The evolution of tribal sovereignty has led to the self-governance of the tribal gaming commissions (TGC), which have developed into a tribal government gaming regulatory role. It started with a strategic plan for the commission, which is a comprehensive review of each of the TGC’s departments. The review focused on strengths, weaknesses and the identification of threats and opportunities.

The TGC’s actual performance is on-target with what we currently expected. All we have to do is review the number of gaming licenses denied and the number of arrests related to “corrupting influences.” Why? To assure that gaming is conducted fairly and honestly by both the operator and players as set forth by Indian Gaming Regulatory Act (IGRA) in which Congress gave tribes direction, and we must include tribal-state compacts. Therefore we evolved to measure our daily actions and we do that by various methods.

We are continually reassessing our performance to ensure it is meaningful and actually telling the story of how the TGC is functioning and performing. The TGC has been using an internal oversight process for the last twenty years. Through this monitoring, we have been able to identify a number of functions with the advantage of modern technology. In early 2000, our surveillance departments started with digital cameras and server based storage of digital data. Along with our licensing departments, records were being digitally stored by various methods such as, copying forms then recreating them in software form for the retention of such date for present and future review. Our compliance department’s testing of gaming device chips and software for integrity and fairness is now done through computers, laptops and in the future will be tracked on iPads and iPhone technology. This will offer a speedier, more convenient way to assure the integrity of gaming activity programs on our gaming floor.

The TGC submitted the strategic plan to their tribal governments. The TGC spent many months preparing their assessment. The assessment evaluated the effectiveness of all elements of the TGC’s management, accountability, and performance system. Including leadership, strategic planning, operational focus, analysis and information, employee performance, and process improvement. The results provided the TGC and tribal government with additional information on how to further improve our processes as we move forward. The plan has also identified opportunities for consolidating and/or transferring some activities and responsibilities from departments within the TGC to departments outside of the TGC, such as operation or security. Another primary goal of the plan is identifying and eliminating the duplication of functions. Additional goals must include identifying and engaging in cooperative efforts with other departments such as training, utilizing specialized skills, and coordinating office space.

The objectives and strategies of our plan are an extension of the aforementioned collective departmental statistics. With these statistics, we developed flow charts to aid review of our paths for compliance of gaming activity, our surveillance to monitor the gaming floor and critical areas of the property. For the licensing process to avoid any missed steps for a complete review of a gaming applicant. Most important is a map for our auditors to audit our actions, and to meet our responsibly set forth by our tribal governments. We have done audits for the last twenty plus years on our oversight of the operational role in our gaming property, how we have effectively utilized data and how we measure improvements to determine our next steps in evolving technology of gaming activity, i.e. the role it will play in i-gaming or e-gaming.

Consideration is given to factors such as: current and projected economic conditions, risk assessments, communications, staffing adjustments, and training and cross training for maximum efficiency. Current economic conditions have been historically and are presently extremely challenging - it impacts all of the TGC’s departments! Although risks are at their highest during negative economic conditions like the one we are currently experiencing, the TGCs remain committed to the protection of tribal sovereignty and tribal assets, excellence, integrity and professionalism.

The origin of tribes are tribes themselves and the evolution of this gaming industry was set forth in P.L. 93-638 the Indian Self-Determination & Education Assistance Act (January 4, 1975), followed by the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act, P.L. 100-497, codified at 25 U.S.C. §§ 2701 et. Seq. (Oct. 17, 1988). Our cultures, along with these legal documents have helped shape the Indian gaming industry. Therefore, to be able to analyze gaming data, to quantify it, to measure it in a way that will provide direction by tribal leadership in utilizing its self-determination. ♦

Tracy Burris is a Tribal Gaming Commissioner for the Viejas Band of Kumeyaay Indians and an enrolled member of the Chickasaw Nation in Oklahoma. He can be reached by calling (405) 642-7144 or email tburris@viejas.com.