

More Than a Land Acknowledgement

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More Than a Land Acknowledgement: Authentic Tribal and Urban Native Engagement

BY MAYOR BRUCE HARRELL AND
COUNCILMEMBER DAN STRAUSS

"I'm glad to see the City of Seattle taking proactive steps to increase effective Native representation and advocacy and strengthen government-to-government relations with Tribal Nations," said Councilmember Donny Stevenson of the Muckleshoot Indian Tribe. "Indigenous leadership and wisdom have sustained d'id'əlalič, the land now known as Seattle, for thousands of years. Tribal and urban Native engagement in public policy is crucial and the continued commitment and effort toward such is what our people call haʔ syayus in our language, which translates to 'good work'."



Indigenous Seattle

Land acknowledgments seek to undo centuries of intentional erasure of Native people by educating about local histories, honoring Indigenous communities, and acknowledging the on-going process of colonialization. Without action and authentic relationships, however, land acknowledgements become performative allyship. The City of Seattle has begun the long-term and collaborative work of moving beyond land acknowledgements to create sustainable and equitable pathways for Tribal and urban Native engagement in local government. Settler colonization and Indigenous movements have shaped the present-day approach to Tribal and urban Native engagement.

Over the past 200 years, the land and waters of Seattle have been drastically altered to meet the needs of settler communities. From the regrading of land masses to the rechanneling and elimination of entire river systems, the ecosystem that sustained Tribal communities since time immemorial has been violently altered for industrial use and urbanization. Ordinance No. 5 of the Seattle Township (1865) banned Native peoples from residing in Seattle. Many Coast Salish people were forcibly relocated throughout the region during the treaty-making era. The impacts of colonization and environmental degradation continue to have disproportionately negative effects on the many Tribal Nations who steward and protect cultural and natural resources, exercise reserved treaty rights in and around Seattle and operate as sovereign governments serving tribal people throughout the region.

Throughout the 1950s-1960s, Seattle was one of dozens of cities nationwide that was designated for urban Indian relocation by federal policies that sought to assimilate Native people. As a result, American Indian and Alaska Native people affiliated with hundreds of Indigenous identities and distinct communities and cultures relocated with promises of employment and housing. When these promises fell short, many tribal members were confronted with the loss of cultural and familial connections and faced new economic insecurity. When federal relocation efforts started, 8 percent of Native people lived in urban areas. By 2020, approximately 64 percent of Native people lived in urban areas.

Today, roughly 46,000 American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian people from hundreds of tribal affiliations reside in King

County, Washington. The region has a long history of diverse and thriving Tribal and urban Native communities that have engaged in collective advocacy and social change movements across generations. Notably, the Fishing Wars across the Pacific Northwest led to landmark recognition of treaty rights and tribal co-management of natural resources. Seattle is also home to many grassroots organizing efforts that have helped establish a variety of urban Indian service providers in the area. These providers support Native people living in urban areas through culturally attuned housing, healthcare, social services, and cultural programming. Collectively, these histories shape the landscape of municipal engagement with Tribal and urban Native communities in the region.

Working Together More Effectively

“Our data also shows that [American Indian and Alaska Native people] are least likely to accept or get services from mainstream systems ... it is going to take Native-led efforts to address it. We are going to need to be empowered ... to address homelessness in our Native community. We know if we solve that, we are going to solve homelessness for everybody.”

– Derrick Belgarde, Executive Director, Chief Seattle Club and member of the City’s Indigenous Advisory Council

In recent years, the City of Seattle has begun a process of re-envisioning Tribal and urban Native engagement. This new approach better recognizes the political status of many Native communities and seeks to advance racial equity for all Native people. Through a two-pronged approach, the city has created and re-invigorated engagement pathways.

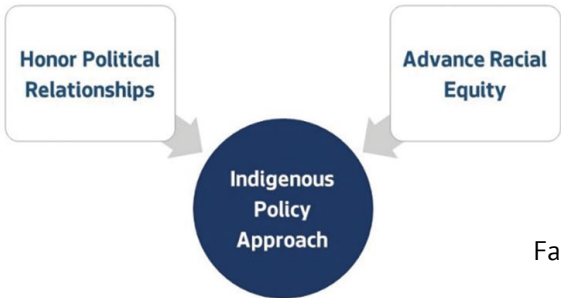
First, the City of Seattle has revitalized a Tribal Relations division that fosters a more robust and authentic government-to-government relationship to engage federally recognized Tribes as sovereign governments and regional partners. Tribal Nations are sovereign governments holding unique political and legal rights stemming from treaties, laws, court rulings, regulations, and executive orders that created nation-to-nation relationships with the federal government. As a result, Tribal Nations and tribal citizens are beneficiaries of unique trust and treaty relationships designed to provide for the health and well-being of the nations that ceded hundreds of millions of acres of

land and resources to create and sustain the United States government. Since 1989, Washington state has recognized its government-to-government relationship with Tribal Nations through the Centennial Accord and New Millennium Agreement. As a municipality within Washington state, the City of Seattle recognizes the need to integrate federal and state policies into a local Tribal Relations framework.

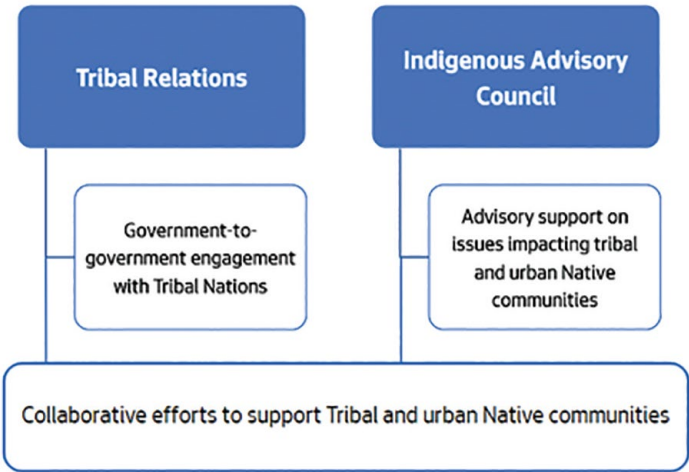


Second, the City of Seattle recognizes the need to engage a broad range of Native communities in local government to advance racial equity and better address trust obligations to tribal citizens regardless of where they reside. In 2021, the city worked with Tribal and community advocates to create an Indigenous Advisory Council, a public commission of nine members that provides a critical avenue for Tribal and urban Native partners to address a wide range of issues impacting Native communities. The Indigenous Advisory Council utilizes an Indigenous approach to policy and systems changes that honors the political and racial equity needs of Native communities. This approach seeks to move government and community partners towards transformational relationships rooted in reciprocity, repair, and shared power.

Our **Indigenous Policy Approach** honors legal, political, and racial equity obligations to Native communities to ensure a transfer of resources and power to Indigenous communities.



These two pathways can be complementary but are distinct channels of engagement. The government-to-government process is inherent to effective Tribal Relations and should not be conflated with the work of a public commission. Together these approaches strengthen a citywide system for Tribal and urban Native engagement.



Culturally Grounded Advisors

“The Department of Neighborhoods is holding critical space for Coast Salish and urban Native tribal members to come together to build policies that will impact Indigenous people citywide for the better.”

- Asia Tail, Executive Director, yəhaw Indigenous Creatives Collective and member of the City’s Indigenous Advisory Council

The Indigenous Advisory Council is among the few local advisory bodies nationwide that focus solely on American Indian and Alaska Native issues in local government. The structure, investment, and collaborative approach of the City of Seattle has made the Indigenous Advisory Council an influential and impactful advisory board.

The Indigenous Advisory Council fills a critical role in local government as a culturally grounded advisory body comprising Tribal and urban Native representatives who act as trusted advocates, advisors, and connectors among city partners. It is the only city commission in the

region comprised entirely of Native people, representing a diverse range of experiences and expertise from Tribal and urban Native communities.



The Indigenous Advisory Council includes positions for youth, elders, and representatives nominated by Tribes and urban Indian organizations. In 2024, there are three elected Tribal leaders and six urban Native leaders serving on the council. This structure fosters collaborative partnerships and inter-Tribal organizing in the areas of health, housing, homelessness, arts and culture, youth development, cultural and natural resource management, economic development, and more. It is also critical to understand that the Indigenous Advisory Council can never fully represent all Indigenous communities. The council is well positioned to guide and inform city decisions through the values, networks, and policy expertise represented among the council members.

The Indigenous Advisory Council has developed a three-year strategic plan, annual work plans, an annual report, and a set of policy priorities to guide advisory work. The work is focused in three areas: 1) guiding systemic transformations that adequately resource and better engage Tribal and urban Native communities, 2) advancing strategies that build generational and community wealth among Tribal and urban Native communities, and 3) forwarding policies that create thriving ecological and cultural eco-systems stewarded by Native people.

Since 2022, the Indigenous Advisory Council has advised eight city departments on 16 projects, programs, and policies. The group has advised on legislative and budget items, presented at six Seattle

City Council meetings, and met with Seattle City Councilmembers to advocate for policy and budget priorities. Community facing initiatives have included a listening session and panel discussion with Native youth to better understand their priorities and promote local civic participation. Other engagements have included advisory support and discussions with tribal and community partners to amplify and support local events and projects impacting Native communities across the region.



IAC Conducting a Community Listening Session

One example of the role and impact of a culturally grounded advisory board is demonstrated by the Indigenous Advisory Council's work on Indigenizing public transit systems. In 2023, the Indigenous Advisory Council partnered with the Seattle Design Commission and then Seattle City Council President Debora Juarez to host a public civic dialogue to learn and vision how Native cultures and values can inform public transit planning through building design, ecological restoration, and cultural placemaking.

More than 50 planners, engineers, architects, artists, and community representatives participated in the event. Following the civic conversation, the Indigenous Advisory Council made recommendations to the city's planning and community development department on integration of Native priorities and values into the public transit design guidelines for the upcoming expansion of 13 new light rail stations coming to Seattle. Three key suggestions were integrated into the draft design guidelines, include working with Tribes and Native communities

to conduct cultural landscape analyses, consulting federally recognized Tribes and engaging Native communities, and integrating Indigenous cultural placemaking. The council will continue to engage key partners and participate in public engagement opportunities as light rail expansion unfolds in the years ahead.

Collaborative Tribal and Urban Native Engagement

*“It has taken 168 years for this historical meeting to take place ...
The Treaty of Point Elliott was signed in January 1855 ...
in exchange for hundreds of thousands of acres of land ...
we were promised a reservation, healthcare, and even vaccinations ...
These treaties are the supreme law of the land. That is why we are
here today.”*

– Jay Mills, Councilmember, Suquamish Indian Tribe and
member of the City’s Indigenous Advisory Council



It took 168 years for the city to host the inaugural City of Seattle Tribal Nations Summit. The 2023 gathering brought together tribal and city leaders to strengthen the regional community and better achieve mutual goals through government-to-government engagement. This historic meeting sought to identify actions and desired outcomes that uphold the sovereignty and treaty rights of federally recognized Tribes and to build partnerships, strengthen collaborations, and enhance diplomacy.

The summit was a direct product of a revitalized Tribal Relations division, a year of Tribal outreach and engagement, and the historic formation of the Indigenous Advisory Council. Collectively, these events created fertile ground for Tribal and urban Native partners to co-design a Tribal

Nations Summit with city partners. The Indigenous Advisory Council's Tribal Caucus comprised of elected leaders from federally recognized Tribes provided essential guidance that shaped the format and structure of the meeting. Tribal leaders advised that the summit must be a place of action – a directive the city has heard loud and clear.



At this inaugural conference, the city hosted leaders and representatives from 11 federally recognized Tribes, six urban Indian organizations, 16 city departments, and the legislative and judicial branches of city government. During the summit, elected Tribal leaders shared their top priorities with the mayor and executive leadership through a listening session followed by an opportunity for city leadership to listen and learn directly from tribal leaders on how to work together more effectively as governments and regional partners. Tribal and urban Native leaders engaged in direct talks and candid conversation focused on three areas of shared concern: housing and homelessness, natural and cultural resources, and public safety.

This historic gathering has been a milestone in the recognition that tribal interests in local government extend well beyond the geographic boundaries of local jurisdictions. City policy, services, and utility infrastructure have far-reaching impacts for Tribal Nations and citizens that live, work, play, and exercise tribal sovereignty and treaty rights in and around our city and across our region.

The Tribal Nations Summit included recognized American Indian and Alaska Native service providers, advisory bodies, tribal public health

authorities, and public development authorities. These entities play a critical role in fulfilling federal trust obligations to tribal citizens and all Native people, regardless of where they reside. There are many examples of the federal government reforming and creating systems that increase states' rights and authority over systems (e.g., health care reform, law enforcement, public lands management). When this happens, it further complicates the fiduciary obligation of the federal government to fulfill the federal trust responsibility. Local and state governments often fail to recognize the political and legal status of Tribal Nations and tribal citizens. Tribal and urban Native policy advocates continue to identify and address this ongoing practice by working to resource and support the self-determination of Tribal Nations and urban Indian organizations that provide services to Native people, especially when state and local governments deploy federal resources.



The discussions at the first-ever summit between Tribal Nation and City of Seattle elected leaders represent a historic opportunity to shape a new future for city-tribal government-to-government relations and further define the role of local government in fulfilling trust obligations. For the first time, city and tribal elected representatives met to honor the respective authorities to serve Native people and protect the shared lands and waters.

Daily Actions that Drive Long-Term Progress

"We heard loud and clear the call from Tribal leaders that the City's Tribal Nations Summit be a place of action, not just words." said

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Tribal Relations Director Tim Reynon. “The actions outlined in this report demonstrate our commitment to better engaging with Tribal Nations as sovereign governments and to better serve Tribal citizens in Seattle. While significant work remains ahead, we continue to engage in the daily actions that drive long-term progress.”

One year following the summit, the city released a report detailing progress on 23 initial actions. Collectively, the City of Seattle has made progress on 21 of the 23 commitments. This is one step in the larger effort to strengthen relations, build trust, and remain a committed partner to Tribal and urban Native communities. There has been notable progress among city partners. For example:

- Seattle Parks and Recreation became the first city department to host a Tribal Nations Gathering to dig deeper into parks and open spaces. The gathering identified tribal priorities and action items such as increased outreach and engagement of Tribal partners and the formation of an internal workgroup to systemize Tribal Relations within the department.



- The city has created a process and interdepartmental workgroup to track tribal engagement across 17 city departments. This is the first systemized effort to track and coordinate Tribal Relations work across city departments. This effort will collect, analyze, and monitor Tribal Relations data to improve interdepartmental coordination and collaboration, better understand the scope and needs of Tribal Relations work across the city, and develop a baseline of Tribal Relations data. The city is developing a training curriculum on working with Tribes and Native communities and the initial modules will launch this year.

These examples demonstrate the City of Seattle's commitment to increasing Tribal and urban Native engagement in local government. The actions taken by city departments have revealed eight key takeaways in the year following the Tribal Nations Summit:

- The city has made foundational and critical steps to more effective Tribal relations and consultation through formation of a City-Tribal Workgroup and the development of tools to better track tribal engagement across city projects and programs.
- The city has made significant strides in its commitment to tribal engagement, including increased Tribal representation in major city planning efforts.
- Tribal consultation has become more consistent and frequent, with numerous departments engaging with Tribes on various policies, projects, and initiatives. At the same time, tribal consultation is still often integrated into a public community engagement process that fails to honor and recognize tribal sovereignty. Tribal representatives have expressed the need for direct city-tribal relationships and continue to stress the importance of early and often consultation on anything affecting Tribal Nations and tribal interests.
- There is demonstrated commitment to reflecting Indigenous values, cultures, and priorities in city projects and policies.
- The city is taking a more collaborative approach to cultural resource stewardship by demonstrating a commitment to environmental justice and expanding outreach across numerous environmental projects, programs, and initiatives.
- The city fosters numerous partnerships to support culturally sensitive housing and emergency shelter services, as well as gender-based violence response and other services that support community resilience for tribal citizens and all urban Native residents.
- The city made strides in increasing education and understanding of Tribal histories, governments, and priorities by visiting tribal communities, hosting city-sponsored gatherings, and developing staff training resources.

- Building staff skills and capacity for more effective tribal relations across city departments is a crucial step to moving this work forward and needs to be adequately planned for, budgeted, and resourced.

The City of Seattle has made significant progress in developing a tribal and urban Native engagement model that begins to address the political and racial equity needs of Native communities. Substantial work lies ahead to formalize and systemize this approach citywide, but it is clear that the daily actions of city leadership and staff are contributing to progress and will inform long-term policy and system change.

Bruce Harrell was born and raised in Seattle, worked as an attorney before serving three terms on Seattle City Council, and is currently mayor of the City of Seattle. Bruce is Seattle's first Asian American, first biracial, and second Black mayor. Bruce grew up in the redlined Central District, graduated Garfield High School, attended the University of Washington on a football scholarship and played on the university's 1978 Rose Bowl-winning team. He then continued at the University of Washington for law school.

Dan Strauss represents District 6 on the Seattle City Council and serves as the Chair of the Finance, Native Communities, and Tribal Governments Committee. He represents the United Indians of All Tribes Foundation, Daybreak Star Cultural Center located in District 6, and was Chair of the Land Use Committee for the last four years.



Tailored Community Solutions

Democracy
Innovation



Better Public Meetings

Communities across the United States are challenged by making public meetings more civil, deliberative and productive. The Center will help local institutions gauge their civic infrastructure, implement better engagement practices in public meetings and hearings, measure the progress of these efforts through an Engagement Scorecard and Civility Index. This option includes a civic infrastructure scan and guidance on participant recruitment, digital engagement around meetings, and new formats for the meetings.



Civic Infrastructure Scan

The Scan examines the strengths and gaps in the support structure for local democracy, including the recent history of engagement, skills and capacities present in the community, the state of local online and in-person networks. Each scan consists of semi-structured qualitative interviews with key local leaders, followed by media and social media analysis, desk research, and recommendations on overcoming weaknesses and capitalizing on civic assets.



Charter Revision Guidance

Our **Basic Level Guidance** provides a comprehensive assessment of the current charter, reviews state open meetings laws, and conducts interviews with stakeholders both inside and outside of government. Recommendations are then crafted based on these findings.

For a more involved approach, our **Premier Level Guidance** encompasses all elements of the basic package, and goes a step further by incorporating extensive community visits, substantive public engagement for charter “visioning,” and the flexibility to add extra services tailored to the unique needs and interests of your community. For instance, you can opt for a Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA) review to enhance the financial management aspects of the charter.



Data Collection and Evaluation

The League can help with administering processes to collect and evaluate data in multiple ways. This can include qualitative and quantitative analysis, surveys, focus groups and in-depth interviews, a pre- and post- Civic Infrastructure Scan and assessment, as well as outcomes analysis.



Engagement and Collaboration Improvement

We can provide on-the-ground assistance to help communities renovate their civic infrastructure, including the work described above, plus strategies for:

- Digital engagement
- Advancing equity and measuring progress
- Engaging youth and older adults
- Assisting neighborhoods and local online networks to build community, involve more people, and connect with the government
- Skill-building for staff, elected officials, and a diversity of community leaders
- Crafting and implementing strategic plans

Email democracyinnovation@ncl.org to discuss your local challenges and find the right solution for your community.