



Newly inaugurated Lower Brule Sioux Tribal Council Chairman Lewis Grass Rope speaks to supporters at a ceremony on Friday. (Evan Hendershot/Republic)

Lower Brule Sioux Tribe celebrates new leader

By [Evan Hendershot](#) on Sep 26, 2015 at 12:43 p.m.

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LOWER BRULE—There's a new chairman in town.

About 40 Lower Brule Sioux Tribe members gathered high atop a bank of the Missouri River on Friday to celebrate the recent inauguration of Chairman Lewis Grass Rope.

Grass Rope, 38, is part of a sweeping change in the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe's administration, taking the helm after the decades-long tenure of recently deceased Michael Jandreau.

Three Lower Brule Sioux Tribal Council members voted in support of Grass Rope, who lost a 2014 election to Jandreau by 28 votes. One of those supporters was Kevin Wright, who called the inauguration of Grass Rope "liberating."

"For the longest time, nobody knew what was going on in the tribe," Wright said.

Wright hopes the change in leadership will allow for more transparency and public inclusion in tribal government. Wright and others in attendance hope that shift will come from Grass Rope's administration.

"We want to see change together," said Wright. "We want to see people be able to stand up and voice their own opinion and not feel that we're going to condemn them for it."

The event was held a short way down the road from the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe Administration Building in Lower Brule. Although Grass Rope was officially appointed on Sept. 10 in Rapid City, tribal leaders decided to take the celebration home in honor of the people who supported the new chairman.

"It's only to recognize what already took place and show appreciation for the supporters," Wright said.

The Grass Rope administration begins as the tribe tries to wade through a troubling report from the Human Rights Watch in January that accused Jandreau of mishandling tribal finances throughout his time as chairman. According to the report, approximately \$25 million in federal funds meant for specific projects between 2007 and 2013 were allegedly used for separate ventures.

While Jandreau denied the claims, Tribal Council members Wright, Sonny Ziegler and Desiree LaRoche pushed for more transparency in tribal finances. The trio got their wish after they elected the transparency-oriented Grass Rope.

According to the tribal constitution, the tribal council has the authority to appoint a new "qualified individual" to fill any officer, councilman or elected position after the official dies while holding office. Wright said that gave the three-person majority of the council the ability to select Grass Rope.

At Friday's inaugural celebration, Grass Rope said his priorities go beyond open access to financial documents.

"I'm most looking forward to getting things turned around and doing things right," Grass Rope said.

"People that are elected are put there for a reason, we've got to sit there and listen to the people and see what they want to do and bring them back together as a tribe."

Grass Rope said the tribe is still heavily divided between two camps, supporters for the old guard and those who appreciate the new perspective from Grass Rope. The new chairman believes it's his duty to unite the tribe before it can effectively move forward and address some of the financial concerns raised in the Human Rights Watch report.

Although the last Tribal Council meeting was laced with raised voices and occasional profanity, according to the meeting's minutes, Friday's event was a peaceful affair filled with music, dancing and speeches from Grass Rope and Wright.

Before offering a speech to his supporters, Grass Rope appeared confident in his ability to take on the role as chairman, but understood the challenges associated with the position.

"It's very hard for anybody to take on something of this magnitude," Grass Rope said about leading a tribe of about 3,400 people, between 1,300 and 1,700 of which live on the reservation. "You're watching over everybody's interests."

Tribal Council member Sonny Ziegler had faith in Grass Rope's capacity to lead the tribe.

"I don't think a person would put their name in the hat if they weren't prepared for the role," Ziegler said.

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