

TRIBE FILES SUIT

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Bridgeton

The Nanticoke Lenni-Lenape Tribal Nation - which traces its history in the New Jersey area back 12,000 years - is suing state officials and demanding official recognition as an American-Indian tribe with the state.

The Nanticoke tribe, which says it has 3,000 members and is based in Bridgeton, filed a federal civil rights lawsuit on Monday contending that not having the recognition harms it psychologically and financially.

The tribe says its well-being is at risk because of a two-sentence email sent by a staff member at the New Jersey Commission on American Indian Affairs to the federal government's General Accounting Office in 2011 that said New Jersey had no recognized tribes.

"So many of the benefits and protections that we receive rely on some level of recognition and, psychologically, it is a tremendous impact on us - and our students in school - to have people question your identity based on if a government agency acknowledges it," said the Rev. John Norwood, a Bridgeton councilman and judge of the tribe.

The Attorney General's Office declined to comment on the lawsuit, citing the pending litigation.

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The suit says the tribe, which has a history in the region going back 500 generations, was officially recognized in 1982 with a legislative resolution.

"During the past 33 years, the Nation and its members have expended time, money, and energy in reliance on the state's recognition; the Nation has also, to a significant degree, associated its tribal identity with that recognition," the lawsuit states.

This recognition continued until late 2012, according to the tribe's attorney, Greg Werkheiser, when the state decided to no longer recognize the Nanticoke or the two other New Jersey tribes - the Ramapough Mountain Indians and Powhatan-Renape Nation - because of the possibility of recognized tribes trying to develop casinos.

The Nation tried to deal with the state and Gov. Chris Christie's administration, the lawsuit says, but was unable to come to any terms.

"We are in the midst of an incredible national conversation about race in this country and, by and large, it's a mature conversation," Werkheiser said. "That is not the case today in New Jersey, where this administration is simply closing its eyes and pretending whole swaths of people do not exist."

The Nanticoke are opposed to gambling, which goes against their religious beliefs.

Sarah Curtis

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"This is not just about the tribe's ability to economically sustain itself, it's about their dignity and it's about - after 200 years of being treated terribly by the colonies and then by the state - there was a period beginning in the '80s where the relationship turned," Werkheiser said.

According to the lawsuit, the Nanticoke will no longer be able to indicate that its arts and crafts are "Indian made" with their designation taken away.

The tribe says it has 40 people making crafts, which produces an annual income of about \$260,000.

"The wampum belts that I weave, I can no more claim that they are American Indian-made than the non-native kindergarten students making macaroni necklaces for American Indian history month," Norwood said. "That the state is not protecting our arts and crafts, by its action, renders my wampum weave and any arts and crafts made by the tribe ineligible to being called Indian-made."

The tribe says there will also be a loss of \$600,000 in grants, 30 tribal jobs and college scholarship awards.

The state Assembly passed a bill in 2011 on procedures for recognizing tribes, but the measure never received a vote in the Senate.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

Don E. Woods, NJ Advance Media, dwoods @njadvancemedia.com

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Graphic

The Nanticoke tribe, which is based in Bridgeton, filed a federal civil rights lawsuit on Monday, contending that not having official recognition harms it psychologically and financially. (Stephanie Maksin/ For south jersey times)

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