



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, April 19, 2024 3:00 PM

Zoom was facilitated by Commissioner Gonzales  
and later Commissioner Anderson

**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): Kym Ayala, Rachel Bayliss, Ella Blackowl, NAICOB; Antonia Blinn, DPH; Miles Yellow Swan Brady, Nichol Brewer-Lowry, Ryan Burke, DPH; Deborah Twisting Breeze Copp, Cheryl Cromwell, DPH; Melissa Ferretti, Herring Pond Wampanoag Tribe; Nicole Friederichs, Candia Flynn, Penny Gamble-Williams, Thomas Green, Vera Haynes, Ashley Hull, Hae-In Kim, DPH; Meredith McGoings, Penny Monk, Ellie & Donna Page, Jon Patton, DCR; Wendy Pearl, DCR; Tonia Raymond, Love Richardson, Shana Simmons, Elizabeth Solomon, Robyn Sweeting, Maria Turner, Akuahah Wheaton, and Ray Williams.

Names from the list of zoom participants whose last names were not included: Cheryl, Cora NITHPO, and Roaming.

Comm. Phillips called the meeting to order at 3:05 PM and offered a prayer. Following the prayer, was a roll call of Commissioners and staff, all of whom were present.

**1. State Health Assessment Presentation.** Mashpee Wampanoag Tribal Member, Cheryl Cromwell, the Tribal and Indigenous Health Equity Strategist at the Massachusetts Department of Public Health in Boston (DPH), joined us again along

with two colleagues. Through slides, they each gave a presentation on the various facets of their new state health assessment tool.

Antonia Blinn, Deputy Chief Operating Officer, opened the presentation. She informed us about their state health assessment and state health improvement and asked for feedback on the entire presentation especially on their list of tribes, indigenous, and tribal/indigenous people serving organizations. She also explained how data gets prioritized for inclusion in this plan.

Hae-In Kim, State Health Assessment Program Manager, spoke about their major milestones for the fiscal year. She shared the landing page on their website and pointed out that on the Data Indicator Page is where the tribes will be listed. She encouraged feedback from everyone.

Cheryl Cromwell concluded by saying that DPH didn't have tribes listed before. She shared the slide that includes tribes, indigenous communities, and "tribal people serving" organizations. The list of tribes is based on the Earle Report, but she knows there are other tribes in the state. DPH will wait for feedback before they move forward with a final list. She remarked that this is an opportunity to highlight Indigenous people in Massachusetts. She encouraged folks to send feedback to her at [Cheryl.L.Cromwell@mass.gov](mailto:Cheryl.L.Cromwell@mass.gov)

## **2. Tribal Listening Sessions**

Nicole Friederichs, a Practitioner-in-Residence at Suffolk University Law School in Boston, gave an update. She has been working with several members of the Commission on Indian Affairs on a model for a Truth and Healing Commission to see if this was something we want in Massachusetts to explore the history, policy, laws that impact Natives in the state. This involved organizing and leading discussions with the tribes. In April 2023, they held a seminar on truth and healing and invited a panel of speakers, from around the Country, who shared their experiences on this issue. To date, several listening sessions have been held. The first one was in November 2023 with the Nipmucs. Four additional sessions have been held since that included the Massachusetts at Ponkapoag, the Chappaquiddick Wampanoags, Western Mass, and Herring Pond Wampanoag. In the coming weeks, meetings will be held with the Mashpee Wampanoags (April 24<sup>th</sup>) and then the North American Indian Center of Boston (May 29<sup>th</sup>). During the summer, it is hoped that two additional sessions will take place. Jim added that the Pocasset Wampanoag would like to participate as well. In the Fall, Ms. Friederichs hopes to convene a seminar similar to the one held last year. Jim remarked that these listening sessions have been a great opportunity to hear from the communities. It gives us a chance to think about where we go next, what the

relationship amongst tribal members has been, what tribal members would like their relationship with the state to be, etc. During the seminar in the Fall, it is hoped that some conclusions will be reached from these listening sessions.

### **3. Mass. State Seal**

Jim Peters gave an update on the status of the Massachusetts State Flag and Seal saying that after 30+ years, we are still trying to change the state seal. The Special State Seal Commission voted to change the seal and spent quite a bit of time discussing the issue. A survey was then shared with the public and since then, nothing has happened. Right now, it's up to the legislature to appropriate funds for the Special Commission to continue. Although there are grassroots efforts being made to get the legislature to do something, a change to the state seal might not happen very soon. Comm. Anderson informed us that Chairpersons of the Special Commission had an audience with Governor Healey in April adding that it was a positive meeting and something with the state seal still might happen.

### **4. Mascots - An Act Prohibiting the Use of Native American Mascots by Public Schools – S.245 and H.477**

Comm. Anderson gave an update on Senate Bill 245 "An Act prohibiting the use of Native American mascots by public schools in the Commonwealth." The bill was originally filed in 2017. Senator Joanne Comerford is Senate sponsor of Bill S.245. Representative Brandy Fluker Oakley is House sponsor of Bill H.477.

\* The bill was reported favorably out of Committee on March 28, 2024 and sent to the Committee on Senate Ways and Means.

\* Language to the bill was amended in Ways and Means and approved by the Senate Council.

\* Currently about 30 public high schools across the Commonwealth still use Native American mascots. This bill would task the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education with establishing regulations to prohibit Native American mascots in Mass. public schools.

\* Comm. Anderson named a number of tribal representatives and Native organizations that are part of the Mascot Steering Committee.

\* A list of schools will be sent to the Commission on Indian Affairs. The Commission will identify the schools that have racist mascots.

Nipmuc tribal member, Akuahah Wheaton, asked for the list of supporters to the bill. She also remarked that that some mascots honor tribes and by forcing them to be removed is erasing Native history in the state. She requested that a Committee of Native American citizens be established to oversee the people who will go around

selecting mascots to be removed. When the time comes, she requested that a list of the schools that are being targeted to change their mascot be made to the public and include justification for the change.

### **5. National Parks Service 250<sup>th</sup> Commission**

Jim Peters, who sits on several Committees for the planning of the 250<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, reported that in 2026 America will celebrate its creation. The organizers are looking for Native participation, projects or presentations. Jim feels that the Native communities should step up and see how they can participate. He knows that there are Nipmuc family stories of the Revolutionary War. Oral stories and memories of ancestors can be shared at an event like this. NPS has been working with youth and Jim feels that some of our people should see what they can do to involve our youth in this commemoration.

### **6. Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR).**

Wendy Pearl, Director, Office of Cultural Resources at the MA Department of Conservation and Recreation gave an update on Native Community Partnerships that are taking place within DCR to develop a relationship with the Indigenous communities. They have been meeting with several members of the Commission on Indian Affairs as well as with Dr. Cedric Woods at the Institute for New England Native American Studies at U Mass/Boston.

Wendy was happy to report that DCR:

\* Is working to fill the agency's first ever Native coordinator position. They are trying to navigate around the hiring controls currently in place, but the position remains a high priority for them.

\* Is working with Dr. Cedric Woods at the Institute for New England Native American Studies to develop a pilot training for DCR staff to understand the history and impacts of colonization on Indigenous communities. The goal is to train all staff over the next year.

\* Issued a solicitation for a consultant to research the historical interactions between DCR and Indigenous communities, including developing a timeline of policies, decisions, actions from 1893 when DCR's predecessor agency, the Metropolitan Parks Commission was formed, to the present day.

\* Engaged a consultant team to develop climate adaptation options for Washburn Island, part of the Waquoit Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve (WBNERR) in Falmouth. As part of the project, the consultant and DCR will reach out to Indigenous people to understand the cultural value of Washburn Island and possible adaptation treatments.

\* Is looking to contract with professional performers and presenters that can provide high quality programs, presentations, and/or performances that complement the

resources and program offerings of the DCR and Massachusetts state parks and properties. It can be fine artists, animal trackers, etc. Interested people can respond to DCR 941 through the online system.

\* Engaged Commissioner Rhonda Anderson to deliver the keynote address at their Leadership Academy on May 1st. The theme of the in-service training is "Healthy Leadership" and includes all aspects of health - personal, organizational, environmental and community.

Nipmuc tribal member, Akuahah Wheaton, reiterated her statement from the last meeting 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. Two-thirds of Massachusetts was all Nipmuc, now they only have 3.5 acres. Their priority is to acquire Nipmuc lands for all Nipmuc people. She added that this request is being pursued not only for Nipmucs but for the entire public. She asked if DCR representatives, Wendy Pearl and Jon Patton, can commit to bring this request to their Commissioner? Ms. Pearl said she has noted it to the Deputy Commissioner and that they are also going to attend a meeting with other DCR officials.

## **7. Other Business.**

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

- Cora Peirce commented on the repatriation/reinterments of skeletal remains in RI that Jim is involved in that were to be reinterred. She wanted to understand how the Commission is trumping NAGPRA on this reinterment? Jim responded that he was appointed by Mashpee as a Repatriation Officer some 30 years ago and continues in that role. He stated that traditional boundaries differ from State borders.
- There was a question about what burials have taken place. They would like a list. Melissa Ferretti responded that due to site privacy concerns and efforts to protect the sites from vandals, the list should not be shared with anyone.
- Cheryll Holley requested that a list of Massachusetts' Historic Tribes be posted on the Commission's web page. Jim said he will work with Burne on it.
- Love Richardson stated that NCAI does not support splinter groups and that the Commission stated recently that they would follow NCAI's lead in not supporting splinter groups. It was asked that the Commission please be mindful of that when the list of Mass. Historic Tribes is shared.

- Elizabeth Solomon asked what is the definition of a splinter group? If the Commission has a position on it, it should be explained.
- It was suggested that the subject of splinter groups be discussed at a future meeting.

Comm. Philips adjourned the meeting at 5:10 PM.

Submitted by Burne Stanley and Jim Peters