

## Land Acknowledgment

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San Francisco Elections Commission

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### Introduction

Throughout this nation's history, Indigenous people have faced disenfranchisement and injustice. Native Americans were not recognized as United States citizens until Congress passed the Indian Citizenship Act in 1924 and only achieved 50-state suffrage in 1957<sup>1</sup>. For perspective, Californian women secured voting rights in 1911. Other de jure and de facto federal, state, and local policies have led to inhumanities such as land theft, forced sterilization, exploitation, barring of religious expression, and genocide throughout history to the present.

The Ramaytush (pronounced 'rah-my-toosh') are the original peoples of *Yelamu*, the San Francisco Peninsula. Prior to the arrival of the Spanish in 1769, the Ramaytush Ohlone numbered approximately 1500 persons and lived in ten small tribal groups. Today, the four family lineages documented are from one single person, "Leandra," who survived the colonization of San Francisco.

The Ramaytush Ohlone people are still here today and work to preserve their cultural knowledge, expand knowledge of their history, revitalize their language, and protect *wahrep* – mother earth – and serve the communities in San Francisco. Yet, the Indigenous community and their views and needs are not consistently reflected nor included in government planning and policy discussions.

On August 24th, 2020 the American Indian Cultural District (henceforth AICD) and the Association of Ramaytush Ohlone wrote to Mayor Breed, San Francisco Human Rights Commission, and San Francisco Board of Supervisors [with a list of demands](#), including a demand that the City "Honor the First People of San Francisco, The Ramaytush Ohlone, by recognizing them and their ancestral homelands prior to all City meetings" through land acknowledgments.

A land acknowledgment is a formal statement that recognizes and respects both Indigenous Peoples as traditional stewards of land and the enduring relationship between Indigenous Peoples and their traditional territories.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, Ramaytush Ohlone believe that when their relatives are acknowledged, all Indigenous people are honored and recognized. Thus, land acknowledgments offer a first step in cultivating a meaningful relationship between San Francisco government and the Indigenous Peoples.

### Relevant Elections Commission Context

<sup>1</sup> [Library of Congress. "Today in History - June 2." The Library of Congress, 2015.](#)

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from [Native American and Indigenous Initiatives, Northwestern University](#) (2021).



Following the letter of demands, AICD staff and Ramaytush Ohlone Association members have worked with various City agencies, including the Board of Supervisors, Human Rights Commission, Rent Board Commission, Commission on the Environment, Board of Education, the Health Commission, and others, to continue advocating for this long overdue recognition for Ramaytush as First Nations People of this land. All aforementioned agencies have adopted land acknowledgment resolutions in tandem with Racial Equity Action Plans.

On March 17, 2021, the San Francisco Elections Commission discussed a draft resolution for reciting a land acknowledgment at the opening of every future Commission meeting (see page 5). During this meeting, Commissioner Charles Jung expressed concern about the legal and historical implications of the acknowledgment's language pertaining to "original land" and "sovereignty." Commissioner Jung asked the Deputy City Attorney (henceforth DCA) to clarify if the City Attorney's office had reviewed and approved the language for the Elections Commission land acknowledgment draft, to which the DCA affirmed. The DCA also shared that the draft modeled the language approved, adopted, and employed by the Board of Supervisors and other City Commissions. Commissioner Jung expressed continued discomfort with the language and suggested additional research be explored into the original history of the land and for the DCA to provide additional insight into the legal nuances. The Commission moved to table the discussion until the April meeting.

At the April 21, 2021 general meeting, Commissioner Jung shared that he conducted research and felt the historical context was incomplete, yet consistent. Commissioner Jung additionally expressed concern about reciting the acknowledgment at every Commission meeting and implications for allocating meeting time to do so when other resolutions did not receive the same time or attention. Commissioner Jung presented a second, revised draft for the resolution based on his concerns (see page 7). The majority of other Commissioners (four out of the six) expressed desire to maintain the recitation requirement. Commissioner Jung's other proposed changes achieved no immediate consensus amongst Commissioners. Separately, the DCA reaffirmed its previous statement that the original draft language (page 5) was reviewed and approved by the City Attorney's office.

When the agenda item moved to public comment, a member of the public suggested that the Commission engage with the Ramaytush Ohlone and that equity decision-making should include the communities who are most impacted by the decisions. Commissioner Bernholz, who was President at the time, agreed to seek out the community input and additional subject matter expertise.

In late April and early May 2021, Commissioner Bernholz exchanged emails with the AICD Executive Director, Sharaya Souza. In response, the AICD suggested that there may be a new process for developing land acknowledgements with City agencies and suggested that the Elections Commission postpone the initiative until the process had been established, likely in Fall 2021. Additionally, the Executive Director expressed interest in collaboration between the Elections Commission and a Native American community liaison to improve representation and resources surrounding voting and elections. Commissioner Bernholz expressed gratitude and a desire to partner again once the process had been codified, in addition to sharing resources surrounding opportunities to participate in Redistricting.

In late 2021, the Ramaytush Ohlone Association developed a template and process for City agencies to develop land acknowledgments that could be adjusted or customized as appropriate. As previously mentioned, the Association has since partnered with the Human Rights Commission and several other Commissions to utilize this framework.

## **Progress to Date**

In late August 2022, in my continued efforts around Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Belonging, and Justice (DEIBJ) for the Elections Commission, I revisited the Land Acknowledgment conversation with AICD and the Association of Ramaytush Ohlone through Commissioner Bernholz. I connected with Jonathan Cordero, Chair of the Ramaytush Ohlone Tribe and Executive Director of the Association, who serves as a representative of the Tribe's interests. The Association functions as the nonprofit branch of the Tribe.

In our conversation, Mr. Cordero shared that land acknowledgments are important for increasing awareness but should also serve as an entry point for further collaboration with the community. He also provided land acknowledgment examples that are currently utilized across City agencies as guides for the Elections Commission and stated the need to explicitly identify and acknowledge land sovereignty, in contrast to the March and April 2021 Election Commission meeting discussions. Following this meeting, I utilized these multi-stakeholder (the Ramaytush Ohlone community, respective City agencies, and City Attorney's office) approved examples to develop the newly proposed resolution presented today, in our regular meeting on October 19, 2022. In late September Mr. Cordero approved the resolution draft included in today's packet. In mid-October, DCA Ana Flores reviewed and affirmed the updated version.

Additionally, in response to Mr. Cordero's feedback about continued engagement and support for the community, I engaged with AICD in September to discuss future opportunities for collaboration. These are ongoing discussions and are just the beginning of much more work together.

Mr. Cordero and AICD have been invited to attend and share with community members details for participating in today's regular meeting.

# Land Acknowledgement Statements

## Things to Consider

- **Why?** Before you begin writing a Land Acknowledgement statement you should ask yourself why it is important to do so. What does it mean to be a settler on someone else's stolen land?
- **It's for You.** Land Acknowledgement statements are primarily for you, not for us, and YOU should read them to open meetings, events, etc., not us.
- **Be creative . . . or not.** Land Acknowledgement statements can take different forms, from a formal policy to performance art.
- **Work with us.** We are here to offer advice, but we encourage you to write them on your own, and then let us review it before it is finalized.
- **Coherence.** Integrate your organization's (or personal) values, initiatives, principles, etc. into the statement in order to enhance coherence or to show alignment.
- **Exclusivity.** Contrary to the practice of inclusivity, Land Acknowledgement statements are exclusive to the original peoples of the land where you live and work.
- **Land Acknowledgement Plus!** How does the Land Acknowledgement statement live in your work? In other words, activate the ideas and commitments behind the Land Acknowledgement statement--make it more than just a symbolic statement. We are excited to partner with you in those actions.

[Source: American Indian Cultural District SF](#)

**2021 Land Acknowledgment Draft – Version 1**

**SAN FRANCISCO ELECTIONS COMMISSION**

Resolution on Ramaytush Ohlone Land Acknowledgement

(Adopted by the San Francisco Elections Commission on **DATE**.)

WHEREAS, The San Francisco Elections Commission acknowledges that the Ramaytush Ohlone are the original peoples of the San Francisco Peninsula; and

WHEREAS, The San Francisco Elections Commission acknowledges that the area comprising the City and County of San Francisco was originally inhabited by the Yelamu, an independent tribe of the Ramaytush Ohlone peoples; and

WHEREAS, The San Francisco Elections Commission acknowledges that the Ramaytush Ohlone peoples have survived the brutalities of colonialism, enslavement, genocide, discrimination, racism, gender-based violence, theft, forced assimilation, and other atrocities driven by local, federal, and global governments; and

WHEREAS, The San Francisco Elections Commission acknowledges that Ramaytush Ohlone peoples are not a mythical population of the past, but an integral and active community in the present San Francisco Bay Area region, and beyond, whose ongoing exclusion and invisibility denied the greater Native American community's inclusion and respect in San Francisco; and

WHEREAS, The San Francisco Elections Commission acknowledges that the City and County of San Francisco was founded on unceded territory, and continues to participate in the erasure and exclusion of the Ramaytush Ohlone peoples; and

WHEREAS, To acknowledge the truth of the lands and peoples history is a human right and a demonstration of honor and respect for the contributions and sacrifices of the Ramaytush Ohlone ancestors that inhabit and care for this land before us; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, From this date forward, the San Francisco Elections Commission will state the following land acknowledgement at the beginning of each commission meeting, following the Call to Order and Roll Call:

The San Francisco Elections Commission acknowledges that we are on the unceded ancestral homeland of the Ramaytush Ohlone who are the original inhabitants of the San Francisco Peninsula. As the indigenous stewards of this land and in accordance with their traditions, the Ramaytush Ohlone have never ceded, lost, nor forgotten their responsibilities as the caretakers of this place, as well as for all peoples who reside in their traditional territory. As guests, we recognize that we benefit from living and working on their traditional homeland. We wish to pay our respects by acknowledging the Ancestors, Elders, and Relatives of the Ramaytush Ohlone community and by affirming their sovereign rights as First Peoples.

**2021 Land Acknowledgment Draft – Version 2 (Commissioner Jung’s revisions)**

**SAN FRANCISCO ELECTIONS COMMISSION**

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