

Methodist Native caucus supports tribe at risk of losing ancestral lands

by [Ginny Underwood](#) in the [June 3, 2020](#) issue



On April 5, 2016, Mashpee Wampanoag Tribal Council member Winnie Johnson Graham (foreground) and others hold shovels during an official groundbreaking for a planned resort casino in Taunton, Massachusetts, part of the Cape Cod-based tribe's recently designated federal reservation. (AP Photo/Elise Amendola)

While most people in the United States have been focusing on the COVID-19 pandemic, a decision to revoke the reservation status of a Native American tribe's more than 300 acres in Massachusetts has gone relatively unnoticed, according to the Native American International Caucus of the United Methodist Church.

In a recent statement, NAIC leaders raised concerns about the secretary of the interior's 2018 decision to disestablish tribal lands of the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe, located on Cape Cod.

“The Mashpee Wampanoag have lived on their land for more than 12,000 years. After a decades-long struggle to finally win official recognition as a sovereign Native American nation, the U.S. Department of Interior has ordered the removal of 321 acres of land out of federal trust, making it impossible for the tribe to govern on its land,” according to the caucus statement.

“Taking our land is a direct attack on our culture and our way of living,” said Mashpee Wampanoag tribal chairman Cedric Cromwell in a statement. “The steps being taken now—in the middle of the nationwide pandemic—to disestablish our reservation and take our land out of trust has created a crisis on top of a crisis.”

The land dispute began in 2015, when the Department of the Interior’s Bureau of Indian Affairs approved the taking of two parcels of land into trust for the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe. The tribe planned to use the land largely for housing and economic activities—primarily a gaming casino and resort to produce needed income, according to court documents.

Local residents filed a federal suit challenging the BIA’s decision. The district court found that the BIA had overextended its authority to take land into trust. A federal appeals court then ordered the Department of the Interior to rescind its decision, ending the tribe’s plans for a casino.

“The Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe remains a federally recognized tribe,” said a Department of the Interior spokesperson in a press release. “This decision does not affect the federal recognition status of the tribe, only Interior’s statutory authority to accept the land in trust.”

The timing of the decision comes as Mashpee Wampanoag leaders have been focused on responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has hit Native Americans hard.

“In the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, which already inordinately impacts our tribal people due to lack of access to adequate, life-saving health measures, it is unconscionable to stand by while any tribe is denied the self-determination, authority and access to needed resources to care for its own people,” the Native American International Caucus statement said.

In 2007, the tribe won federal recognition allowing it to reestablish its Indian reservation, where it now operates a Montessori school for more than 40 children, its

own police force, medical and dental clinics, and tribal housing. The tribe website states that the disestablishment would take away millions of dollars in funding for the tribe's clean water initiative, critical community programs, and emergency services.

Chebon Kernell, executive director of the United Methodist Church's Native American Comprehensive Plan, said the action by the Department of the Interior represents one more form of displacement forced upon a community that has endured similar treatment for centuries.

"We stand in solidarity with members of the Mashpee Wampanoag Nation as they defend their ancestral homelands and rights to self-determination," Kernell said. "Persons supporting the rights of Native American people should petition congressional representatives and respective parties to reverse this trend immediately."

The NAIC and Native interest organizations are showing support for the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe through letters and phone calls to lawmakers and on social media by posting the hashtag #StandWithMashpee. People can also support the tribe by signing an online petition. —United Methodist News