



May 13, 2025

Submitted via email to: HouseFinance@rilegislature.gov

Submitted Testimony of Dr. Taino J. Palermo, Esq.

General Counsel, Pokanoket Tribe

Legal Director, Center for Indigenous Peoples Rights

Dear Members of the House Finance Committee,

I write in my capacity as General Counsel for the Pokanoket Tribe and as the Legal Director of the Center for Indigenous Peoples Rights to express strong support for House Bill 6291, legislative measures that advance long-overdue legal and moral recognition of the Pokanoket Tribe's stewardship of its ancestral homeland.

As one of the oldest Indigenous governing bodies in what is now the northeastern United States, the Pokanoket Tribe holds an unbroken connection to the East Bay lands encompassing Bristol, Warren, Barrington, and East Providence—including Mount Hope (Potumtuk), the spiritual and political seat of Massasoit Ousamequin. The Pokanoket people remain active stewards of their territory, revitalizing language, maintaining tribal government, and upholding cultural and environmental preservation covenants across East Bay.

In 2024, Brown University transferred 255 acres of land at Mount Hope to a preservation trust organized by the Pokanoket Tribe. This historic conveyance formalized what the Tribe has always known: that these lands hold sacred, cultural, and historic significance that predates European colonization and extends into the present day. Yet, due to the absence of a Rhode Island state tribal recognition process, non-federally recognized tribes—no matter how historically grounded or legally organized—remain vulnerable to exclusion from public policy, consultation, and economic sustainability mechanisms.

House Bill H6291 proposes an amendment to § 44-3-3 of the Rhode Island General Laws to explicitly exempt from property taxation real and personal property held by the Pokanoket Tribe in the form of a Rhode Island nonprofit land trust committed to cultural preservation and environmental stewardship. In doing so, the legislature is not granting a handout but rather correcting a centuries-long imbalance in legal recognition and access to the same exemptions currently afforded to similarly situated nonprofit organizations across Rhode Island.

The State already acknowledges the Pokanoket Tribe in a variety of public ways: through Senate Resolution 1034 (2025), in public history exhibits, through recorded municipal acknowledgments of tribal stewardship over land, and in state and federal legal filings where the Tribe's sovereign interests have been asserted and upheld under the law. This bill now invites our tax code to reflect this reality.



The Pokanoket Tribe has asked for no financial compensation. We ask only that Rhode Island's legal frameworks treat Indigenous cultural preservation efforts with the same respect it grants to historical societies, religious organizations, and community-based nonprofits. By passing these bills, Rhode Island will take a meaningful step toward inclusive policy grounded in equity, cultural continuity, and legal consistency.

I urge you to support H6291 and to advance them out of committee with a favorable recommendation.

Thank you for your time and your commitment to justice.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several overlapping loops and a horizontal stroke, representing the signature of Dr. Taino J. Palermo.

Dr. Taino J. Palermo, Esq.
General Counsel, Pokanoket Tribe
Co-Founder & Co-Director, Center for Indigenous Peoples Rights

cc: Representative June Speakman (jspeakman@rwu.edu)
Representative Susan Donovan (rep-donovan@rilegislature.gov)