

Executive summary | June 2025

Wipfli Tribal Government CFO Exchange

Host: Lisa Desotelle | Wipfli

SMEs: Doug Kolker | Wipfli

Kevin Krueger | Wipfli

Jonathan Stowers | Green Summit Engineering

Facilitator: Austin Evans | Profitable Ideas Exchange



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Introduction

Eighteen chief financial officers (CFOs) and leaders of finance from tribal governments met virtually to discuss pressing issues, share best practices and gain insights from subject matter experts on June 18, 2025.

The exchange, hosted by Lisa Desotelle, partner at Wipfli, and facilitated by Austin Evans of Profitable Ideas Exchange, focused on critical topics shaped by pre-interviews with participants. Doug Kolker, partner and leader of Wipfli's energy incentives team, Kevin Krueger, director in the construction and real estate practice at Wipfli, and Jonathan Stowers, president at Green Summit Engineering, provided subject matter expertise.

The key discussions revolved around navigating the complex federal funding landscape, understanding urgent energy tax credit opportunities, planning for large-scale projects amidst economic uncertainties and emphasizing the vital role of tribal voices in legislative processes.

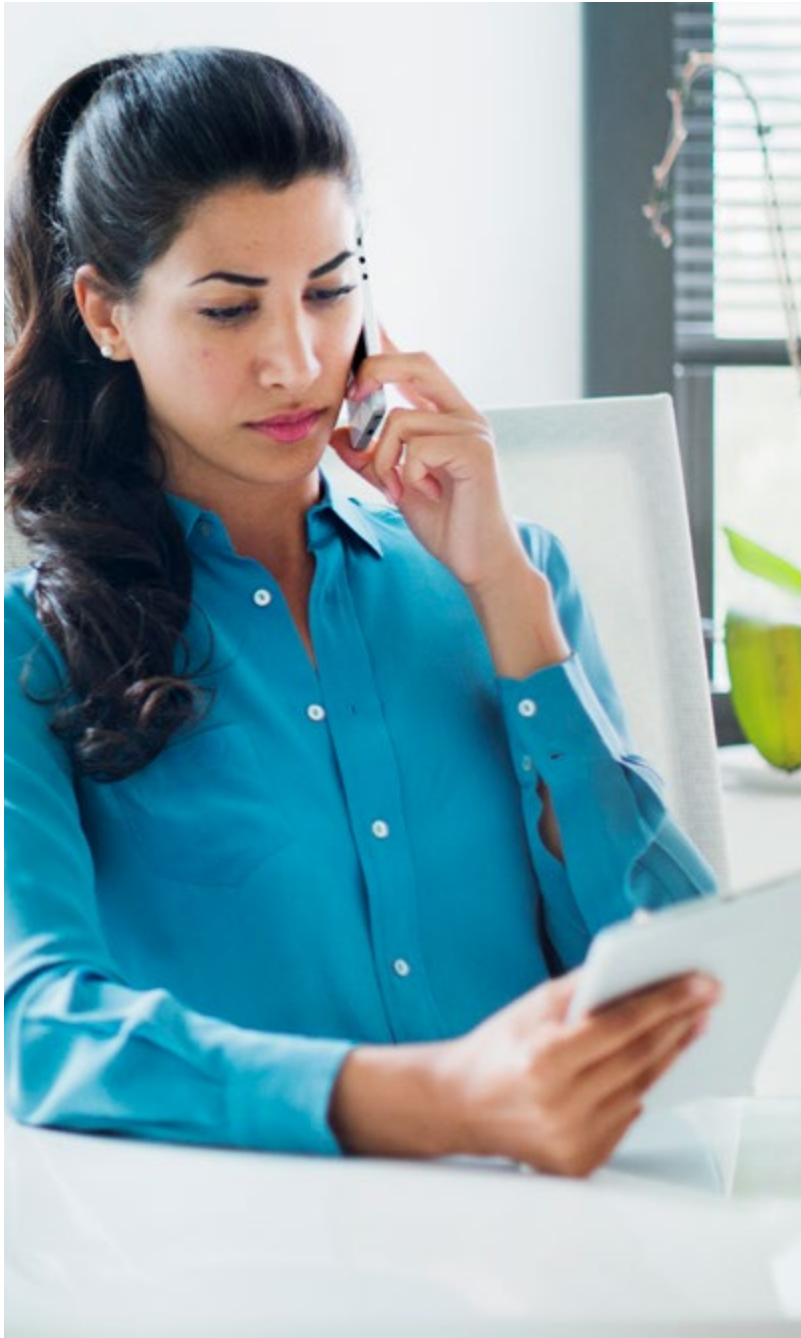
Navigating federal funding uncertainty and the One Big Beautiful Bill

The conversation opened with an update from Lisa Desotelle on the status of Trump's One Big Beautiful Bill Act.

This bill successfully passed the House of Representatives on May 22, 2025, and subsequently moved to the Senate for consideration. On June 11, the House amended the bill through a procedural rule, which notably removed certain crackdowns, such as dates for the pandemic-era Employee Retention Tax Credit Act, as well as significant funding allocations for Pentagon military intelligence programs and missile development.

A policy that would have ended the SNAP assistance program for some individuals was also removed, alongside a provision that would have allowed mining around the Boundary Waters in Northern Minnesota. The bill was with the Senate for approval at the time of our meeting and has subsequently been passed and was signed by Trump on July 4, 2025.





Beyond the One Big Beautiful Bill, Trump's 2026 budget proposal, released in May 2025, raised significant concerns due to proposed cuts. Lisa Desotelle noted potential reductions for Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), Indian Health Services (IHS) and renewable energy funding, with some programs like the Community Development Financial Institutions Fund targeted for complete elimination. She expressed hope that lobbyists would work to help ensure positive outcomes for tribal communities.

Members voiced serious apprehension regarding these potential cuts. An executive articulated the severe impact, stating:

"I do recommend everyone try to get their state senators and members of the House, anyone who has access to get in Trump's ear, because 30%-40%-50% [cuts] are detrimental. Not all tribes are in that scenario; for some tribes it would be super devastating to have a 30% or 40% reduction in their funding."

The executive clarified that Trump's budget proposal for the next year, which includes these significant cuts (30%-60% for BIA and IHS projects), is separate from the One Big Beautiful Bill. While the executive's tribe might weather a 30%-40% reduction, the executive stressed that for many, it would be "super devastating."

In contrast, a member shared a positive development, noting the permanent authorization of the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act self-governance programs, which were previously pilot programs. This member also observed that some renewable energy provisions seem to have been essentially carried over from Biden's infrastructure bill, just credited differently.

“We’ve reached out to all of our departments across tribal government and asked them to evaluate their own department, but also evaluate tribal government services in general, to see if there are efficiencies and what they would consider duplicative services.”

Tribal leaders are actively navigating this uncertainty. Some tribes have implemented hiring freezes and expenditure controls. Many are conducting comprehensive reviews of grants and funding sources, cross-referencing audit data with federal funding lists to identify potential vulnerabilities.

Staying informed through legitimate news sources and industry updates — such as newsletters from the National Congress of American Indians and the Native American Finance Officers Association — and attending webinars is considered crucial for decision-making. One participant noted the difficulty of getting consistent views, even from CPA firms, highlighting the fluid nature of current interpretations.

Urgency on energy tax credits and strategic planning

Doug Kolker, a partner at Wipfli leading their energy incentives team, highlighted urgent opportunities for specific energy projects, particularly advising that credits for solar, wind and EV charging stations are at high risk of expiring or changing significantly under new legislation.

He emphasized that if tribes are considering solar projects, it is strongly recommended to get them started from an expenditure standpoint within the next three to four months. While completion isn't necessarily required in 2025, starting construction is critical.

Solar can be “quite lucrative,” potentially returning 30%-50% or even 60% as a direct payment if certain hurdles are met, though it requires pre-registration with the IRS and specific tax filings. Credits for EV vehicles and charging stations are also expected to expire at the end of the year, with charging station credits ranging from 6% to 30% depending on prevailing wage requirements.

In contrast, geothermal and nuclear energy systems appear less affected, with a longer runway for consideration, potentially through 2030, and battery storage also seems largely unaffected. Geothermal, in particular, is barely mentioned in the bill as being affected and is being seen in new schools and other buildings.

“Solar would be the one if you’re really looking at solar right now. I would definitely get that started from an expenditure standpoint ... I would definitely try to get that moved along as fast as you can here over the next three to four months.”
– Doug Kolker

Regarding “energy glass” for a cannabis grow facility, Doug Kolker confirmed that this would fall under “solar” and its credit eligibility might be affected by the final bill’s outcome, advising caution.

Jonathan Stowers, president of Green Summit Engineering, introduced the 179D program for energy-efficient buildings that offers a deduction that can be allocated to architects or engineering firms. He suggested that tribal governments could negotiate a rebate from these firms.

Doug Kolker added that there are tax strategy considerations for both the designer and the tribe that his team can assist with. The new wording in the bill indicates that tribes may need to start construction by June 30, 2026, for certain building projects to qualify for up to \$5.81 per square foot.

Large projects: Planning for tariffs and federal changes

Many tribes have large projects currently underway and are closely monitoring costs despite federal funding concerns.

A member reported their tribe is “full steam ahead” on a new gaming facility but is concerned about the impact of tariffs and political movements on supply costs. Another participant noted her tribe is proceeding with long-planned projects, implementing contingencies for tariffs and product costs while also slowing down on annual capital budgets and prioritizing spending grant funding quickly to avoid potential loss.





Another member shared that they are “full steam ahead” on two major projects (totaling about half a billion dollars) to expand convention space and a satellite casino. They have successfully managed costs through guaranteed maximum price (GMP) contracts with cost-sharing provisions with their contractors.

“We did GMP contracts with all of our contractors with the cost share, if it’s reduced, and that’s proved to be very, very helpful in managing the cost.”

An executive confirmed they are moving forward with several projects, including a newly opened water park and hotel renovations. They are building in contingencies and feel it is the right time to proceed.

One executive’s tribe is “full to go” on construction projects, including a hotel tower, and is building in contingencies. Another participant stated her tribe is proceeding with grant-funded projects to spend funds before they might be pulled back and is incorporating clauses in contracts that allow projects to stop if funding is lost.

Conversely, another member reported that most of his tribe's major projects concluded in the first quarter of 2025, and leadership is currently pausing new projects and closely watching budgets.

“On the project side of things ... we’ve had these projects planned for years ... we are putting contingencies in place for the tariffs and product costs and things like that.”

Wipfli's Kevin Krueger advised on the importance of carefully tracking contingencies and allowances, as their proper approval and documentation can prevent issues during project closeouts. He also mentioned the value of hiring third-party “owner's representatives” to provide “boots on the ground” daily monitoring of projects. These

representatives can help ensure work quality and manage change orders, which aids timeliness and communication.

One participant shared that their large projects are completed, and they are implementing a three-year budget plan to gradually make reductions and minimize impact on tribal citizens.

A significant discussion point was raised on whether tariffs should be considered a federal tax from which tribes should be exempt, especially for owner-direct purchases. This participant cited an instance where a visible \$9,000 contingency for a potential tariff on medical equipment made the tariff discernible.

This argument is similar to sales tax exemptions for direct purchases by tribal governments, making it an interesting legal question. The members strongly supported the executive's idea, calling it a “great legal argument” and suggesting collaboration among tribal legal minds, specifically mentioning the United South and Eastern Tribes' sovereignty protection fund.

Letting tribal voices be heard

The imperative for tribal voices to be heard at the federal level was a pervasive theme, particularly in light of the proposed budget cuts and legislative changes.

One executive highlighted their tribe's legislative director lobbying state and federal representatives to explain the potential impact to the Trump administration. Jonathan Stowers emphasized that a larger group advocating for these programs would be more effective. Lisa Desotelle echoed this sentiment by stating, "The more that we can have our voice be heard and lobbying and working together, the better off we're going to be."

The ongoing challenge of obtaining consistent views from CPA firms regarding future economic outlooks further underscores the critical need for unified tribal advocacy and clear messaging at the federal level.



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