substances in the soil samples. Above, archaeologist Debbie Corbett talks with Eason as he sorts a soil sample. Campers analyzed soil samples taken during a previous Susten camp.

The camp schedule included discussions during and between activities, but camp participants were also engaged in informal discussions during and between activities. “We think we had more of that this year,” Corbett said of the campers’ questions about Dena’ina and other Alaska Native cultures. “Being able to sit down with the kids, and the people running Yaghanen, talking about what we do – that informal discussion is really important.”

Other camp highlights included a seminar on bear safety, an exercise in predicting wildlife fire behavior, and a canoe trip across Dolly Varden Lake.

Ahlers said she appreciated the presentation on bear safety because it went beyond the basics. Krausberger-Linson delved into bear behavior and tactics for brown bear and black bear encounters.

“We learned how you can tell what a bear might do by its body language,” Ahlers said.

Camp wrapped up with a trip to the K’beq’ Interpretive Site in Cooper Landing. The archaeological site there includes a house pit and a couple of cache pits.

Krausberger-Linson, who grew up on the Kenai Peninsula, said her time at the Susten camp provided depth to her knowledge of the area’s past. “It brings the whole area to life,” she said. “This is much more than a tourist destination. It’s home, and it’s been home for thousands of years and supported people. . . . We’re very fortunate to live here.”

At left, Susten Archaeology Camp participant Samiel Wilson and Yaghanen Youth Advocate Jonny Wilson lead off a “leave no trace” relay race during a camp activity at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge’s Outdoor Education Center. Campers had to run the recommended distance away from a campsite to dig a cathole – a 6- to 8-inch-deep hole to dispose of human waste – then hand off their trowel to the next camper.
Raven Willisya-Williams and Roberta Turner, standing at back, lead camp participants through a game during a break in learning.

Shannon Dodge, Student Services Coordinator, talked about the importance of knowing your tribe and Native corporation affiliation. She conducted a quick survey before her presentation, and found just a handful of students knew their tribe.

Misty Klock, Daggeyi Intern Supervisor, did a presentation on college and career readiness to give camp participants an idea of steps to take during high school to be ready to pursue a degree or a place in the workforce.

Audef Gifford and Crystal Wright from the Behavioral Health program discussed the importance of mental health and self-care with camp participants.

Communications Department Technical Writer Will Morrow went over some of the dos and don’ts of media for job hunters and employees.

The camp wrapped up with a trip to Cooper Landing. The plan had been to hike to Russian River Falls, but due to inclement weather, it was shortened to a stroll along the boardwalks by the river and finish off with a trip to the top ice cream at Widman’s.

Ben Spinka of Kenai, headed into his freshman year of high school, said he found the camp to be informative and fun. Among the things he said learned were “how to make a résumé and apply for jobs.” He plans to take a few classes in the fall.

Nadia Walluk is headed to college in the fall.

Before she found her calling, she picked up valuable job experience making the Daggeyi Internship Program through the tribe’s Education and Career Development program.

For example, she learned she was a very goal-oriented person. And through the internship program, she learned how to set goals and how to take the necessary steps to achieve them.

The internship program is about two years old, said Misty Klock, Daggeyi Intern Supervisor, and Nadia was the second intern in the program.

She’s been mentoring and support, whether the path is higher education or career training,” Klock said.

Last summer, Walluk participated in a nursing camp at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, the program originally offered by the Education and Career Development Department.

Walluk also participated in “all the camps” Yaghanen offers, and has been involved in the Yichtughtani program. She’s a member of the Youth Council, and is headed to San Diego in July for the National Youth Conference.

She said she had a little bit of trepidation about her future plans, but looking forward to attending classes in the fall.

“I was a little excited,” Walluk said. “She’s also connected with the Daggeyi Program in July of 2016, where she interned with the Daggeyi Program.

Klock said that the tribe has scholarship opportunities available for post-secondary and vocational education, but has had limited funding available for middle- and high-school students. However, over the years, there have been regular requests for that type of assistance.

“The Education Committee and the Education and Career Development Department asked to create this new scholarship to fill that gap,” Knight said. “There are educational experiences that come up every year, but they have expenses associated with them.”

Knight said the goal is to ensure that students don’t miss out on an opportunity because they can’t afford to participate. To apply for the scholarship, students must submit a completed application, available on the web at www. kenaitze.org/assistance/scholarships. Applications must be submitted to the Education and Career Development Department office. Signedatures of a parent or guardian and a school academic counselor or teacher are also required, along with a copy of the student’s Kenaitze Indian Tribe member card.

Submit the completed application and proof of enrollment to the Education and Career Development Department, 510 Upoldt Street, Kenai, AK 99611. For more information, call 907-335-7600.

One of the goals of the Kenaitze Indian Tribe’s Environmental Program is to provide the tools for the next generation to live sustainably. At the Kenaitze Green camp in early June, those tools included a trowel, gardening gloves, and worms.

“We’re teaching about sustana- bly living, and all the tools we want them to have to keep the Kenaitze people independent and self-sufficient,” Environmental Program Coordinator Janelle Schadle said.

During the three-day camp, participants learned about growing in a worm farm, planting tomatoes, and setting up their own compost.”

Nadia Walluk takes Heritage Place resident Laura Lee Curl for a stroll through Soldotna in June.

Trefon also asked campers who had been to hike to Russian River and employees.

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Maddy Morris said she comes to Tyotkas Elders Center to watch the blank canvas gradually turn green, said as he watered a planter. “It’s a calming space,” John Willis, Advocate at Tyotkas Elders Center, said who works with the Elders program. “I got to plant my first garden – you just pull it and eat it.”

The greenhouse will go to Tyotkas and other tribal programs. Sutton is learning about greenhouse gardening alongside the facility’s other users. “I come and look in the window every day,” she said.

At top, George Holley performs during the opening ceremony for the tribe’s new greenhouse held in July. Above, Wellness Director Deb Nyquist talks about how the facility will be utilized.

For thousands of years, Denú’ina people have hunted and gathered food across Yaghanan, the good land. From moose to salmon to wild berries, food harvested from the land is important to Denú’ina life. Cooking with Kenaitze highlights ingredients and recipes relevant to Denú’ina culture. This time we focus on fireweed recipes.

Fireweed (wildlupine) flowers and leaves are used in salads, soups, casseroles, teas, jams and honey. Stems and shoots can be boiled, steamed, and covered with a cream sauce similar to asparagus. Fireweed shoots can be bundled and hung to dry for a few days. Wilting fireweed can be preserved in seal oil.

Fireweed is an excellent source of vitamins A and C, and a good source of fiber. Harvest fireweed shoots in early spring, leaves in late spring, buds and flowers in summer and fruit stalks in the fall.

Learn more about cooking with fireweed on Aug. 15 from 3 to 5 p.m. at the Denú’ina Wellness Center’s Skilak Lake Kitchen.

**FIREWEED PICKLES**

Ingredients
- 1 pound fresh fireweed shoots
- For the brine:
  - 1 teaspoon mustard seeds
  - 1 teaspoon peppercorns
  - 1 cup water
  - 1 cup apple cider vinegar
  - 1 cup sugar
  - 2 tablespoons sea salt (or canning or pickling salt)

Directions
- In a saucepan, combine all brine ingredients and bring to a boil. Then remove from heat.
- Rinse fireweed shoots well. Sterilize your jars, either one quart jar, two pint jars, or four half pint jars.
- Pack your jars tightly with the fireweed shoots and cover with brine to 1/2 inch from the top of jar. As you add the brine, you might be able to fill in more fireweed. Cover and cool in the refrigerator.
- Serve pickles with cheese and crackers, or salmon and cream cheese, or add to an omelet. Store jars in the refrigerator, and use within one month for best quality.

Recipe courtesy of ediblealaska.ediblecommunities.com/recipes/fireweed-pickles

**FIREWEED JELLY**

Ingredients
- 1 aquafaba lemon juice
- 1/2 teaspoon butter
- 1 (3/4 ounce) package dry pectin
- 3 cups sugar

Directions
- For fireweed jelly: Harvest about 8 packed cups of fireweed flowers. Rinse thoroughly and put in 2-quart pot. Add just enough water to make water level just below top of packed flowers. Juice should be a deep purplish color when finished. If not much water is used in boiling process, juice will be a brownish color. More water can always be added after flowers are boiled to increase amount of juice.) Boil flowers in water until color is boiled out and petals are a greyish color. Ladle juice into jar through cheesecloth to strain. Warm fireweed juice, lemon juice and butter on stovetop.
- Add pectin, bring to boil and boil hard for one minute.
- Add sugar and bring to full boil for one minute. Skim top of jelly. Pour into pitcher (makes it easier to fill jars) and skim again.
- Fill sterilized jars leaving 1/8 inch space at top. Process in hot water bath for 10 minutes.

Recipe courtesy of Tia Holley

**FIREWEED TEA**

Ingredients
- Fireweed leaves

Directions
- Gather fireweed leaves before the plant flowers. Wash and dry. Lay leaves flat out on the counter or cutting board and break the middle vein with a rolling pin.
- Once the vein is flattened, take 3 to 5 leaves depending on size and layer them on top of each other.
- Roll the layered leaves together and make into a ball between your hands. Leave the ballied leaves out to dry, but covered from any flavor contaminants.
- Once dry, usually 3 to 5 days, the tea is ready to use.

Recipe courtesy of Tia Holley

**Cooking with Kenaitze: Fireweed**
Our Mission
To assure Kahtnuht’ana Dena’ina thrive forever.

Our Values
These are the beliefs and principles that define our people and will assure our future as a tribe:

• **Family:** Honoring and sustaining health and happiness of family as a first responsibility
• **Stewardship:** Respectful use of land, resources and all creations
• **Spiritual Beliefs:** Acknowledging the existence of a higher power and respecting spiritual beliefs
• **Education:** Passing down cultural knowledge and traditions and supporting formal education

Our Vision
By 2025, the Kahtnuht’ana Dena’ina have enhanced and strengthened the prosperity, health and culture of their people and tribe by:

• working toward united effort with Native organizations and other governments that impact our people.
• developing and implementing a tribal education system.
• living our traditional values and practices.
• empowering our sovereignty.
• continuing to demonstrate resiliency.
• striving for excellence in all of our programs.
• elevating the wellness of our people.
• using our talents and resources to ensure we are able to take care of ourselves and share with others.

Addresses and phone numbers

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<td>150 N. Willow St., Kenai, AK 99611</td>
<td>907-335-7200</td>
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<td>Early Childhood Center</td>
<td>130 N. Willow St., Kenai, AK 99611</td>
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On the Web: kenaitze.org
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