

PHIL SAVAGE: DISTRICT 2 (SAWYER)

A Letter to the Community

Friends, relatives, elders, parents, and young people of District 2, over the past 4 years I have spent a great deal of time listening to our community, at work, at family gatherings, in everyday conversations, and in the quiet moments where people speak most honestly. Again and again, I hear the same message: people are proud of what our Nation has built, but they are thinking deeply about what comes next. We are not in crisis. But we are at a turning point. The next four years will bring decisions that shape our land, our jobs, our families, and the opportunities available to the next generation. This moment calls for thoughtful leadership that can build on what is working while planning carefully for the future ahead.

Taking Care of Our Own

One of the most difficult issues I have heard about from community members is the experience of enrolled workers who become seriously ill and lose their jobs once their leave runs out. This is not an abstract policy issue, it is a real experience affecting real families. Our Nation has always been built on the belief that we take care of our own. That belief should be reflected not only in our words, but in our policies. We should review and strengthen policies affecting enrolled workers facing serious illness. Compassionate leave options like the hour-donation program once provided a safety net for families during difficult times, and conversations about restoring or strengthening similar protections deserve thoughtful attention. When families feel secure during hardship, the entire community becomes stronger.

Using Our Land and Assets Wisely

Land and economic resources are central to long-term sovereignty and stability. Our responsibility now is to ensure the assets we already own are used strategically and thoughtfully. We have tribal-owned properties that are not currently generating opportunity or revenue for our people. One example is the former Applebee's location in Cloquet, a high-traffic commercial site that has remained unused. Exploring responsible development of that property, including the possibility of a tribally operated dispensary, is not about rushing or hype. It is about using what we already own to bring outside dollars into our Nation and create opportunity for our community. Idle assets quietly cost money every year. Strategic development creates long-term stability.

The Next Stage of Cannabis: From Retail to Community Opportunity

The opening of our new dispensary was an important milestone. It represents sovereignty in action, the ability to regulate, operate, and benefit from an industry on our own terms. That progress deserves recognition. But opening a dispensary is not the finish line. It is the starting point. The real question now is: how does this industry benefit our people in the long run? Cannabis is already generating revenue. The next step is ensuring it creates opportunity, jobs, and long-term stability for enrolled members and families. If approached carefully and responsibly, cannabis can become one of the strongest community-based economic engines our Nation has ever developed.

Moving Beyond Retail

Retail sales are only one part of the cannabis economy. Across the country, the most successful programs build full supply chains and workforce pathways that support long-term stability.

Future planning should include:

- workforce development and training
- licensing pathways for tribal growers
- quality control and testing standards
- reinvestment into community priorities
- clear, transparent governance and oversight

The goal is not rapid expansion. The goal is responsible, community-focused growth.

Community-Based Growing Opportunities

Many community members have asked how this industry can create opportunity at the household level.

Thoughtful planning around future tribal grow licensing could:

- create new agricultural and small business opportunities
- support job creation and training
- provide a reliable supply chain for tribal retail operations
- keep more cannabis revenue circulating locally

This would complement existing operations while expanding opportunity in a structured and regulated way.

Cannabis should not be an industry that benefits only buildings. It should benefit people.

Workforce Development and Training

The cannabis industry includes careers in:

- cultivation and horticulture
- processing and manufacturing
- laboratory testing and compliance
- security and logistics
- marketing and business operations

Creating training pathways ensures community members are prepared to participate in this evolving industry.

Using Tribal Assets Strategically

Tribal assets can play a role in strengthening the cannabis economy responsibly. High-traffic commercial properties offer opportunities to bring outside dollars into the Nation and support long-term job creation. Smart development requires careful evaluation, planning, and community conversation.

Planning for Crop Stability and Long-Term Supply

As this industry grows, it is important to talk openly about risk management and long-term stability. Agriculture always carries risk including mold, pests, plant disease, equipment failure, and environmental disruptions. Community members are asking thoughtful questions about long-term crop security and redundancy planning.

Important questions include:

- How do we ensure crop stability when production is concentrated in a single facility?
- What backup plans exist in the event of mold, pests, or plant disease?
- What redundancy plans exist if a facility must temporarily shut down?

- How can multiple grow sites or licensed community growers reduce supply risk?
- What environmental monitoring and quality assurance systems are in place?
- Has there already been crop failure or mold within or on the new facility?

These questions are not about criticism. They are about responsible planning.

Diversifying production over time can:

- reduce risk to jobs and revenue
- strengthen supply reliability
- create workforce opportunities
- protect long-term sustainability

Thinking ahead about crop security and facility redundancy helps ensure this industry remains stable and resilient for years to come.

Reinvestment into Community Priorities

Cannabis revenue should support long-term community priorities such as:

- healing and recovery programs
- youth and family programming
- language and cultural initiatives
- workforce development
- community wellness

Economic development is strongest when it strengthens the whole community.

Supporting the Casino While Planning for the Future

Our casino remains one of the strongest economic engines our Nation has. Supporting its long-term success is essential. Families have made it clear we are missing safe, year-round recreation. The loss of the arcade and pool left a gap for youth and families that is still felt today.

A phased, partnership-based Family Entertainment Center could:

- bring more visitors to the property
- increase hotel stays and repeat visits
- create new jobs
- give families safe, local recreation
- strengthen long-term economic stability

Supporting the casino and creating family recreation are not competing goals, they strengthen each other.

Healing, Wellness, and Protecting Our Workforce

Across District 2, families have been clear that wellness, recovery, and worker stability are not side issues, they are central to the health of our entire community. Substance use, mental health challenges, burnout, and family stress affect workplaces, schools, and homes.

When we talk about economic development and long-term stability, we must also talk honestly about the conditions that allow families and workers to thrive. One of the most difficult concerns I continue to hear is about enrolled workers who become seriously ill and lose their jobs when their leave runs out. When people who have given years of service to the Nation face job loss during serious illness, the impact ripples through entire families. Reviewing policies that affect workers during extended illness and ensuring compassionate options exist is an important conversation for our community.

Workers also deserve environments where they feel safe, respected, and able to do their jobs without fear of retaliation or instability. Many community members have shared concerns about workplace security and the need for stronger protections that support employees and families, including women who deserve to feel safe and supported in their workplaces.

Wellness must be approached as a full system:

- Expanding culturally grounded mental health and recovery services
- Strengthening prevention and early support for youth
- Supporting families impacted by addiction and trauma
- Ensuring workplaces are stable, respectful, and family-supportive
- Recognizing that worker stability and community wellness are deeply connected

A strong Nation invests not only in buildings and businesses, but in the well-being of the people who sustain them every day.

Anishinaabe Language Revitalization and Commitment

The preservation and revitalization of the Anishinaabe language is a cornerstone of our community's cultural integrity and future. As members of the Sawyer District, we have a responsibility to ensure that the next generation continues to speak, understand, and honor our traditional language. This language is not just a means of communication, but a vital connection to our identity, history, and the wisdom of our ancestors.

Commitment to Language Education and Empowerment

We are committed to creating accessible pathways for Anishinaabe language education across all ages, starting with our youngest learners in schools and extending to adult programs. Whether through immersive language camps, community classes, or digital resources, we will prioritize opportunities for language acquisition and fluency. By fostering a learning environment that encourages the use of Anishinaabe in daily life, we will empower individuals to take pride in their linguistic heritage.

Partnerships for Sustainability

We recognize that revitalizing our language requires collaboration. We will work with language experts, tribal colleges, cultural organizations, and other communities to develop and share resources. Our vision includes partnering with local educators and institutions to integrate Anishinaabe into classrooms, community events, and cultural programs. Together, we will ensure that language is not only learned but lived.

Documentation and Preservation

In addition to active teaching, we will dedicate efforts toward documenting and preserving Anishinaabe language through digital archives, books, recordings, and multimedia projects. This will safeguard our language for future generations and support ongoing efforts to teach and speak it with pride.

Commitment to Cultural Revitalization

The revitalization of the Anishinaabe language is intertwined with the broader cultural resurgence of our people. As we work to preserve our language, we also renew our commitment to cultural practices, ceremonies, and traditions that carry deep meaning and history. By strengthening our language, we strengthen our community, reinforcing a sense of belonging and resilience.

Looking Forward

As we look to the future, we are focused on ensuring that Anishinaabe remains a living language that resonates within our families, schools, and communities. Together, we will continue to create a space where our language flourishes, and where every voice contributes to its vitality.

Our language connects generations and strengthens identity. Supporting intergenerational language programs and youth opportunities helps ensure the next generation can build their lives here at home. Strong communities invest in their young people.

Looking Ahead

In past election cycles, the people of the Brookston District placed their trust in me and advanced me to the general election. That experience shaped my approach to leadership and reinforced the importance of listening carefully and planning responsibly. I also had the honor of being elected to Chairman of the ISD 94 JOM Committee, and as Secretary Treasurer of FDLTCC Anishinaabe Student Congress, where we advocated for educational opportunities and parents of indigenous youth and children.

The next four years will require preparation, coordination, and steady leadership. Our community deserves thoughtful planning, clear communication, and a focus on long-term stability.

Miigwech for your time and your care for our community.

Phil Savage

District 2 , Sawyer