

State affirms status of Burlington County tribe

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Body

TRENTON - New Jersey has restored official recognition to two American Indian tribes, officials said Monday.

Attorney General Gurbir Grewal announced separate agreements with the Powhatan Renape Nation, which has tribal grounds in Westampton, and the Ramapough Lenape Nation in the state's northeast region.

Grewal's office four months ago settled civil rights lawsuits brought by a third tribe, the Bridgeton-based Nanticoke Lenni-Lenape Tribal Nation.

"Because the three tribes were so similarly recognized and then mistreated, it only makes sense that all three should now see their recognition reaffirmed," said Greg Werkheiser, an attorney for the tribes.

Reverend Roy E. Bundy, a Powhatan spokesman, said the tribe "can now turn our attention fully to the hard work of building the strength of our community."

In a statement, the two tribes said they had received state recognition "beginning in 1980." They claimed former Gov. Chris Christie allowed "state bureaucrats to deny and undermine the tribes' status in communications with federal and state agencies."

The tribes claimed the efforts to undermine their recognition reflected a mistaken concern that would open casinos in competition with Atlantic City's gaming industry.

"All three tribes have disclaimed any interest in profiting from vice, including casino gaming," Werkheiser's statement said.

"The parties agree that official state recognition does not provide the tribes with federal casino gaming rights," Grewal noted in a statement.

Without state recognition, the tribes said, they could not obtain grants to support health, education and job-training programs for their members, as well as the right to label and sell traditional arts and crafts as American Indian-made, among other setbacks.

In announcing the agreement, Grewal said the state "revokes any past denials of recognition" for the tribes.

"Tribal rights are significant rights, and we are glad that, through good faith negotiation, we've been able to reach an accord with both the Powhatan and Ramapough nations," he said.

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Grewal said the state will notify "all relevant" agencies of the newly formalized recognition status of Powhatan and Ramapough nations within 30 days.

Those agencies include the Indian Arts & Crafts Board, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and U.S. Small Business Administration.

The lag in recognizing the Powhatan and Ramapough tribes occurred because those groups had not sued the state, Werkheiser said.

"The state was first focused on resolving the litigation by the Nanticoke Lenni-Lenape Tribal Nation," he said. "Once that was done ... they focused on the other two tribes."

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