



Commonwealth of Massachusetts
**EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF HOUSING &
LIVABLE COMMUNITIES
COMMISSION ON INDIAN AFFAIRS**

Maura T. Healey, Governor ♦ Kimberley Driscoll, Lieutenant Governor
Edward M. Augustus, Jr., Secretary ♦ John Peters, Jr., Executive Director

**MINUTES OF THE VIRTUAL MEETING OF THE
COMMISSION ON INDIAN AFFAIRS**

Friday, February 2, 2024 3:00 PM

Zoom was facilitated by Commissioner Gonzales

Commissioners Present: Rhonda Anderson, Tashanna Carter, Aaron Gonzales, Gail Hill, Troy Phillips, Chairman; and Mike Wagner.

Staff: John “Jim” Peters, Executive Director; and Burne Stanley, part-time Administrative Assistant.

Community Members & Other Attendees (names from list of zoom participants): Courtney Akbar, Ella Blackowl, NAICOB; Deborah Copp, Cheryl Cromwell, DPH; Colleen DeVicentis, Massachusetts Indian Council; Tracy Eastman, Melissa Ferretti, Herring Pond Wampanoag Tribe; Thomas Green, Raquel Halsey, Jonathan Jackson, Bishop Jordan, Nehemiah Jordan, Louis Mallison, DCR; Amira Madison, Meredith McGoings, Alexis Moreis, Mitchell Moreis, Jenny Oliver, Jon Patton, DCR; Wendy Pearl, DCR; Love Richardson, Grace Robinson, Shana Simmons, Akuahah Wheaton, Penny Williams, and Ray Williams.

Names from the list of zoom participants whose last names were not included: iPad, Margaret’s iPhone, Roaming, and Tonia.

Comm. Phillips called the meeting to order at 3:05 PM and asked Comm. Cater to give a prayer. He then did a roll call of Commissioners and staff all of whom were present except Comm. Wagner who joined 10 minutes later.

1. Cheryl Cromwell. Mashpee Wampanoag Tribal Member, Cheryl Cromwell introduced herself. She is an employee of the Massachusetts Department of Public Health in Boston (DPH) and works in the Community Engagement Unit of the Office of Health Equity. Through a slide presentation, she gave an overview of her role and the

work she's doing. She explained that the Community Engagement Unit was created as a result of DPH's lack of outreach to the Indigenous population during the Covid-19 pandemic. The priority at DPH is to change the way they do things. As the Tribal and Indigenous Health Equity Strategist, she is in a position to lift up the work that tribes and Native organizations are doing. She outlined the following:

- * Funding is available through DPH and has been distributed to Native American LifeLines, the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head/Aquinnah, and the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe.

- * Through the Vaccine Equity Initiative Program, funding, around Covid programs, is available until July 2025.

- * Funds are also available around Social Determinants that includes such things as lack of employment/underpaid jobs; lack of health insurance; no housing stability; lack of nutritional food, clothing; lack of access to quality healthcare; etc.

- *She's working on a Strategic Mapping Project that includes:

 - Creating a list of Tribal, Indigenous and Tribal People Serving Organizations

 - Data collection to be distributed back to tribal communities

 - Contracting and Policies

 - Developing new system for direct funding to tribes

 - Resources

 - Gaps/disparities

 - Feedback on priorities, needs, and concerns.

- * They held their 1st Annual Tribal and Indigenous Health Summit in September 2023 at U Mass/Boston. It was a successfully executed event. Another one is planned for September 2024. Input is needed from the communities and people were encouraged to be on the planning committee.

- * DPH has a work group for Statewide Interagency Tribal Partners. They meet the second Monday of the month at 1PM. The purpose is to bring together state agencies, bureaus, offices, and programs working with Tribes, Tribal and Indigenous people Serving Organizations, to develop a cohesive and collaborative approach for partnering and supporting Massachusetts communities."

There was a question about the structural governance of DPH. And also where MassHealth fits within the structure. Ms. Cromwell explained that the Massachusetts Department of Public Health is under the Executive Office of Health and Human

Services. And that MassHealth is also under the Executive Office of Health and Human Services.

There was some concern that MassHealth doesn't seem to be for all Native Americans in Massachusetts. Ms. Cromwell said she will be meeting with the heads of MassHealth and will get clarification.

Alexis Moreis, a Chappaquiddick tribal member, stated that Covid funds that went to the Chappaquiddick Wampanoag Tribe, Inc. are not going to the Island community. There was some dispute about her statement. It was then stated that the Chappaquiddicks will be meeting with Nicole Friederichs, who is with the Truth and Healing Commission, to set up mediation with all Chappaquiddick branches.

2. Colleen DeVicentis. Ms. DeVicentis, from the Massachusetts Indian Council in New Bedford, joined today to introduce herself to the Native communities and to give an overview of the services they offer. The Mass. Indian Council is a new regional division of the Rhode Island Indian Council (RIIC), a non-profit organization. Most of its funding comes from the Department of Labor. The RIIC has been serving Native Americans since 1975 with offices in New York, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New Jersey, and Delaware. In August 2023 the Massachusetts office opened.

Some of the services they provide include tuition assistance, text books and supplies, job placement and training, job interview assistance and more. Ms. DeVicentis added that they can also help you get a CDL license. These services are available to low income, state and federally enrolled tribal members who are living in Massachusetts. For convenience, there is an on-line intake form.

She encouraged everyone to join them on Wednesday, February 7, 2024 from 11am-2pm at U Mass/Boston for a Pizza hour where folks will learn about the opportunities, services and eligibility requirements of the program.

3. Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR). Several members of the Commission on Indian Affairs have been involved in discussions with DCR who have been looking to develop a relationship with the Indigenous communities. Much of the land under DCR control was historically Native homelands and are proposing a First People, First Stewards Partnership with Indigenous /Native Peoples. How such a relationship will be developed is in the planning stages.

A staff position is now open within DCR and has been shared with the communities. Native folks were encouraged to apply.

Jim mentioned that DCR has funds to help with Truth and Healing that need to be used by the end of the fiscal year (June 30, 2024.) An idea for the use of funds was to have a major intertribal gathering to discuss where we want to go, what kind of relationship we want with the state, etc.

Jon Patton from DCR spoke briefly. He said he is trying to assist in a capacity building way, much like DPH, to set things correct with land and waters.

Nipmuc tribal member Akuahah Wheaton stated that any kind of sharing of our lands is always favorable but the Nipmucs are in need of land as they already have public access to these spaces. 2/3 of Massachusetts was all Nipmuc, now they only have 3.5 acres. Their priority is to acquire Nipmuc lands for all Nipmuc people. Wendy Pearl from DCR spoke. She said all of these opportunities are where they want to head but doesn't know where it will lead. She talked about partnering with tribes and coming up with ideas beyond just public access.

4. Truth and Healing.

Jim said that Suffolk University Law School, UMass/Boston and Ohketeau Cultural Center are supporting the Commission on Indian Affairs in organizing listening sessions with tribes, with the goal of exploring the idea of a truth and healing process.

Comm. Anderson gave an update on the listening sessions. She noted that she is involved through her role with the Ohketeau Cultural Center.

* They just finished a listening session with the Massachusetts Tribe. The tribe and the North American Indian Center of Boston (NAICOB) met together but it didn't work out. Through no fault of NAICOB, it was felt that meeting together didn't give the Tribe the space they needed to speak freely. So, the meeting with NAICOB was rescheduled.

* A listening session was held last year with the Nipmucs.

* On February 21, 2024 they will meet with the Chappaquiddicks.

* On February 28, 2024 they will meet with the Herring Pond.

* They want full participation of all Chappaquiddick Tribes.

* There is a need for Peace Keeping/Bridge Building.

* They are moving forward with a couple tribes a month.

* Listening sessions will take place via Zoom through Suffolk.

* Listening sessions have targeted questions for the tribes and are not to air or settle lateral disagreements.

5. Other Business.

Since there was still time before the meeting ended, Comm. Phillips open the floor to comments and concerns from the community.

Comm. Anderson gave an update on the Mascot Bill “An Act prohibiting the use of Native American mascots by public schools in the Commonwealth.” She reported that Sen. Comerford informed her that the bill passed Committee as written.

Love Richardson, a Nipmuc tribal member, stated that the Natick and her band have no representative on the Commission. She hopes it will be resolved. It was noted that Comm. Carter represents the Nipmucs.

Tracy Eastman asked if the Truth & Healing and the State Recognition process are the same or are they separate? Jim responded that they are separate. Some of the information from truth and healing may lend to State Recognition criteria development.

Love Richardson mentioned that she went to the Annual Conference of the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI). She reported that it was heavy on pop up and splinter groups and added that state recognition will be a thing of the past. She added that Jim said splinter groups will be considered in Massachusetts legislation. She asked if the Commission will follow NCAI rules? And if so, what does that look like? She suggested that a statement come from the Commission to NCAI. Jim responded that there will need to be a discussion about it before a statement is made.

Melissa Ferretti, Chairwoman of the Herring Pond Wampanoag Tribe spoke. She said she was at the NCAI conference and it was hostile and hard to be there. They want to remove state tribes from NCAI membership. There is a proposed rule change that state tribes need to be legislated as a state recognized tribe. She asked how does the Commission support state tribes at NCAI? Comm. Anderson suggested that a meeting be scheduled with Jim.

Comm. Phillips adjourned the meeting at 5:03 PM.

Submitted by Burne Stanley and Jim Peters