

VERMONT
COMMISSION
ON
NATIVE AMERICAN
AFFAIRS

VCNAA MEETING MINUTES

Approved September 14, 2022

June 15, 2022

1:00 P.M. – 4:00 P.M.

Beverly Little-Thunder's House
647 Salvas Road, Huntington, VT



vcnaa.vermont.gov

COMMISSION
Carol McGranaghan, Chair
Carol Irons, Vice Chair
Hillary Hoffmann, Secretary
Patrick Lamphere
Beverly Little-Thunder
Lucy Neel
Douglas Bent
Jeffrey Benay

Members present: Carol McGranaghan (Chair); Carol Irons (Vice-Chair); Hillary Hoffmann (Secretary); Doug Bent; Jeff Benay; Patrick Lamphere; Beverly Little-Thunder

Absent: Lucy Neel

Guests: Jess Robinson (VDHP); Chief Shirly Hook (Koasek); Elodie Reed (VPR); Karen Freeman (VHCB); Stephanie Yu (Public Assets Institute); Shalini Suryanarayana, (Vermont Office of Racial Equity); Aaron Marcus (ANR)

Meeting called to order at 1:04 pm.

Beverly Little Thunder welcomed everyone to her home.

The Commissioners and guests introduced themselves.

Changes to the Agenda

There were no changes to the agenda

Approval of the May Meeting Minutes

Carol Irons moved to approve the May meeting minutes without alteration. Beverly Little-Thunder seconded the motion. All other commissioners voted in the affirmative.

Housekeeping

Carol McGranaghan passed out copies of the operating guidelines adopted by the Commission several years ago. She stated that wanted to remind commissioners what they had agreed to previously.

1. The Chair will be a person of Indigenous heritage in recognition that the land of Vermont is Abenaki country. This is also to ensure that Commission activities and projects retain an Indigenous focus rather than a Euro-American one.

2. The Commission will not officially endorse or support, but letter or funds, any group or project that is not specifically a Commission project in order to retain public neutrality.
3. It is expected that if a Commission decision is being requested that directly favors one group/affiliation/tribe, and that a Commission member is also a member of that favored group, this be recognized as a conflict of interest and the member recuse him/herself.
4. When possible, decisions are made following the consensus model.

NEW BUSINESS

1. Climate Council

Beverly Little-Thunder stated that David Plumb couldn't attend the meeting today, so she offered to summarize his presentation on his behalf. Beverly Little-Thunder stated that the Vermont Climate Council is now doing public engagement and outreach. Although there were a significant number of sub-committees within the Climate Council itself, she noted that many within the council agreed that there was little public engagement with Indigenous communities, people of color, New Americans, the poor, and others. As such, the Climate Council decided that they would go out into those communities and engage with them directly. She noted that the recommendations of the Climate Council will very likely be turned into legislation at some point. She stated that David Plumb or others in the Climate Council was interested in reaching out to the tribes directly with presentations or question and answer sessions.

Jeff Benay asked why the VCNAA wasn't the clearing house for that information, which the Commissioners could then be disseminate to the tribes. Beverly Little-Thunder stated that she thought it would be better if representatives went directly to the tribes themselves because they have the expertise, and that the goal was direct engagement. Jeff Benay then asked how the Climate Council would reach out to non-affiliated Native individuals. Beverly Little-Thunder stated that the Climate Council is willing to directly engage with them as well, but that she could use a directory of contacts to facilitate that.

The conversation then led to the process of legislative tracking, and potential legislators that could help the VCNAA with it. Shalini Suryanarayana stated that the Office of Racial Equity was developing a legislative tracker, that might perhaps be modified for their purposes. She was going to follow up later.

2. Letter of support for Anne/Mariella Squire

Carol McGranaghan stated that Mariella Squire was looking for a letter of support to update her Abenaki school curriculum. Carol McGranaghan stated that because her curriculum was being utilized and disseminated by the VCNAA to individuals interested in teaching about the Abenaki in schools, it would potentially be a project that the VCNAA would endorse. Several Commissioners agreed. Carol McGranaghan then

circulated copies of the draft letter for the Commissioners to consider. After consideration, Beverly Little-Thunder made a motion to accept the letter and return it to Mariella Squire. Carol McGranaghan seconded the motion. All Commissioners voted in the affirmative.

Break – there was a 45-minute break for a potluck lunch and conversation

NEW BUSINESS

3. Discussion of content for draft letter to Dave Massell On UVM April presentation

Carol Irons began by stating she was uncomfortable with the letter Carol McGranaghan drafted in May. She stated that if it is a Commission-drafted letter, then all of the Commissioners should be in agreement about it. She stated that the Commission acts by consensus.

Carol Irons felt that the letter unfairly characterized all of UVM with the same broad brush as the conference organizer. She also stated that while some of the attacks were personal and inappropriate, she also felt that fraudulent Abenaki claims by some are a real problem and that they were hurting the long-time, core, Abenaki community, which she termed “traditionalists”. She finally stated that status and financial benefits presented opportunities for the Abenaki, but that has led some individuals to a colonial mindset.

Beverly Little Thunder then stated that while she is not Abenaki, she has discussed some of these issues with a group of Native people in Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont, who also have issues with certain people in Vermont. She stated that people that push themselves to the front and who show up when the media is present tend to be perceived as leaders in the public eye, or as representatives of Abenaki culture. She stated that she also felt that there was misogyny being perpetrated by some in the Abenaki community. Finally, she felt that the Commission didn’t need to fight this battle. She suggested that the Chiefs travel to Odanak, with tobacco, sit down and talk. She thought the content of the letter was accusatory, divisive, and echoed violence that she did not want to support.

Carol McGranaghan stated that she also, upon reflection, agreed that the letter was too broad and accusatory and that she could not support it in its current form. She now thinks that it was written in anger. She also stated that this process has led to accusations against her in public forums that profoundly disappointed and upset her. She said that she has worked tirelessly for six years for the Commission and had no agenda other than the promotion of the Abenaki community.

Doug Bent then stated that while he understands the aspiration for non-violence, he felt the conference and the Odanak made concerted, personal attacks against the Vermont Abenaki community at large; not just specific people. He stated that he felt that there had to be a defense of the Vermont Abenaki community by the VCNAA. He stated that it was completely appropriate to respond and defend the Vermont Abenaki community. In sum, he supported the first or second draft of the letter, but that the third was “ok”, but too timid in his opinion.

Jeff Benay stated that Missisquoi Abenaki Chief Menard approached Jacques Watso at the UVM conference and asked, “What do we need to do to make this better”? Jeff Benay stated that Jacques Watso’s reply was, “Let’s get ready to rumble”. Jeff stated that the conference then went on to level extremely personal, untrue attacks against Homer St. Francis, among others. He was shocked that they would speak ill of the dead, particularly when most of the attacks were untrue or attacked Homer St. Francis’s substance abuse problem; a common ailment in Native communities.

Jeff Benay also stated that while it was not explicitly stated at the conference, or in the media since, Jacques Watso did not represent the Odanak community or the tribal council and was explicitly asked not to speak on their behalf. Jeff Benay went on to note that the Missisquoi Abenaki have had a long-term relationship with UVM, which was now in jeopardy, and that Missisquoi youth are now scared to attend because their identities are being questioned.

Jeff Benay then stated that he felt it was completely inappropriate to question any chief’s legitimacy, motives, or potential standing, because they were elected by their communities. He felt that the VCNAA writing a letter defending the Vermont Abenaki community is totally appropriate and in fact what the Commission should be doing and is charged with doing. He also stated that the Commission seemed to have no problem writing a letter against the CVU librarian before, so he is not sure why the Commission cannot send one in this instance. He supported the first version of the letter and that was the one that he wanted sent.

Patrick Lamphere stated that he also felt there need to be a response by the VCNAA. The personal attacks were made without evidence, uncalled for, and needed to be called out. He stated that it didn’t have to be an indictment of all of UVM, but that minimally David Massell and the history department needed to be addressed.

Hillary Hoffman stated that the Commission reflects all Native people in Vermont, including the four recognized tribes, unaffiliated Abenaki, and other Native people. She recognized that it was very hard to find a consensus among all of those constituents. She further stated that the environmental community in Vermont is aware of this issue and that the VCNAA should address it. She thought that while a letter might be appropriate, there did not have to be a time-pressure on writing it.

Beverly Little-Thunder made a motion to have the VCNAA collaboratively write a version of the letter everyone could agree with, beginning with a smaller committee composed of Beverly Little-Thunder, Doug Ben, and Patrick Lamphere. After some discussion, Hillary Hoffman seconded the motion. All commissioners voted in the affirmative, although Doug Bent did express some reluctance.

Announcements

There were no announcements

Public Comment

Carol McGranaghan was presented a plaque by Carol Irons on behalf of the VCNAA honoring her years of service on the VCNAA.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:05 PM.