Dear Colleagues:

For the past six years, the City of Portland’s Tribal Relations Program has existed to promote culturally grounded, long-term, positive relationships and decision-making processes through government-to-government engagement with Tribal governments and the urban Indian community. A continuous increase in knowledge and understanding of Native culture, customs and lifeways is essential to bolstering the program’s initiatives that are being implemented to promote greater Native visibility and engagement, decolonization of public spaces, inclusivity, systems change, and respect for sovereignty and treaty rights.

Since beginning in the Tribal Relations Program Director’s position in 2017, it’s been my personal mission to ensure that Native voices are heard within the walls of City Hall, uplifted during discussions in City Council chambers, and valued in the dialogues held by City employees. My goal has been to ensure that all City officials and staff understand that Indigenous perspectives, knowledge, and voices must be considered when making decisions on how the work of the City is done and how those decisions impact all who live in the City, not just Native people whose ancestors have lived in the place we now call Portland for generations. And with that in mind, the Tribal Relations Program that I developed has sought to bring Tribal nation sovereignty and decolonization to the forefront of every City bureau, to shift ways of thinking and to re-indigenize the City of Portland. The result is a Program that offers a unique opportunity to build relationships and collaborate with tribal communities by demonstrating a commitment beyond performative words to repairing the harms of settler-colonialism. I am proud of the advancements I’ve accomplished. The Program has established a firm foundation that I hope and expect will be built upon by the next Tribal Relations Director.

Growing a program from a concept on paper to a fully operational City-wide program has not been without its challenges. I did not accept this position because it was going to be easy, because I knew I could help make a difference – and I have done so. I courageously took on this position because I knew that it was an opportunity to make historic systems change that would benefit Indigenous people and Tribal nations for generations to come, all of which would honor the sacrifices made and losses experienced by Native peoples from our past. It has been a distinct honor and pleasure to serve as the City of Portland’s Tribal Relations Director. Serving in this position, I met hundreds of amazing City employees, and had the pleasure of working alongside some of the most dedicated people that I have ever met. I have been inspired by the level of commitment that I have witnessed by my colleagues in their willingness to learn about Indigenous cultures and ways of knowing, and their respect and humility to set aside ethnocentric habits for a different way of seeing the world around them and a new way of working, in genuine collaboration. The work that my program accomplished would not have been possible without my City colleagues. To each of you, I send my utmost gratitude for being my partners in the endeavor to shift how the City engages with Tribal nations and with urban
Indigenous Portlanders. All the changes that have been made were possible because we did it together, and together those changes can be sustained into the future.

Some of you may not know the full breadth of work the Tribal Relations Program has accomplished in the past six years. Our program serves internally the 26 Bureaus and 6 elected Offices, maintains relationships with seven Tribal nations in the region, which includes the Cowlitz Indian Tribe, the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, the Nez Perce Tribe, the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians, the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, the Yakama Nation, and the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, and works to improve services and conditions for the almost 90,000 Native American Portlanders that live in our City’s metropolitan area. Those services and conditions include expanding public art installations, increasing housing and houseless services, increasing access to first foods and spaces for gathering, protecting salmon and lamprey, protecting in-ground cultural resources, creating systems to improve City tribal consultation processes, giving assistance with navigating city systems and processes, advocating for new community spaces, and ensuring that long range land use planning includes consideration of tribal treaty rights and the application of tribal ecological knowledge in land management and sustainability practices. The list goes on. At times, the need is so great that our small but mighty team can barely keep up. However, that means that our program is serving in the manner it was intended for and, importantly, the Native community and Tribal governments have faith in our ability to perform at the highest level to meet their needs.

The Tribal Relations Program set the ambitious goal of educating City employees about the importance of cultivating relationships with Tribal nations and understanding the fundamentals of tribal sovereignty, treaty rights, and the critical need to protect cultural resources for future generations. Our goal was met through the development of the annual Tribal Relations Employee Training that grew from 120 attendees in the first year to 750 attendees, including staff from over 15 local jurisdictions and organizations by the third year. Significant progress has been made with City colleagues including the Police Bureau, most of whom had no familiarity with the epidemic of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW). Now we have ensured that all police officers give full faith and credit to tribal court protective orders, that all 7,000 City employees are familiar with the acronym MMIW, and that Portlanders within the City of Roses now annually recognize City Council’s Resolution for the National Day of Awareness of this epidemic crisis. And all are knowledgeable of the statistics and ways they can contribute to ending this violent epidemic.

The Program also worked with the Office of Equity and Human Rights and the Auditor’s Office to improve and increase the collection of American Indian and Alaska Native data to include greater detail and stronger data validity, such as tribal affiliation. Now, City offices are better able to identify and track the number of Native community members to whom they provide services and are better poised to include increased outreach when conducting data collection. And with the passage of the Land Acknowledgement Resolution in 2020, each Bureau and Council Office now deliberately sets an annual tribal relations work plan and ends the year with a report that is shared with the Tribal Relations Program to capture the impact of the work they accomplished.
In my role as the Tribal Relations Director, it has been of the utmost importance to ensure that the City recognized and heard all tribes who had treaty rights, interests, and historic connections to the Portland area, that we did not give preference to one tribe over another, and that we were diligent in our actions to ensure that we did not at any time contribute or were complicit in any way to tribalism. In order to accomplish this during my tenure, we brought together seven distinct sovereign tribal nations for three annual Tribal Nation Summits where they felt welcomed, included, and heard. The majority of the tribes shared that it was the first time they had ever been welcomed to the City of Portland in such a respectful way. This led to a level of relationship-building with tribes that had never existed before between our City and this number of Tribal nations. Through these relationships the City and Tribal governments, has seen mutual benefits in numerous projects and partnerships that will see positive outcomes for generations to come, if the Tribal Relations program continues to be given the importance both required by treaty obligations and that the City has promised through Council action.

The greatest compliment to our shared accomplishments of all the work that has been done over the past six years is to see the ripple effect that we have had in the Portland Metropolitan Area. I am especially happy to know that the City’s Tribal Relations Program inspired our regional partners to start their own programs. There are now similar programs and positions at Metro Regional Government, Multnomah County, Portland General Electric, Portland State University, and others to be established in the near future.

My most important thanks are offered to the Tribal nations that opened their doors to the City after we had closed our doors to them for so many decades, and to the urban Native community for their advocacy, creative energy finding solutions, and limitless volunteerism in the form of physical, mental, and emotional labor. They continue to make us better at how we do our work.

People who I would like to recognize who helped lift me up along the way include the following: Commissioner Amanda Fritz, the late Commissioner Nick Fish, former Office of Government Relations Director Elizabeth Edwards, Representative Tawna Sanchez, the Acting Assistant Secretary of the Army for Civil Works Jamie Pinkham, and the Director of the National Parks Service Charles Sams. To my beloved children Gerald and Larae, thank you for all your sacrifices and support while I served the City and our Native communities.

As of June 9th I will resign from my position. The time has come for me to turn this work over to the next Native leader who will take the Tribal Relations Program into the future. I am confident that they will carry this valuable work forward, bringing fresh ideas and energy to the role. I look forward to seeing who will step into the position next and send them all the positive encouragement and support for a successful and meaningful tenure.

For questions about the Tribal Relations Program, please contact Miranda Mishan at 503-865-6801 and miranda.mishan@portlandoregon.gov. To get in touch with me personally, you may contact me at xxxxxxxxx@gmail.com. With gratitude,