

2025 State of the Tribe
by
Dr. Alicia “Lisa” Gassman

I will fondly remember my years working for Sitka Tribe of Alaska (STA) and forever be grateful I was able to work with Council members such as those that were on when I first started working at the Tribe in 1999. These include but are not limited to Woody Widmark, Ted Borbridge, Herb Didrickson, Gil Truitt, Irene Jimmy, George Ridley, Harvey Kitka, Jim Skannes, Archie Nielsen, John Nielsen and too many others to be able to mention them all. ADD TLINGIT Language statement

I have heard don't speak about your work, let your work speak for you. I took that message to heart, I am a woman of few words. At this time, however, I will say a few words to reflect on my time at STA (which spans between Aug 1999- Sept 2011 and July 2016-current). I worked with many great directors, managers and staff throughout the years, and I understand STA was so successful while I was there not just because I was in the position I was in, but also because of the people who worked with me. I want to thank each and every staff person and Council person, whose heart was and is with the Tribe, that worked with me.

I am very proud of my tenure with the Tribe. I am the longest standing GM/CEO at 21 years of service. While I remember the years working for STA fondly, that shouldn't be taken to mean they were all easy. During my two tenures at STA, the Tribe moved from a budget that consisted of our Tribal Compact funding (in 2000 that was 1.2M budgeted) along with some grants, to a budget in 2026 of 25M. If you remove the last of the ARPA funds to be spent in 2026, the budget for 2026 would be roughly 21M. So, a move from 1.2M to 21M.

Many in the community have seen the growth of the Tribe and our programs. We have hard-working staff that find grant funding to support program development and staff dedicated to accomplishing our strategic plan approved by the Tribal Council.

In addition to growth in annual budgets throughout my time at STA, we also have seen enormous growth in our assets and equity. As Yeidikook'aa mentioned in her quote to the media, I saw the Tribe through a financial crisis that occurred early in 2000, just prior to me becoming the General Manager. In 2000, we had to sell some of our properties to keep the Tribes doors open, Woody Widmark who recently returned to the Council is the only current council member who was there and experienced the Tribe in that situation.

As far as property acquisition, during my tenures we have acquired:

- The property below 456 Katlian, we owned the building but not the land. After that purchase, we had full ownership. We have in progress plans to utilize this building for an STA Education Center – feasibility study completed as well as basic A&E concept/design.

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- 458 Katlian, which we have been making great progress this last year on using that property to construct a Transit Facility on in 2026-2027 timeframe.
- Both properties that make up the road up to 456.
- 4608 HPR, currently being utilized for a maintenance facility for our buses and has an apartment, and commercial kitchen/cottage industry development center
- We finished paying off 429 Katlian (previously known as the Healing House – currently used by the Resource Protection department), and acquired the parking lot across from 429, we secured 2M for necessary renovation/rebuilding of that property and completed a feasibility study and basic A&E (concept design). The next step was acquiring the additional funding needed to move forward on renovating this facility in to a state of the art lab operated by our Resource Protection Department.
- We will soon pay off a loan on 200 Katlian – the Sheet’ka Kwaan Naa Kahidi Community House.
- In 2019, we acquired our Tribal Headquarters (204 Siginaka Way). It was with the help of Mary Miller, who was a Tribal director at the time, that I was able to make this happen. It was with the help of Anne Davis that we renovated it and made it what it is today.
- We have entered into an agreement with the federal government that pays the expenses for our building since we are operating services out of there related to our compact. Having these types of agreements only opened up to Tribes on the BIA side relatively recently and are important to have in place.
- Our full financial picture 2016 to 2024 – In 2016, we had total assets of 9M, liabilities of 4M and equity/retained earnings of roughly 6M. In 2024, we had assets of 36M, liabilities of 23M and equity/retained earnings of roughly 12M. That is double the amount of equity from 2016 to 2024. I am using 2024 vs this year because we haven’t completed our 2025 Audit yet since we are still in 2025. Thank you to Nadia Riley, for starting to work for the tribe in 2021 and the hard work you have done and continue to do to show an accurate picture of the finances at STA.

Acquiring 204 Siginaka allowed us to achieve a goal of the council in the 2004-2014 Strategic Plan to “be under one roof.” When we accomplished this in 2019, we were **too big** to all fit but it helped us get most of our departments together.

We were one of the first Tribes to have a true self governance agreement with National Park Service to provide interpretation services at the park for visitors, with that we were able to tell

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our OWN story of the battle that occurred there between the Tlingits and Russians. We were the second Tribe in Alaska to enter into a self governance agreement with the Department of Transportation in January 2025, this was thanks to the hard work of Gerry Hope.

We grew from a staff that could fit in to two smaller buildings (roughly 30 employees) to the amount we will have in early 2026 (roughly 81 FTE). This number doesn't include our seasonal positions we hire during the summer, including those raises that number to well over 100.

There are organizations I am sure to forget or fail to mention because the Tribe is an economic driver and lends support to the community. We recently reported to the City, earlier this month, at our government to government meeting our annual contributions to the community. I am proud to report here that STA provided in the past passthrough money to the City for the Sitka Police Department and we have a current grant that we will pass through funding to help with infrastructure. We currently annually contribute to SAFV, and have done sizeable contributions to the Sitka Homeless Coalition, Betty Eliason and other daycare centers, and the Sitka School District. We also annually provide funding to Catholic Community Services (which utilizes that funding to operate the Swan Lake Senior Center and Senior Transportation Program). We continue to authorize our compact funding from IHS to go to SEARHC for them to provide healthcare for our citizens and similarly authorize our Housing and Urban Development funding to go to Baranof Island Housing Authority to provide Housing services in Sitka. All of these long-standing relationships are critical and we have been happy to help support these organizations.

Last, I want to highlight just a few more areas. STA operates a fully functional Transit system that helps the community as a whole. Us doing that began under former STE Director Camille Ferguson and she started with just a few buses. We operate Tribal Tours that started with just 1 bus the Council authorized Camille to purchase in the mid to late 1990's. We now have a fleet of buses to do Tours and "The Ride." Finally, we have an annual meeting to report out to Tribal citizens about our activities and an annual picnic at which we invite the whole community.

All these things happened with me working with the tribal staff, please know I am not trying to claim all credit, I know it is because I had built great teams that great things happened. Please look at the annual reports that list all of the tribal staff as of November 30. They are a strong crew that will continue to do great things for STA.

At this point, I feel ready to start a new chapter in my life. I plan to take a little time off focus on my health and spending time with family for a little bit – take this opportunity to catch my breath! Then I will plan to get another job that allows me to be of service to our citizens and/or

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the community – that commitment to service is something that never goes away in people, myself included.

Gunalcheesh at tlein to the Council of 2000 that put their trust in me, at the time they did that I was only 28 years old, a relatively new law school graduate, and STA was my first “real job” after getting my education (a Bachelors Degree at Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colorado and Juris Doctorate degree from the University of Washington, Seattle). I was a Tribal citizen who wanted to work for my Tribe and they gave me that opportunity.

It was with a mix of emotions that I determined it was time to move on. I have built a solid foundation, so I know that the next person to be in my position can be successful. I deeply appreciate the current Council recognizing the impact that I have had on Sitka Tribe of Alaska, allowing me to stand before you today and give the “State of the Tribe” from my perspective as of 2025, and I wish Sitka Tribe of Alaska only the best moving forward. Last and certainly not least, I would like to thank my family - my parents/in-laws, siblings, husband Ted Gassman, daughter Emma Gassman, nieces, nephews, great nieces, great nephews, aunties, uncles and cousins, who have supported me my entire life and never hesitate to be there when I need them. Gunalcheesh ho ho!