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Call goes out for audit of Walpole Island band books

More than 50 residents are challenging a series of U.S. business deals in which the band spent \$670,000 with no return on investment

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WALPOLE ISLAND — A crowd of island residents gathered here Tuesday night to demand a forensic audit of band finances.

"We know that there are outside forces that simply want us to go away," said Michel Sands, the first band member to publicly question council's investment in an electric car/biofuels venture. "Tonight, we're here to tell you that we won't be going away anytime soon."

More than 50 residents came to the Walpole Island Sports Complex to hear Sands present information on a series of U.S. business deals in which the band spent \$670,000 with no return on investment. Council has not responded to Sand's request.

"I also want to make it very clear that we hold no ill will (against) our elected officials," she said. "We only want them to be held accountable for their actions."

Community anger has grown in recent months over a series of ventures either completed or in the discussion stage, including an island wind farm, a \$4.5-million wireless Internet system, even \$25,000 invested in a now mothballed "healing chair."

Walpole is one of 134 Ontario First Nations that share gaming revenue from Casino Rama, which opened on the Rama First Nation near Orillia in 1996. The investments have been funded using cash from that agreement.

More than 200 residents have signed a petition calling on Chief Joseph Gilbert and band council to hire an accounting firm to do the forensic audit. Sands said it would cost \$50,000 and take up to three months to complete.

"Our reasoning for requesting a forensic audit is to tell us exactly where and how our dollars have been spent, nothing more," she said. "A regular audit won't do this."

Sands told the crowd she was reluctant to turn to the media and outside investigators to look into the matter. But she changed her mind when council ignored her questions, she said. But calls to the FBI, RCMP and OPP have not amounted to anything, she said.

"Everyone is trying to shove it off on to the next person," she said. "No one wants to be part of First Nation's politics right now, we get it."

Walpole resident Cindy Soney told the crowd she was "furious" about the money lost on the U.S. investments.

"Think about what all that money could have done for the community," she said. "We should be pissed."

Resident Bill Sands (no relation to Michel Sands) urged the assembled community members to demand answers from their chief and council.

"We've been kept completely in the dark here," he said.

Neither Chief Gilbert nor members of the band council were present at the meeting. When contacted by The Observer, Gilbert said he did not know what was said at the meeting and would not comment.

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