



Senator Mike Shower, Chair, State Affairs Committee  
Alaska State Capitol  
Juneau, Alaska 99081

February 14, 2022

**RE: House Bill 123 in Support of the State of Alaska Formally Recognizing Alaska's Native Tribes**

Dear members of the Senate State Affairs Committee,

Alaskans for Better Government is a ballot initiative committee that was formed so the Alaskan people would have the chance to vote on the issues raised by House Bill-123 directly if the legislature does not take action. From October to January, the initiative collected more than 56,000 signatures from Alaskans in every State House district in order to qualify this issue for the ballot.

However, if the legislature passes HB-123 in its current form, the initiative would not move forward, as HB-123 and the ballot initiative are functionally identical. There have been some questions as to whether the sponsors of the initiative are supportive of passing the legislation. We, the cosponsors of the ballot initiative, are submitting this testimony for the public record to confirm that we fully support passage of HB-123 in its current form and to provide our rationale for investing in this important idea.

In a time of widespread political division, there is a solution being offered that could bring us together. It does something different, something unique, at a time when we collectively need a win. That solution is HB-123, sponsored by Representative Zulkosky, which has broad bi-partisan support in the House and Senate.

HB-123 simply says that the State of Alaska will formally recognize the Tribes of Alaska and acknowledge a government-to-government relationship. This means the governments will have a way to sit down and talk to one another, problem solve together, and collaborate as partners. This concept is not new - it has been advanced in various forms since 1993. Last year, HB-123 passed the State House by a bipartisan vote of 35 yeas and 4 nays. Alaskans have been waiting to see whether the State Senate would pass this bill also. Since the 2022 regular legislative session began, HB-123 has picked up 10 Senate co-sponsors, including both Republicans and Democrats. There is real potential for this bill to bring Alaskans together.

A few things you should know about this bill: it is not complicated, it is not partisan, and it does not cost money. It does not confer any special status, legal authority, or funding, and it neither takes away nor grants new rights to the State or to Tribes. Rather, it creates a permanent bridge to collaboration, similar to how the State engages with other State governments. HB-123 brings Alaskans together in celebrating our rich heritage, while simultaneously leveraging a clearer legal relationship between State and Tribal governments to facilitate innovation across some of Alaska's biggest challenges.

Why is this important? Although the court system has already recognized the sovereignty of Alaska Native Tribes, it too often gets confused across state departments and administrations. Not only have we missed considerable opportunity to harness the capacities of these governments to serve Alaskans, but the State has also spent significant amounts of money suing the Tribes in Alaska, and *losing every time*. It's time for a new approach that focuses on our strengths and what we can do together.

So what does this look like in practice?

First, HB-123 sends the message that instead of a fractured, litigious relationship, the State of Alaska honors Alaska Native peoples and desires a strong working relationship with Tribes. As we heard over and over again while gathering signatures for a companion ballot initiative in support of this legislation: many Alaska Native people across the state feel this act of recognition would be enormously meaningful.

Second, HB-123 provides tangible and needed benefits for Alaska. Uniting the State and Tribes represents a critical way to unlock Alaska's problem solving potential. Today, when Tribes try to work with the State to solve problems in rural public safety or child welfare, or to pursue new funding streams from the Federal government, those efforts frequently suffer from inconsistent approaches and lack of clarity around the legal status of Alaska Native Tribes. Absent statutory support, efforts to collaborate will continue to run the risk of stalling out

We have seen enormous success in Tribal management of healthcare for Alaska Natives and non-Natives alike. In Cordova, the Ilanka Community Health Center is a Tribal organization that serves as a key provider for the whole community, providing critical healthcare services to non-Native residents and veterans. But other efforts to leverage these kinds of partnerships to solve problems have gotten bogged down in bureaucratic confusion around the State's ability to truly partner with Tribes. HB-123 would establish clear expectations across State departments.

Finally, not only is this the right thing to do, it just makes logical and financial sense. Alaska's fiscal crisis demands solutions like taxes, rearranging oil revenues, or budget reductions, while Tribal recognition offers a creative pathway to increase revenue coming into Alaska. Tribes alone bring in over \$2 billion dollars a year in health care services and infrastructure. We are leaving money on the table that would benefit all Alaskans, simply because of confusion about the State-Tribal relationship. This effort could bring much-needed clarity, streamline efforts, and potentially bring more funding into Alaska. Developing innovative agreements between the State and Tribes that outlast political turnover could eliminate redundancy across governments and

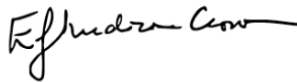
apply local knowledge to solve local challenges closer to home, while ending the series of failed and costly lawsuits.

To ensure this critical solution is not derailed by gridlock, last month we submitted the signatures to the Division of Elections to put this question before voters in the November election. But we have a chance to save Alaskans the time and expense of another full-fledged initiative campaign by passing this uncontroversial legislation now.

We humbly urge the Alaska State Senate to take up this issue in committees and move HB-123 to a vote on the Senate floor.

Sincerely,

Co-Chairs, Alaskans for Better Government



*'Waahlaal Gíidaak Barbara Blake, La quen náay Liz Medicine Crow, and Chalyee Éesh Richard Peterson serve in their personal capacity as the Co-Chairs of Alaskans for Better Government, a ballot initiative campaign supporting a statutory path for government-to-government relations between the State of Alaska and Tribes in Alaska.*