So many attended, there almost wasn’t room to dance at the Chinook Indian Nation’s Annual Winter Gathering this year.

The tribe’s winter celebration was Jan. 18 at the Cathlapotle Plankhouse in Ridgefield. The event was a chance for the tribe to live its culture by dancing to the beat of drums, singing ancient songs and passing down traditional knowledge. Stories recounted the tribe’s history, from its ancient
beginnings all the way up to the past decade.

The Winter Gathering came barely more than a week after U.S. District Court Judge Ronald B. Leighton ordered the U.S. Department of the Interior to reexamine its justification for a ban preventing the tribe from reapplying for federal recognition.

'We are at a really good moment that feels like there are a lot of exciting things just ahead of us.'

_Tribal Chairman Tony Johnson_

Federally recognized tribes are American Indian or Alaskan Native tribal entities that have sovereignty on their own lands within the U.S. Recognized tribes can do direct business with the federal government and are entitled to certain benefits, services and protections. Chinook Indian Nation was granted official recognition in 2001 at the end of the Bill Clinton presidency, but it was rescinded 18 months later by the George W. Bush administration.

While the tribe’s fight for recognition ebbs and flows, passing down Chinook traditions enforces that the next generation will be able to keep the fight alive, said Tony Johnson, Chinook Indian Nation chairman.
“We are at a really good moment that feels like there are a lot of exciting things just ahead of us,” Johnson said in an interview.

Paths to recognition

Since the Chinook Nation’s recognition was reversed in 2002, the tribe has been trying to re-petition for official status. Reapplying for recognition is banned by a Department of Interior regulation. In 2014, a proposed amendment to the recognition rules would have created an exception for tribes to reapply under certain circumstances. However, a final rule issued by the Department in 2015 did not include this exception.

While the Chinook are trying to reopen the administrative process through the courts, the tribe also believes it could have success arguing for a federal court to recognize the tribe, Johnson said. And the tribe continues to encourage supporters to write to Senators Patty Murray and Maria Cantwell as well as U.S. Rep. Jaime Herrera Beutler asking them to introduce legislation that would recognize the tribe.

Neither of the senators’ offices responded to questions about the possibility of future legislation, but Herrera Beutler said she is willing to work with the tribe.

“I know the Chinook Nation is extremely pleased after earning the right to reapply for recognition — they should be,” Herrera Beutler said in a statement Tuesday, Jan. 28. “Through my many meetings and conversations with them over the years, it appears that what they want from a legislative solution has evolved since Rep. [Brian] Baird
introduced the Chinook Nation Restoration Act in 2009. Any successful legislative path forward will require bicameral support, so I remain open to working with the tribe and our U.S. senators on further legislative efforts.”

Preserving the past, securing the future

While the tribe is focused on regaining recognition, the court case wasn't its sole accomplishment in 2019.

In April, the tribe bought two important parcels of land on Tansy Creek in Clatsop County, which are part of the tribe’s 1851 Treaty Grounds. The tribe signed a treaty with the U.S. Government on the land in 1851, but it was never ratified, contributing to why there are questions about the tribe's status today.

Rachel Lynne Cushman, treasurer for the Chinook Indian Nation, said owning the land is a priority for the tribe because it preserves tribal history. By the time of the treaty signing, disease had decimated the Chinook peoples and the nation’s
population had plummeted.

Every single member of the Chinook community was at the treaty signing, something which would have never been possible just a century before when the tribe's population was estimated to be more than 10,000, Cushman said. The land is a physical reminder of that moment in history; and reminders of the Chinook are vital to tribal members, Cushman said.

“We live in a society that often we are erased from,” Cushman said.

But she's been encouraged by the response the tribe has gotten since the court case. Calls have rolled in to the office with people asking how they can help the tribe.

The Oregon Cultural Trust granted the tribe about $6,000 for an interpretive kiosk at Tansy Point. And in December the tribe approved a plan to build a cultural-use space and a small maintenance building. The goal is to restore the land, revitalizing the creek bed and eliminating invasive species. It
will be used for cultural and environmental education programs for tribal members and surrounding communities.

The Tansy Point signage is part of a larger campaign to erect markers about the Chinook people throughout Pacific, Wahkiakum and Clatsop counties, Johnson said. On Jan. 6, Cathlamet announced it will use $7,500 from the Lewis and Clark Trail Stewardship Endowment to create two Chinook heritage signs at the Elochoman Marina and Queen Sally’s Park, as well as directional signs on State Road 4 and in the town.

All the land around the mouth of Columbia River has a story and a history, Johnson said. Tribal members associate specific sites with those stories, he said. When the broader community learns this same history, Johnson said he believes it will be the difference in creating a sustainable future.

“The Chinook people should be allowed to flourish here for the next 10,000 years,” Johnson said.

**Whatever that future may be**

The tribe’s sustainable food program as well as its teachings about maritime navigation and canoe construction provide the tribe reassurance it is prepared for what the future could hold. He comes from a culture that lived a stable existence for more than 10,000 years, Johnson said.

“And you see just how dramatically everything can change in just a few generations,” Johnson said. “I think we would be foolish to think everything stays the way it does now.”
Part of the tribe’s plan in 2020 will be to record its present. The tribe will be launching a campaign to ensure every single member of the Chinook Indian Nation is recorded in the 2020 U.S. Census. This will help to leave a clear record for the tribe’s descendants.

The tribe is still waiting to see how the federal government will react to the decision from Judge Leighton, which is subject to appeal.

“There are so many things that the community could do or directions that we are pulled in,” Johnson said.

“We have to remind ourselves consistently to stay on the path that leads toward clarifying our status above everything else.”

Ashley Nerbovig