



Transparent protest

When nine tribal elders stage a sit-in at the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribal Council headquarters, saying they are concerned about the secretive nature of the administration and demanding to see financial records, it's going to raise some eyebrows.

And, indeed, it should. Transparency is a vital ingredient in good government. But let's take a look at the allegations and the people making them.

First, there is the notion that council Chairman Cedric Cromwell and his administration have not been forthcoming with financial details. The elders say the tribe's financial records are unclear and incomplete, but the record tells a different story. Cromwell has discussed the tribe's business at several meetings, including an emergency meeting to specifically discuss money.

Where the money is and where it was going is a long-standing concern within the tribe, and Cromwell has made sorting it out a top priority.

In fact, he launched an audit earlier this year to determine the state of affairs and to clean up what he says is a financial mess. The results of the audit are due soon, and the current administration plans to share the findings. That is transparency.

The elephant in the room, of course, is that the protesters, who billed themselves the "Golden Elders" because they are all over 62, were close associates with the previous administration of Glenn Marshall.

Marshall's credibility was challenged and serious questions were raised about the state of the finances at the time. Ultimately, those questions erupted into a scandal and Marshall ended up in federal prison on embezzlement charges.

One of the individuals asking questions this week was Nellie Ramos, the tribe's treasurer under Marshall. If anyone should have a handle on the tribe's business, at least until this year, it should be Ramos. Likewise, the other members of the Golden Elders, some of whom lost positions in the tribe when the new administration took office. Until very recently, they were in the know.

But the elders didn't want to talk about that. "We're not here to talk about previous administrations," said Patricia Oakley, the tribe's former genealogist who was fired when Cromwell took over. "We've come here to get answers and if we don't get them today, we'll be back tomorrow."

Meanwhile, casino interests certainly loom large in the background. The divisive issue has been heating up in recent months, as investors backed out and the tribe found itself without a stream of outside financial support. But that was before a new momentum began to build in D.C. and Beacon Hill that could benefit the tribe's casino interests, so questions about where the money is coming from and where it is going will only continue.

Is it possible a financial scandal has brewed so quickly under Cromwell's watch? Theoretically, it's possible. But, practically speaking, it's unlikely.

And it is possible the elders are making an earnest effort to get the facts. But it's hard not to wonder if this is simply tribal politics, fueled by past grievances.

The surest way to find out is for Cromwell to release the audit findings as soon as they are delivered. The tribe members have a right to know and so do their neighbors in the surrounding Cape communities.

In the meantime, we should reserve judgment. And let's hope no one is shunned for asking these questions