



# North Dakota House of Representatives

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## **Representative Collette Brown**

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## **COMMITTEES:**

Industry, Business and Labor  
Government and Veterans Affairs

March 27, 2025

Madame Chair Roers, members of the committee,

For the record, my name is Collette Brown, Representative from District 9, which encompasses two of the five tribes of North Dakota—the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians (TMBCI) and the Spirit Lake Tribe (SLT). I want to thank you for the opportunity to introduce HB1603, a bill born from the painful discovery of human remains at the University of North Dakota (UND) and the insights gained from President Armacost's experience in addressing this issue.

I stand before you today to defend a bill that is not only necessary but transformative—House Bill 1603. This legislation will strengthen the implementation and compliance of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), ensuring that North Dakota stands as a leader in ethical repatriation practices and Tribal relations.

With a biennium request of \$500,000—structured as a match-grant of \$100,000 from each Tribe—this bill establishes an agreement ensuring that all funds for compliance efforts are placed in a separate account with oversight by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). The North Dakota State Historical Society will oversee these funds and establish a NAGPRA compliance committee, creating a robust and sustainable system for repatriation.

HB1603 is more than a legislative proposal; it is a moral commitment. It acknowledges that compliance with NAGPRA is not just about following regulations, it is about justice, respect, and healing. This bill forges a deeper partnership between North Dakota Tribes and the North Dakota Historical Society, ensuring that repatriation efforts are led with full transparency and in collaboration with Tribal experts who provide essential cultural and historical insight.

Since its enactment in 1990, NAGPRA has sought to return Native American human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects, and cultural patrimony to their rightful descendants and communities. Yet, more than three decades later, institutions across the nation, including those within North Dakota, continue to face significant challenges in fulfilling this obligation. The intricate and resource-intensive nature of repatriation, coupled with a lack of adequate federal funding, has led to delays that deny Indigenous communities the closure and respect they deserve.

The urgency of this issue has only grown with the U.S. Interior Department's recent regulations, announced in late 2023, aimed at streamlining the return of human remains and cultural items. These regulations emphasize four key pillars: Enhanced Tribal Authority, Consent Requirements, Inventory Updates, and Increased Transparency. However, the federal government provides merely \$2 million annually for NAGPRA compliance—an amount insufficient to support more than 574 Tribes along with museums and institutions nationwide. This bill will help where federal support falls short.

HB1603 provides the framework and resources needed to ensure our state does not fall behind. This bill will:

- Facilitate Compliance: By funding staffing, training, and consultations, this legislation ensures that repatriation efforts are carried out effectively and efficiently.
- Strengthen Collaboration: Establishing a NAGPRA compliance committee with representatives from NDHS and Tribal Historic Preservation Offices (THPO) ensures a shared decision-making process rooted in mutual respect and cultural expertise.
- Honor Commitments: Setting clear timelines for repatriation guarantees that promises to translate into action, reinforcing North Dakota's dedication to upholding both the spirit and the letter of NAGPRA.

This is not just about legal compliance; it is about dignity, reconciliation, and justice. The repatriation of ancestors and sacred items is a sacred responsibility, one that carries profound significance for Native communities. North Dakota now has the opportunity to be a national model for ethical repatriation practices and Tribal partnerships.

By supporting HB1603, we do more than allocate funds—we take a stand for what is right. We demonstrate that North Dakota values the cultural dignity, sovereignty, and history of its Indigenous peoples. This bill is an investment not just in compliance but in healing, unity, and the moral integrity of our state.

I urge you to support HB1603, to stand with North Dakota's Tribes, and to affirm our shared commitment to justice and respect. Let us move forward, not just as legislators, but as stewards of history, champions of equity, and partners in reconciliation.

Thank you for your time and consideration.