

Lower Brule Sioux dispute moves to tribal court

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A Lower Brule Sioux Tribe official who took over for the late Chairman Michael Jandreau should be ordered to stop acting as the tribe's chairman and his recent actions should be invalidated, two council members will argue in tribal court.

Terry Pechota, an attorney for Councilmen Orville Langdeau and John McCauley, said he expected the filing to arrive at the tribal court Monday. Jandreau's death about a month ago intensified a political battle among members of the tribe loyal to the decades-long administration and a new guard of tribal councilmembers who say more transparency is needed. Among them is Kevin Wright, who is acting as chairman.

Wright, since he took over leadership of the government shortly before Jandreau died in April, has pushed for staffing changes and urged the federal government to freeze fund transfers until proper tribal council oversight over the tribe's finances has been established.

The tribal court motion says Wright's actions have created a hostile work environment for employees of the tribe. It says that Wright has been acting as chairman illegally and that his actions exercising the office, including requesting the suspension of federal fund transfers, aren't valid.

"It's all ludicrous," Wright told The Associated Press. "It just shows that they have something to hide, to me."

The tribal court motion also lists two councilmembers, Sonny Ziegler and Desiree LaRoche, as defendants with Wright.

Ziegler and Langdeau didn't immediately return phone messages. McCauley and Matt Rappold, an attorney who had previously represented the defendants and was served with the motion, declined to comment. LaRoche was unavailable for comment.

Wright, who previously served as vice chairman, cited the tribe's constitution and bylaws when he assumed the leadership role. He has said he has been stonewalled trying to access the tribe's finances, which have been subject to allegations of mismanagement.

Wright in April sent a letter with the finance and oversight-related requests to Kevin Washburn, assistant secretary of Indian Affairs at the Interior Department. Nedra Darling, a spokeswoman for the Interior Department, said Monday the department had received Wright's letter and will be working with the tribe, but declined to comment further.

Wright and Jandreau had previously sparred about administrative transparency, and Wright was one of the council members who criticized Jandreau over allegations of financial mismanagement that were outlined by Human Rights Watch in January.

Jandreau and Marshall Matz, who has been an attorney for the tribe, have vigorously pushed back against those allegations.

The Department of the Interior's Office of Inspector General has said that in February 2013 it started investigating circumstances surrounding the tribe's purchase of a New York-based brokerage firm called Westrock Advisors Inc. that ultimately went bankrupt, and the probe is still open. The office has said it is also mulling whether to investigate allegations from the Human Rights Watch report.

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