

Testimony of Mayor Scott Neisler
House Natural Resources Committee, Subcommittee on Indigenous Peoples
September 24, 2020

Chairman Gallego, Ranking Member Cook, Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify here today. It is a great pleasure to have the honor to be here supporting the Catawba Indian Nation and their effort to make full use of their trust land in Kings Mountain, North Carolina.

I want to begin by saying that it has been an absolute pleasure working with Chief Harris, and his team throughout this process. It has been a long one, without question, but it was apparent that the Department of Interior took their time to get their decision right. I am hopeful that we are finally coming to the closing chapters of righting the historical wrongs suffered by the Catawba people, and bringing much-needed economic development to the Kings Mountain community.

My name is Scott Neisler, lifelong citizen as well as the mayor of Kings Mountain, North Carolina. I have held this role since 2015, and have been personally involved in this project since that day.

It's been said that the Catawbans are a South Carolina tribe. How can they be just a South Carolina tribe before there were any state lines? There is evidence otherwise. Dr David G Moore stated, "decades of archaeological research provide evidence of a long history of Catawba Indian occupation in the Catawba River valley region of what would become North and South Carolina" .. After the English arrived the Catawbans continued to hunt and farm the Piedmont region over a wide area. Kings Mountain is located in that Catawba River Basin.

My involvement on behalf of the City of Kings Mountain was not the first time that our community has benefited from the generosity of the Catawbans of this area. Before our nation was founded, Catawba warriors Helped American patriot militias defeat British loyalist forces here at Kings Mountain. The Battle of Kings Mountain was a turning point in the war for independence. It marked the first time that American forces were able to go on the offensive in the southern colonies, and it changed the mindset of the Crown of England from the notion that North or South Carolina would support their cause.

Almost 250 years later, we are once again witnessing the same dedication to our community. Tribal leadership and their development team have gone every step of the way as the Catawba Indian Nation has worked to put land into trust and pursue economic development opportunities in Kings Mountain.

It started with the early and direct outreach to the city and our staff. The City knew from day one what the tribe was doing, and why. And they have maintained those open lines of communication for almost a decade now.

More formally, one early endeavor was the execution of a Memorandum of Agreement between the tribe and Cleveland County, North Carolina--the County in which Kings Mountain resides. This agreement formalizes the government-to-government relationship between the County and the Nation, setting out the important rules of the road for how the two governments work together. In addition, the City recently has executed a government-to-government agreement with the tribe regarding utility services to be provided. So, we work well together.

The tribe has also made concrete commitments to our community in the form of purchasing and hiring agreements. Of particular importance: the tribe committed to hiring minorities for at least 40% of its workforce. Kings Mountain has more than its share of poverty. About 13% of families and 19% of the population in the city were below the poverty line. And this community has been impacted by the health and economic consequences of the pandemic, so this commitment is even more meaningful today than it was when it was signed.

Regarding the legislation under consideration today, for Kings Mountain, the most important provision of the legislation, Section (2)(b), clearly puts tribal gaming operated by the Catawba Indian Nation in the State of North Carolina under the rules and regulations of the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act. This is critical to ensure that the operations of this establishment meet the expectations of our community. We are fortunate that the Trump Administration has already steered the Tribe in that direction. And we understand that the Governor and Tribal leadership are actively working on a State-Tribal Gaming Compact which will clearly lay out these rules. This framework is well established in North Carolina, and across the Country, and our community is grateful that the Administration and the Nation are taking this approach.

Thank you once again, Mr. Chairman and Mr. Ranking Member, for the honor of testifying before you today. We look forward to continuing our partnership with the tribe, and this legislation will play a big role in helping to facilitate our future relationship. Although it's taken 10 years for us to get here, I believe that the next 10 years will bring even more economic success and partnership.

Thank you for your consideration, and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.