



North Dakota House of Representatives

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COMMITTEES:

Industry, Business and Labor
Transportation

Testimony of Representative Finley-DeVille

Chairwoman Roers and members of the Senate State and Local Government committee, my name is Representative Lisa Finley-DeVille. I represent District 4A, which includes, Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Nation. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of House Bill 1603, which addresses the repatriation and protection of Native American graves and sacred cultural property.

The MHA Nation has long been committed to the preservation and protection of our ancestors' sacred remains and cultural patrimony. We believe that honoring and reclaiming our ancestors is a fundamental responsibility that ensures the dignity and respect of those who came before us. For decades, our tribe has faced numerous challenges in attempting to repatriate our ancestors' remains and sacred objects from various institutions. Our efforts to reclaim these precious artifacts and human remains date back to the 1980s—long before the federal Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) was passed in 1990.

Since then, we have continued to advocate for the return of our ancestors, whose remains and sacred objects were taken from burial sites and stored in museums, universities, and other institutions across the country. These actions were a violation of our sacred traditions and our right to preserve our cultural heritage. We are grateful that federal law now requires the repatriation of Native American remains and sacred objects, but the process of compliance has been long, complex, and often hindered by financial and logistical barriers.

The appropriation in House Bill 1603 will provide essential funding for compliance with the federal NAGPRA, a critical step in addressing the repatriation of culturally significant human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony. With a dedicated compliance committee made up of tribal representatives, including those from the MHA Nation, this funding will ensure that our tribes can work directly with the State Historical Society, the Indian Affairs Commission, and the Attorney General's Office to identify, prioritize, and facilitate repatriation efforts that are in line with both federal and state requirements.

I support the creation of a committee that includes tribal historic preservation officers and other relevant stakeholders to oversee these efforts, as it provides an opportunity for tribal nations to have a voice in the repatriation process. The involvement of our tribal representatives will be helpful in ensuring that repatriation efforts align with the cultural and spiritual needs of our people. Additionally, the matching funds requirement from each tribe ensures that we all have a vested interest in the successful implementation of these efforts.

The MHA Nation stands in strong support of the establishment of policies and procedures to facilitate the repatriation of our ancestors' remains and sacred objects. This effort will not only restore the cultural dignity of our people but also promote healing and closure for families whose loved ones were taken and whose sacred traditions were violated.

I ask the this committee to support House Bill 1603. The MHA Nation, along with all North Dakota tribal nations, has waited far too long for the return of our ancestors and cultural heritage. This bill provides a crucial opportunity to finally achieve justice and restoration, and we look forward to working alongside the State Historical Society to ensure that our ancestors are brought home where they belong.

Thank you for your time and consideration.