

City of Worcester Human Rights Commission Minutes
VIRTUAL MEETING – Monday October 5, 2020, 6:00pm

Members Present: Lilian Chukwurah, Lauren De Oliveira, Elizabeth O’Callahan, Edward G. Robinson, Jacqueline Yang

Members Absent: LaToya Lewis, Deidre Padgett, Aaron Richman

Staff: Miriam Nyante, Jayna Turchek

1. Call to order and introductions

A quorum was established and Vice Chairperson Yang called the meeting to order at 6:10pm. Commissioners and those present introduced themselves. The Vice Chairperson welcomed members of the commission, and those present.

2. Approval of September 14, 2020 meeting minutes

Commissioner Robinson motioned to approve the minutes as written. Commissioner De Oliveira seconded. Motion passed with all in favor.

3. Conversation on the journey, obstacles and legacy of the indigenous people in Massachusetts*

The name "Massachusetts" originates with native Americans in the Massachusetts Bay area (from the language of the Algonquian nation). The name translates roughly as "at or about the great hill."

Vice Chairperson Yang acknowledged the traditional ancestral territory of the First Peoples of Massachusetts:

...on whose land we are convening, specifically of the Nipmuc Nation, who resided in what is now known as Worcester County. Although Nipmuc history predates written history, records from the 1600’s inform us that the original inhabitants of this area were in principally three locations: Packachoag, Tatesset (Tatnuck) and Wigwam Hill (N. Lake Ave).

It is important to make this acknowledgement to honor the ancestors who have come before us. Unfortunately it is all too common to live in this land without ever hearing the traditional names and history of the people who resided and prospered in these lands and who continue to reside and prosper here.

Tonight we acknowledge members of the Nipmuc, Pocasset Wampanoag, Taino and Guatemalan Representatives gathered with us tonight.

The Nipmuc flag will be raised in front of city hall in honor of Indigenous Peoples Day on October 13.

Tonight we have the opportunity to learn from our guests. Essential to have indigenous voices in Worcester and in Worcester government at the table. It is important to acknowledge that Worcester residents have diverse heritage. **To begin I'd like each panelist to please introduce yourself and your tribe and a little of it's history. Also please share the significance of your emblems as printed in tonight's agenda?**

**Chairman Sequan Pijaki / aka Chief George Spring Buffalo
Pocasset Pokanoket Land Trust Inc.; Indigenous People's Network**

Traditional name: Sequan Pijaki; Algonquin

Pocasset Wampanoag Tribe of the Pokanoket Nation/ Watuppa Reservation

Emblem represents all of our clans that are members of our tribe

Ulum Pixan Ahtohil / aka Dania Flores, member Guatemalan Nation, adopted by Pocasset Wampanoag tribe of the Pokanoket Nation; Global village

Traditional Name: Ulum Pixan Ahtohil, Mayan for "First Spirit," last name "Justice of God"

Emblem is of the Old (first) people from Latin America (traditional Mayan Lands)

Irene Mother Eagle Hernandez / The Jatibonicu Taino Tribal Nation of Boriken, adopted by Pocasset Wampanoag tribe of the Pokanoket Nation

Charlie Hopkins, lifelong resident of Worcester (Tatnuck), member Wampanoag Tribe, Gay Head (Aquinnah)

Tribal symbol of great spirit Moshup, by dragging his foot across lands created Cape Cod and the island of Martha's Vineyard

Tribal Councilor Strong Bear Heart / aka Andre Gaines Jr., The Amiskanoagwiak Band of the Nipmuc Indian Tribe, was unable to attend the panel but was acknowledged by fellow panelists

Panelists were asked a series of questions about a number of topics that were discussed in a conversational format:

"How many members are there of each tribe? If you are an urban tribe, what does that mean in terms of your ability to self-govern and organize? If you are a federally-recognized tribe, what does this mean in terms of self-governance and organization?"

Pocasset Wampanoag Tribe of the Pokanoket Nation/ Watuppa Reservation

- Tribe is a "state recognized tribe"
- This terminology is seldom used except in circumstances where it is necessary for state recognition: "We don't like to be colonized; We are our own sovereign nations"

- The tribe is 800 strong; first ever deeded reservation in the country in Fall River as part of the Pocasset purchase
- Urban Indians - "if you're indigenous, you're an urban Indian"

Jatibonicu Taino Tribal Nation of Boriken

- Not federally recognized. However, there are 36,000 Tainos; 3,000 in each tribe.
- Some live in Puerto Rico, but others have been displaced.
- There was a paper genocide saying members of this tribe were all extinct
- However, over 61% Of Puerto Ricans Have Taino lineage in mitochondrial DNA
- Others reside in Cuban, Jamaica, Dominican Republic, Florida
- Tribe is Patriarchal

Mayan Nation in Guatemala

- Mayan people number more than 1 million;
- In Guatemala ¾ of population is Maya Quichean, a subtribe ancestral tribal people
- In the US, there are about 250,000 Mayan descendents; 8,000-9,000 in Massachusetts
- 600 are Maya Quichean; often misclassified by USCIS as undocumented immigrants
- Mayans working with Pocono tribe, as they always had free passage into the nation in the pre-colonial era in North America
- The Government is semi-matriarchal - a chief is trained and chosen
- The tribe is not recognized by any city, state or the United States at the federal level as a tribal group; self-recognized as indigenous

Wampanoag Tribe

- 3250 Members of the tribe, 1500 members of tribe on Martha's Vineyard
- 1350 enrolled members of the tribe participate in regular tribal meetings monthly
- Chairperson - woman or man; last 2 have been women
- 1/3rd live off island
- Very large effort to reclaim language using an old King James bible that was found and translated from English to Wampanoag and is the basis from reclaiming language
- Grandfather's generation and extended family members were all sent off to the Carlyle school as young children to "extinguish everything" about the culture and "taught to be ashamed of tribal roots"
- Current generation engaging in concerted effort to reclaim culture and language that has been lost; reclaiming "who we are"

Gaps in Services, Recognition and Funding

- Federal recognition is necessary for access to a number of programs through the federal government available to tribes, responded to situation understanding from history what the impact of a disease like [the current novel coronavirus pandemic] can be
- 90% of ancestors died from diseases like this
- Tribal offices have been closed since march

- There are lots of food programs through Indian health programs; Mass Health available to mass residents with native roots through Indian healthcare services
- Healthcare is free on reservations
- However, no services are available for tribes who are not federally recognized
- Efforts to get on healthcare panels and groups to let folks know services are out there;
- Individuals need affiliation with a tribe or they won't get same recognition when they go to access healthcare

How have indigenous peoples been affected by Covid-19? Is this being tracked? How can we advocate for better outreach and services?

- Some folks have traditional medicine - still traditional medicine not recognized by US as safe medicine; Medicine Women/men exist but there is no access to that through insurance
- No specific outreach being done to Taino community, feel like there has been a "blind eye," and lack of access and health equity both on the mainland and on the islands
- Tracking the impact is very difficult in some communities
- Language is a big barrier - Many indigenous Mayan people speak Quichean as a first language; Their second language is Spanish and they are not very fluent; When they come to the United States, English is a 3rd language. A lot of communications are not translated into their first language and interpreting services are incredibly expensive
- Pre-Covid there were a lot of meetings with folks in health services system about
- Working with Census also so that the services can be better; This work is only going to come out now in 2020 census where people are divided by tribe; Mayan Quichean are counted; will be 5-10 year delay in counting and funding
- No cases on Martha's Vineyard; off-island people are heavily impacted; several have passed away
- Mental health struggles, sexual assault, domestic violence, lack of access to internet, technology, food inequality, have also all been pervasive issues affecting indigenous peoples during the pandemic
- 1,000 food boxes being delivered per week to indigenous and non-indigenous households through USDA grant and it was not enough to meet the need

How can the Human Rights Commission advocate for better outreach and services?

- One of the biggest setbacks is acknowledging that there are different ways of dealing with health, wellness and disease: "Live foods are medicine," sweat lodges, and opportunities for gatherings are also important culturally, psychologically, and health-wise, and have been unavailable
- "Acknowledge that we're here"
- Open up scope of the work being done and advocate for different ways of healing in the community and making it acceptable; "That we can go to tribes and get help we need" from indigenous health centers, with coverage from insurance
- Advocate for equity in health for all and indigenous people

- VA can treat with traditional medicine, but it's not covered on reservations
- Teach true history of Christopher Columbus in schools
- Healing from generational trauma cannot begin until these conversations and systemic changes happen
- There is a state bill to change the symbol on Massachusetts State flag and Motto
 - 40 cities and towns have approved to get rid of seal; Worcester has not come forward with anything
- Voting Rights: With COVID and evictions, there are likely a fair number indigenous and people of color experiencing issues with access to voting. Thankfully Massachusetts does not have voter ID laws, which disproportionately affect people of color and indigenous people

Generational Trauma

- Indigenous kids struggling with systemic oppression and stigma of culture (for example children being asked to cut hair by schools), mental health diagnoses and learning disabilities due to learning multiple languages and not receiving adequate support
- The truth about Christopher Columbus, and what's happened to indigenous peoples is still not taught, discussed or acknowledged
- Tribal lands kept shrinking and shrinking until they did not include traditional hunting lands and then were arrested for leaving tribal lands to hunt and feed their families, then were put into forced labor for years to pay debt off to state of Massachusetts
- Native Americans have the highest incarceration rate per capita, which is perpetuated by lack of access to services that serve as protective factors (education, mental health, social and health services, etc.)
- After emancipation proclamation, freed slaves and natives were chased into the hills where they intermingled just to survive. Slavery is a part of indigenous history, not just from Africa but as Native Americans. Not talking about it perpetuates it. "Trauma echoes continue to reverberate"
- Here in Massachusetts, on our flag "We still have a sword over an Indian's head"
- History of Thanksgiving Holiday: A murder in Plymouth was blamed on Wampanoag, and resulted in a band of vigilantes slaughtering a tribe of men, women and children. When the Governor who "the savages have finally been subdued"
- Textbooks in schools perpetuate harmful narratives and fail to acknowledge truths and suffering of the history of Native Americans
- Problems with DCF initiating investigations toward indigenous people due to traditional cultural norms and ways of living, such as traditional ways in which people sleep

Motion: Clerk O'Callahan Motioned for the Human Rights Commission to request that the Worcester City Council take up the bill that is currently moving through at the state level, make some acknowledgement and consider what further action could be taken to move this forward.

Commissioner Robinson amended to include the name of the bill: HB 2776 Senate 1877, *Resolve Providing for the Creation of a Special Commission Relative to the Seal and Motto of*

the Commonwealth. Commissioner Chukwurah seconded motion as amended; motion passed with all in favor

Link to bill information here: <https://malegislature.gov/Bills/191/H2776/BillHistory>

Sentiment among commissioners is that superficial action is a starting point, but it is insufficient to really address these issues and stop perpetuating these harmful narratives

What is the most pressing contemporary issue facing indigenous peoples?

Racism:

- Panelists emphatically cited racism, and specifically, fear for their safety due to racism: “In my entire life I have never experienced more racism than I have today...It’s being stirred up in ways I never thought I’d see in my lifetime”
- One panelist described being stranded on the side of the road in Worcester years ago and having a police officer approach him with a gun drawn, and reported that the officer muttered “That’s a good way to get shot.”
- Another panelist described an incident where their minor son was in fear of his life when detained by law enforcement as a passenger in a vehicle due to not having an id.
- Panelists’ children have experienced racism from fellow students in schools
- Experiences like these promote a deep fear of law enforcement, but also community members engaging in racist behavior that creates a threat to their safety.
- Panelists live in fear for their safety and the safety of family members

Lack of Acknowledgment of Systemic Racism:

- Panelists expressed sadness and dismay at the lack of acknowledgment from the Worcester Police Department of the existence of systemic racism given these shared experiences from the community.

Lack of Representation in the Community:

- Worcester boards and commissions in the city do not represent population: many indigenous people are not registered voters are excluded from participation
- Indigenous people have been left out of conversations and city activities

How or whether panelists view their communities, specifically the youth among them, to increase visibility and influence. And what would the expectation be from people in groups toward common, civic and civil rights goals?

- Kids need to be taught their culture and build pride in who they are.
- Multi-generational households and gathering spaces provide opportunities to learn about culture from elders in the tribe
- What is taught outside of the home is very different from what is taught in the home
- School system needs to provide accurate education on indigenous culture

Are you or have you been considering, to engage with Worcester residents through social media and/or other ways to reach all ages, citizenships, status and ethnic groups, more effectively and openly?

- Clerk O’Callahan reviewed the history of the Human Rights Commission pursuing ways to engage through social media, and citing the lack of resources within the department to manage and monitor a Human Rights Commission page
- Members of the board recognize there are a lot of silos of information, and many segments of the population not being reached in the current forms of outreach done by the city, in spite of considerable efforts being made to conduct this outreach effectively.
- These gaps are really evident in the demographics of people attending Neighborhood meetings and participating on boards and commissions, and city events, as well as current vacancies on boards and commissions
- Director Turchek added that there is a social media page for the Worcester Health and Human Services Department (includes divisions of Human Rights and Accessibility, and boards under those divisions, as well as other divisions of Health and Human Services)
 - Need staff dedicated to that type of engagement
 - A lot of the work done as a department is interconnected
 - There are higher volume of posts when seen collectively
- Email distribution through constant contact is still occurring, but engagement piece and a larger engagement plan that the Department of Health and Human Services is discussing as a whole department, given the lack of staffing for each individual city board and commission

Additional Discussion

- Commissioner Robinson requested that the Human Rights Commission review textbooks as part of the school curriculum. Commissioner Oliveira echoed this
- Clerk O’Callahan shared the formal complaint process from the Worcester Police Department for members of the public to pursue anonymously or in a way that allows follow up, and expressed hope that conversations about racism could take place in a more open, narrative form in the future. Panelists expressed misgivings toward this process and expressed the need for additional conversation and “a seat at the table.”
- Miriam Nyante echoed sentiment that the school system does not educate students about other cultures in general, including Africa.
- Commissioner Oliveira requested additional information from panelists about experiences with DCF involvement to assist with efforts to dismantle systemic racism in that department. Discussed the need for reform within DCF, and representation of social workers who are people of color

Motion: Vice-Chair Yang motioned to recommend that the City of Worcester, in all ground breaking ceremonies to include a land acknowledgement to honor ancestral homelands. Clerk O’Callahan seconded. Motion passed with all in favor.

5. Adjournment at 8:14pm

Next meeting Monday November 2, 2020, 6pm