

VCNAA Request

INTRO

I'm Rep. Katherine Sims, representing Orleans-4, which includes the towns of Albany, Craftsbury, Glover and Greensboro. Here to request \$150,000 in funding for the Vermont Commission on Native American Affairs to give visibility and voice to the Abenaki community.

BACKGROUND

As you heard during the public hearing from the Chair of the Commission, the Vermont Commission on Native American Affairs is a nine-member commission, reflecting a diversity of native affiliations and geographic locations in the state, who are appointed to serve on the Commission by the Governor.

THE NEED

The charge of the commission is large:

- secure assistance for social services, education, employment opportunities, health care, and housing for Native Americans.
- develop and market Vermont Native American fine and performing arts, craft work, and cultural events; and
- develop policies and programs to benefit Vermont's Native American Indian population

While the charge of the VCNAA is significant, the only funding the VCNAA receives is the standard per diems through ACCD (approximately \$2,700 per year) and admin support from ACCD for the commission's meetings. We've heard from members of the Abenaki community that the limited compensation for commissioners is a barrier for participation.

Without staff and project funding, work falls to volunteer members or isn't able to move forward because of a lack of capacity and resources. As we have recognized with other Commissions, like the Commission on Human Rights or the Commission on Women, staff capacity is critical to ensure a commission can fulfill its statutory duty. We even funded a commission on the 250th Anniversary of colonizing Vermont.

Our legislative body has asked native voices to be at the table to weigh in on policy and programs but we haven't funded that capacity. It's a structural issue that needs to be addressed.

Request

In collaboration with the VCNAA and the recognized tribes, we've to put forward H.260 An act relating to the Commission on Native American Affairs. The bill seeks a \$150,000 annual appropriation to support the Vermont Commission on Native American Affairs.

Funding will be used to:

- Increase per diem to commissioners (\$9,000, \$1,000 max per commissioner)
- Project funding for education initiatives (\$41,000)
- A full-time staff position (\$50,000)
 - The staff would maintain an office and carry out the commission duties and charge;
 - EDUCATE State and local governments and the general public about issues affecting Native Americans in Vermont;
 - Serve as LIAISON between government agencies, organizations, and the general public concerned with services for Native Americans. Also ensure coordination of communication across the Native community.
 - Make POLICY recommendations affecting the status of Native Americans in Vermont
 - PUBLISH periodic reports documenting the legal, economic, social, and political status, and other concerns of Native Americans in Vermont
 - While these activities are part of the charge of the VCNAA, they are beyond the scope of a volunteer group. We've defined this role in statute, now we need to resource it.

Why this request now?

Racial and social justice are an important priority for the general assembly. This request is an opportunity to build on our work over previous sessions: the Eugenics apology, the free access to hunting and fishing rights, and property tax exemption for land owned by tribes.

Right now, the workload for the VCNAA is increasing as there is a growing awareness about the value of input from diverse perspectives. I believe the commission has been asked to fill over 10 positions on other boards as a result of what's in statute. An increase in support for the VCNAA will increase the ability of our indigenous community to participate in those efforts. We've asked for this input, we need to resource it.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak with you about this request. I know you have way more requests than available resources and you have tough decisions ahead. The reason this request rises to the top for me is that I see this as a meaningful step to recognize the sovereignty of the Abeaniki, enhance their capacity to care for native citizens and to engage with the state Government. Thank you for your consideration of this request for \$150k for VCNAA.