

## **State senators consider alcohol problem, solutions in Whiteclay, Neb.**

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Whiteclay, Neb., a town with enough residents to fill a small college classroom, doles out enough beer in one week to satisfy the entire University of Nebraska-Lincoln student body with three cans apiece. While the town is thriving from the alcohol sales, the neighboring Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, a legally dry land, is facing the dire consequences brought on by the booze.

Nebraska state senators met Sept. 25 for a joint interim hearing of the Judiciary Committee and General Affairs Committee to consider LR199, a resolution concerning the alcohol sale and consumption in Whiteclay. The hearing allowed for a discussion of the problems stemming from Whiteclay and the voicing of possible solutions by the public.

“This is generally just a thought-sharing process,” said Sen. Russ Karpisek, of Wilber, Neb., and chairman of the General Affairs Committee, to the full committee room in the Nebraska State Capitol. “This won’t happen overnight, folks, but we might as well start a road map for the long run.”

Whiteclay is located on a 4-square-mile portion of land on the northern border of Nebraska that was originally included in the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, home of the Oglala Sioux tribe. In 1905, the Nebraska land was legally removed from the reservation, thus also removing it from the dry law of the reservation. As a result, alcohol sales in Whiteclay have spiked as residents of the reservation make the 2-mile trek across the state line to purchase and illegally return the contraband to the reservation.

While the sheer quantity of alcohol being sold in Whiteclay may be surprising (approximately 3,000 cases of beer sold each week between four licensed establishments), the effect of such sales, and subsequent consumption, is astounding.

Frank LaMere, a Native American activist and member of the Winnebago tribe, said that Pine Ridge sees 20 percent of their children born with fetal alcohol syndrome and suffers from an 80 percent unemployment rate, as well as experiences rampant alcoholism and poverty. The alcohol that is bootlegged on the reservation, he said, is considered a commodity, and has led to widespread assault, robbery and prostitution.

Larry Bradley of the Environmental Quality Council knows this all too well. He testified that years ago, his grandmother was in Whiteclay purchasing groceries when she got in the middle of a fight that had broken out. Her face was swiped with a broken bottle, and she lost an eye. On another occasion, his aunt was doused with gasoline and lit on fire after getting mixed up in a drunken brawl.

“It is time for us to examine the facts and see what we can do,” LaMere said. “We have a chance now to knock down some doors; overcome some barriers.”

“We know there’s a problem; that’s why we’re here,” Karpisek said. “We want to hear some solutions.”

Various members of the community testified before the committee, expressing what they thought to be necessary steps to combat the crisis.

Lela Shanks, representing Nebraskans for Peace, referred to the situation in Whiteclay as “our Katrina.” In order to begin resolving the situation, then, we must recognize the issue at hand.

“First, we must claim the problem and own the problem,” Shanks said.

Father Thomas J. Merkel, a priest from Omaha, noted one of the main concerns for Nebraska are the laws that are being broken within the state, in Whiteclay. He said that alcohol is commonly being sold to minors and people who are visibly intoxicated, and the paperwork necessary for large alcohol purchases is not being completed. Pine Ridge, being predominately in South Dakota, lies outside the jurisdiction of the Nebraska senators.

“We must enforce our (state) laws,” he said. “That’s ultimately what we can control.”

Bradley recommended the senators contact South Dakota legislators to notify them of the problem and voice their concerns. He also testified that it would be beneficial to call the FBI to investigate how alcohol is crossing onto the reservation as well as appoint more health care professionals to the area in hopes of fighting alcoholism.

Dr. Donna Polk Primm of the Nebraska Urban Indian Health Coalition agreed, saying state tax money should be used to provide treatment to those wanting to change their lives. She cited the tobacco industry as a model: Nebraska has taken money from tobacco settlements in the past to be put toward health purposes.

Omaha Sen. Brad Ashford, chairman of the Judiciary Committee, opted for a more drastic approach, saying he would support the restriction of alcohol sales in Whiteclay. Sen. Steve Lathrop, also of Omaha, disagreed.

“If we shut down the retailers, it doesn’t stop the problem,” he said. Instead, he said, reservation residents will travel to towns farther away to make their alcohol purchases.

No matter what solution is ultimately pursued, the process will be no easy feat.

“In other words, we’ll probably have world peace before we beat alcoholism?” asked Sen. LeRoy Loudon of Ellsworths.

The hearing concluded with the sentiment that the situation in Whiteclay should be an urgent concern for the state, and something must be done about it.

“This is clearly an abomination. I’m embarrassed for this state,” Ashford said. “It’s amazing to me that we don’t have a response.”