

Open Letter to the Vermont Commission on Native American Affairs

A Request for Public Opposition to Violence and Deliberate Disruption

To the Members of the Vermont Commission on Native American Affairs:

We write collectively as Vermont Allies to the Abenaki First Nation at Odanak concerning an incident at a private educational gathering held at Rock Point in Burlington on September 24, 2026.

The gathering was organized to provide invited community members and elected officials an opportunity to hear directly from representatives of the Abenaki First Nation at Odanak, historians, policymakers, and local allies. The discussion concerned Vermont's 2011 and 2012 state-recognition processes, the historical and genealogical evidence underlying those decisions, the exclusion of the First Nations at Odanak and Wôlinak, and potential future policy action.

The invitation explicitly stated that attendance was limited to the invited recipients. Participants were asked not to forward the invitation or share remote-access information with individuals or organizations likely to disrupt or derail the conversation. A private location was selected because earlier attempts to hold evidence-based discussions of these issues in public settings had been deliberately disrupted, most notably at the Vermont State House in February 2025.

Despite those precautions, four individuals affiliated with the state-recognized Missisquoi group arrived at Rock Point without invitations and attempted to enter the gathering. Among them were Robert Richard, identified by the Missisquoi group as a Tribal Councilor, and Brenda Gagne, identified by the group as its Chief.

As State Representative Troy Headrick informed the group that the event was private and that they would not be admitted, Mr. Richard forcefully shoved Representative Headrick with both hands and made a verbal threat of further physical violence. Ms. Gagne was present and witnessed the confrontation. She did not direct Mr. Richard to step back, disengage, or otherwise attempt to de-escalate his conduct. The encounter is documented on video.

Burlington police responded to the incident. Mr. Richard was arrested, charged with simple assault, and has a pending court date.

The court will determine criminal liability. The Commission can and should address the conduct expected of people holding leadership positions within state-recognized groups. Two Missisquoi leaders participated in the effort to enter a private gathering. One was arrested and charged following the use of physical force against an elected State Representative. The other witnessed the confrontation without intervening or calling upon her Tribal Councilor to disengage.

This incident represents a serious escalation in the organized disruption of discussions concerning Vermont's state-recognition process. Disagreement over history, identity, evidence, or public policy cannot justify intimidation, threats, physical assault, or attempts to prevent others from gathering and speaking.

The Vermont Commission on Native American Affairs was established to address Native American needs in State policy, programs, and actions. That public responsibility requires the Commission to respond when leaders of a state-recognized group participate in an organized effort to disrupt an evidence-based policy discussion and that confrontation results in an arrest and a criminal charge.

We therefore ask the Commission to issue a public statement:

1. Unequivocally condemning physical violence, threats, intimidation, and deliberate disruption as responses to disagreement over Vermont's state-recognition policies;
2. Affirming the right of individuals and organizations to gather lawfully and peacefully, including in private and invitation-only settings, to examine historical evidence and consider public policy;
3. Affirming that organizers of a private gathering have the right to determine attendance and that invited participants must be free to attend without confrontation or intimidation;
4. Recognizing that individuals holding leadership positions within state-recognized groups carry a heightened responsibility to conduct themselves peacefully and to address disagreement through lawful public dialogue; and
5. Committing the Commission to oppose future efforts to obstruct, intimidate, or physically confront people participating in evidence-based discussions of Vermont's recognition policies.

We ask the Commission to publish its response within ten business days and to include this matter on the agenda of its next public meeting.

Silence in response to this escalation would communicate that violence and intimidation may be tolerated when directed at people questioning Vermont's recognition decisions. The Commission should state clearly that these methods have no legitimate place in public discourse or in the conduct of anyone serving in a leadership position within a state-recognized group.

Respectfully,

Vermont Allies to the Abenaki First Nation at Odanak