

Concert aims to pressure state to take responsibility, change ugly story

by Brandon Vogel

The 512 cases of beer sold each day in Whiteclay, Neb., (pop. 14) sends \$120,000 in tax revenue annually to state coffers, according to a 2009 state study, while 90 percent of the booze winds up just 200 feet away in the legally dry Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota.

Alcohol has been illegal since Pine Ridge was founded in 1878, but alcoholism and poverty are severe. A 2009 report by the Red Cloud Indian School found life expectancy on the reservation was the worst in the western hemisphere outside of Haiti. Eighty percent of residents reported being unemployed.

Politicians and activists have debated stopping the alcohol stream for more than a century, but Whiteclay's remote location — about an hour northeast of Chadron — makes the issue easy to ignore, said Frank LaMere, longtime Indian activist and director of the Four Directions Community Center .

"It's out of sight, out of mind," he said. "If the murders, the ugliness, and the devastation was felt daily in downtown Omaha it would've been changed years ago."

The Whiteclay Advisory Committee, a local group of activists committed to the cause, hopes to bring the message home with Sunday's Concert for Whiteclay Awareness in Omaha.

The concert features music from Michael Murphy and Cherokee singer-songwriter Michael Bucher. And showgoers who write two letters to local government officials supporting Whiteclay's closure get in free.

Legislating change in Whiteclay has been difficult in part because it requires coordination between two state governments and a tribal council. In April, Gov. Dave Heineman signed Legislative Bill 1002, awarding \$25,000 in seed money to Nebraska's Indian Affairs Commission to investigate solutions and pursue grants for alcohol treatment in Whiteclay.

Commissioning studies is one thing, but the governor doesn't seem ready to actually make any actual changes. In August, governor's spokeswoman Ashley Craddock said, "The Indians are coming from Pine Ride and that's in South Dakota."

LaMere said continued public pressure is crucial to force a government solution.

“[Whiteclay] is one of the worst cases of human rights violations in this country and we fail to see it because it’s hard to look at,” he said.

“Good people sit on their hands, good people wring their hands, and good people remain oblivious to what happens there. We as Nebraskans are better than this.”

The Concert for Whiteclay Awareness is Sept. 19, 6 p.m. at the Countryside Community Church, 8787 Pacific St. For more, call 659.6175.

16 Sept. 2010