

Testimony of Audrey Bennett
President, Prairie Island Indian Community
Senate Confirmation Hearing
BIA Assistant Secretary

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Good afternoon Mr. chairman and members of the committee. My name is Audrey Bennett, and I'm president of the Prairie Island Indian Community. We are a Minnesota tribe located along the banks of the Mississippi River, in the southern part of the state.

It is an honor to be here on behalf of our tribal council and tribal membership to speak in support of President Bush's nomination of Mr. David Anderson to the position of assistant secretary, Bureau of Indian Affairs.

In addition to serving our tribal community as its president, I am treasurer of the National Indian Gaming Association and the immediate past chair of the Minnesota Indian Affairs Council. I have been involved in tribal politics much of my adult life and I know full well the challenges we as native peoples face in this country.

Our cultures are eroding with the passing of time. Land issues threaten our senses of community and many tribes continue to struggle for economic development capable of sustaining their governments. And many of our children are not getting the education they need to succeed in this world, while others are succumbing to today's most sinister social ills.

The BIA, for all its faults, remains a critical resource for addressing and helping meet these challenges. As such, the BIA is deserving of leadership that reflects its significance and the magnitude of the challenges at hand. We believe Mr. Anderson can satisfy this role and we fully support his nomination.

Throughout his life, Mr. Anderson has pursued the American dream for his family and his people. Along the way he has experienced

numerous personal and professional setbacks, but they only sharpened his resolve. In this way his life is quite similar to the struggles and triumphs of Indian people throughout this country. He is a testament to what can be accomplished through hard work and dedication and he is an inspiration to our young people.

As a Minnesota tribe, we have witnessed many of Mr. Anderson's accomplishments. We have seen first hand his commitment to improving the lives of Native Americans on and off the reservation. To this day he can be found offering guidance to Native American teens at the LifeSkills Center for Leadership in Minneapolis, an organization he founded and helps finance.

His work in tribal gaming helped build the foundations on which a number of tribal communities throughout the country now are beginning to thrive, including the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe and the Lac Courte Oreilles tribe where he is an enrolled member and a former CEO. His success with the Lac Courte Oreilles was heralded by President Reagan's Commission on Indian Reservation Economies.

As an entrepreneur, Mr. Anderson has demonstrated a keen insight for business, substantiated by his more than 80 Famous Dave's restaurants spanning some 20 states. Today, in Minnesota and in many other places, his is virtually a household name.

Mr. Anderson also is no stranger to public policy. He is a graduate of Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. And he has served in numerous public service positions, including the Wisconsin Council on Minority Business Development, the National Task Force on Reservation Gaming, the Advisory Council for Tribal Colleges and Universities, and, most recently, the American Indian Education Foundation.

In a recent editorial, the St. Paul Pioneer Press described Mr. Anderson as a generous man, giving of his time and his fortune to help young native people and the broader community.

That same editorial also questioned his thinking for wanting to take, what the paper described as one of the most challenging and complicated jobs in Washington.

Perhaps it is rare to find someone with Mr. Anderson's blend of real world experience, education and desire to do good who is willing to take on what some believe is an impossible assignment.

There is no question that leading the BIA is a formidable task, but it is not insurmountable – it can't be because there is too much at stake if we allow it fail.

As a Washington outsider, we believe Mr. Anderson will bring a fresh perspective to numerous issues that have plagued the BIA for decades and relieve a source of frustration for tribes and numerous administrations alike.

Mr. Anderson is worthy of this opportunity and capable of meeting the enormous challenge before him. We urge you to accept his nomination and confirm him to the position of assistant secretary, Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Mr. chairman, members of the committee, thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of Mr. Anderson's nomination.