



February 14, 2022

To House Ways and Means:

In May of 2021, the Vermont Commission on Native American Affairs invited the Chiefs of the four State recognized Abenaki tribes to join us in a council meeting to discuss what is important and critical to include in the reparations part of the Truth and Reconciliation process. All who were present agreed that first and foremost was the stewardship inherent in the ownership of land. This is highly important because our culture is a land-based culture. It is where we gather as a community to share our history, customs, crafts, and traditional gardening as well as passing on knowledge about the other living beings who share our world with us.

Two bills - H.556, for exemption of property tax, and H.620, the act relating to Abenaki land ownership and repatriation - will have an extensive and extremely important impact for Abenaki. The passage of both would represent a truly significant recognition and acknowledgment of what our culture is and has always been. Our land rights were never given away by treaty or by any other means. Instead our homeland was taken by outsiders through the use of land grants and legislation. These very acts continued for centuries and did not recognize this as our homeland - ignoring our continued existence in N'Dakinna, now called Vermont. Abenaki are the original People of Vermont - we have been here for 13,000 years and are still here. The tribal State recognition process which was put in place a decade

ago was the first step in giving us visibility and validity as a culture separate from those who have settled here during the last 400 years. To be able to own and maintain ownership of land within our homeland is vital to us as a People.

Currently all Abenaki land is held in trust with non-profits. The tribes receive no State funding and Federal funding only for education. This makes it difficult to raise the funds needed to pay the taxes, maintain the land currently under tribal stewardship or to purchase new tribal land. If H.556 is passed, the funds used to pay taxes could then be used to provide for other services and needs of the tribal communities. In combination with H.620, which will provide the option of purchasing additional tribal land or to have land returned to Abenaki caretaking through repatriation, Abenaki can once again have land be at the center of our culture and communities.

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With the help of strong advocates and allies, there have been many small steps toward recognition of who Abenaki are. To pass both H.556 and H.620 is a very significant step in continuing what was begun in the reparations process. Thank you for the time, effort and hard work your Committee has expended in consideration of H.556.

With sincere thanks,

The Vermont Commission on Native American Affairs

Carol McGranaghan, Chair

Carol Irons, Vice-Chair

Hillary Hoffmann, Secretary

Beverly Little-Thunder

Lucy Neel

Doug Bent

Jeff Benay

Patrick Lamphere

Chiefs of the recognized Vermont Abenaki tribes:

Sagamo Roger Longtoe Sheehan, El-Nu Abenaki tribe

Chief Shirly Hook, Koasek of the Koas Abenaki tribe

Chief Raven Wood, Koasek of the Koas Abenaki tribe

Chief Richard Menard, Abenaki Nation of Missisquoi St Francis/Sokoki Band

Chief Don Stevens, Nulhegan Abenaki Band of the Coosuk