



Toward an Indigenous- Led Naming Policy: Key Findings and Recommendations (May 20, 2025)

Wakan Tipi Awanyankapi, Minneapolis Park
and Recreation Board, City of St. Paul, and
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Summary of Key Findings and Recommendations from the Indigenous Place Names Roundtable held on May 20, 2025, to inform MPRB's next steps and commitment to the American Indian Community.

Introduction and Purpose

This report synthesizes the key findings and actionable recommendations from the Indigenous Place Names Roundtable, held on May 20, 2025, from 4 to 6 PM at the Minnesota Indian Women's Resource Center (MIWRC). The roundtable was a crucial milestone in fulfilling the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board's (MPRB) commitment to listen to the American Indian community regarding place naming efforts.

The primary goal of this report is to provide MPRB staff, particularly the Indigenous Liaison and their team who coordinated the event, with a clear, actionable, and community-informed synthesis of the key discussions and input. It aims to support MPRB's next steps by highlighting emergent themes, offering strategic recommendations, and reinforcing the critical need for accountability and transparency to Dakota people and the American Indian community.

Event Overview and Methodology

The Indigenous Place Names Roundtable was an Indigenized process designed to generate deep insight, guidance, and a culturally relevant pathway for determining Indigenous place names. It featured an experienced expert panel of Dakota knowledge keepers and historians, alongside valuable input from the Minneapolis American Indian community. An Indigenous Consultant and Content Facilitator facilitated the event, who moderated discussions based on structured questions developed by a Host Planning Team. Panelists included Dr. Kate Beane (Flandreau Santee Sioux), Cheyenne St. John (Lower Sioux Indian Community), and Samantha Odegard (Upper Sioux Community).

The discussions aimed to explore how MPRB could effectively and equitably incorporate the community into new community-informed decision-making processes for future park name changes, emphasizing the urgent need for a process where Indigenous voices lead final decisions to ensure equitable representation and collaboration. The panelists and audience were asked questions that explored historical perspectives, participatory methods for incorporating Indigenous wisdom and protocols, and immediate and long-term tangible outcomes. These clearly defined outcomes would be measured to ensure transparency and accountability moving forward. Data was

collected from a Dakota expert panel, the Minneapolis American Indian community, MPRB staff, and participant idea/question cards. This information will guide the establishment of full, equal, and effective participation, decision-making processes, and indigenous-informed naming criteria for MPRB's next steps.

Key Findings and Themes

The roundtable discussion highlighted several interconnected themes, reflecting the deep historical and contemporary cultural processes of Dakota and American Indian communities and the significance of place names for Indigenous communities and the urgent need for systemic change for Dakota and the Minneapolis American Indian community, who historically make up a politically and culturally distinct community of Minnesota and the Twin Cities:

- **Dakota Connection to Land and Place Names:** From a Dakota perspective, place names reflect relational worldviews rather than ownership. Historically, names were descriptive, indicating usage for ceremonies, foraging, or camp sites (e.g., "Where we camped, we described that place"). Sacred sites and villages, such as Black Dog's Village (now Eagan) and Bde Maka Ska, hold deep intergenerational and spiritual meaning. Participants emphasized the concept of Dakota people as "spatial thinkers" with a continuous relationship to the landscape, contrasting it with a "temporal," segmented, and "terminal way of thinking" often seen in state processes that categorize things by "first and last and biggest to smallest". The Minneapolis metro area was historically a "massive economic hub," for Dakota people with sacred sites spread throughout, many unrecognized or unrecorded.
- **Historical Erasure and Reclamation:** The current landscape carries the weight of systemic erasure of Dakota people through settler renaming and urban development. This erasure includes the forced removal of Dakota people and the subsequent lack of recognition for their enduring connection to the land, even when it was illegal for them to be present. Reclaiming names, such as the effort to restore Bde Maka Ska, is seen as a model of resistance and restoration of Indigenous presence and knowledge systems, challenging "white supremacy" that resists such changes. The effort to rename Sibley Park and the struggle to educate the public about figures like Henry Sibley underscore this point.
- **Cultural Revitalization and Language:** The Dakota language is central to place naming and is seen as a vehicle to honor ancestors and restore the worldview. Indigenous languages must be used responsibly and respectfully, requiring consultation with first-language speakers, elders, and traditional knowledge holders. While historically place names and sacred sites were not named after people, recognizing that human beings evolve and adapt (e.g., through contemporary Dakota naming governance processes via community vote for "land of the yellow medicine") is part of the ongoing process.
- **Consensus and Community Process:** Achieving consensus is recognized as ideal but difficult within current bureaucratic systems. Historically, Dakota people practiced consensus and pluralism, accepting multiple truths and perspectives,

meaning that not all Dakota people will agree on every detail due to diverse experiences, dialects, and bands. It was repeatedly emphasized that engagement must be broad, inclusive, and transparent, including more voices beyond the "same people over and over again". The process needs to be "done right" to avoid further trauma and build trust.

- **Tangible Benefits and Broader Impact:** Renaming efforts are seen as more than symbolic; they are opportunities for public education, cultural resurgence, relational accountability, healing, and reconciliation. As seen in the Sibley school renaming, youth involvement is a powerful tool for intergenerational education and leadership development. There is a strong push for renaming to connect to broader initiatives like land back, not just in terms of title, but also recognition of Indigenous wisdom and ancestral land use for thousands of years.
- **Structural Barriers and Institutional Critique:** Participants expressed deep frustration with repetitive and "extractive engagement," where the community is repeatedly asked for input without visible action or follow-through from government institutions such as MPRB. Concerns were raised about "gatekeeping" by city and state agencies and how bureaucratic structures often limit responsiveness and stall progress when it reaches the board level. The centralized youth sports registration system, which removed autonomy from Indigenous-led coaching models like the Red Bears team, was cited as a recent example of ongoing systemic barriers and a violation of meaningful consultation.
- **Allyship and Accountability:** Allies were called upon to listen, follow Indigenous leadership, and use their positions within institutions to support Native demands. This includes showing up physically and helping "close the loop" between community feedback and formal action. Good allyship is rooted in values of relationality, humility, transparency, accountability, respect, equity, and active advocacy within systems.

Strategic Recommendations for MPRB

Based on the insights from the Indigenous Place Names Roundtable, the following strategic recommendations are put forth for MPRB's consideration and action:

- **Prioritize Immediate Action on Existing Input:** The community has repeatedly shared input over the past few years, with frustration evident regarding the lack of significant commitments or progress. MPRB must act on the input and data already gathered, demonstrating a commitment to moving forward rather than continually asking the same questions. A presentation by MPRB synthesizing "what we heard you say" from previous engagements would be a crucial step in building trust.
- **Develop a Consistent, Indigenous-Led Naming Policy:** Urgently update and finalize the park naming policy to ensure it is Indigenous-led, transparent, and inclusive.
 - **Land-Based Naming:** Prioritize descriptive, land-based names, or those reflecting significant cultural uses (e.g., foraging, ceremonies) over naming after individuals, especially when related to landscapes and waterways.

- **Cultural Significance:** Ensure names carry deep cultural meaning and are not merely "tokenistic" appropriations of Indigenous language.
- **Language Integrity:** Emphasize the importance of using the Dakota language correctly, including proper spelling and pronunciation, and ensuring the language is shared in a way that feels "alive".
- **Develop a Context-Specific Naming Process for Gray Areas with American Indian Community:** As panelists and community members emphasized at the Indigenous Place Names Roundtable, the naming process should be adapted based on each site's specific and unique context. We recommend distinguishing between: For new parks, we encourage a naming process grounded in the recent historical, cultural, social, and relational significance these places hold for the American Indian community. For instance, the recent Philips Neighborhood community-led initiative led by Indigenous youth to rename a park that had been used since the founding of Little Earth faced delays due to the MPRB's decision. Where traditional or ancestral names are unavailable, names may reflect contemporary Indigenous connections to the land, stories of community resilience, or the lived experiences of Native residents.
- **Strengthen Tribal Consultation and Community Engagement Protocols:** Implement formal, consistent, and culturally appropriate consultation protocols with the Dakota tribes and the Minneapolis American Indian community engagement.
 - **Proactive Engagement:** Initiate outreach directly to tribal councils and communities within their territory, providing advance notice for meetings and allowing sufficient time for preparation.
 - **Transparent Communication and updates:** Improve communication channels to avoid unintentional barriers to participation and ensure clear messaging and updates.
 - **Culturally Responsive Formats:** Utilize holistic facilitation approaches, such as small group discussions and structured questions, recognizing that Indigenous events often have a more organic flow and value relationship-building over strict time constraints.
 - **Support Community Efforts:** Understand that community leaders are often burdened with full-time jobs and families, structural disadvantages, and political invisibility. MPRB should take responsibility for engagement work rather than delaying it.
- **Address Structural Barriers and Explore Co-Governance:** Acknowledge MPRB's historical and ongoing "paternalistic approach" towards Indigenous communities.
 - **Increase Indigenous Representation:** Actively work to increase Native American workforce across all levels of MPRB and create permanent seats for Indigenous decision-making, including at the Board level, beyond just advisory roles.
 - **Formalize Partnerships:** Explore formal agreements for co-management or co-governance of parkland with Native organizations and Tribal

- leadership, recognizing Indigenous governance structures and sovereignty.
- **Policy Review:** Review existing policies (e.g., Vegetation Ordinance) to ensure they support Indigenous cultural practices and address systemic inequities.
 - **Ensure Accountability and Follow-Through:** MPRB must demonstrate concrete actions that build trust and ensure the community's input translates into policy and systemic change.
 - **Formal Documentation and Communication:** Ensure the Native Parks Council's recommendations are formally documented, noted in meeting minutes, and communicated effectively to all relevant staff and commissioners.
 - **Continuous Evaluation:** Implement a robust, participatory evaluation plan throughout projects, not just at the end, to track progress, identify milestones, and adapt strategies. This should capture "rich conversations" and qualitative data beyond surface-level feedback.
 - **Budget Transparency and Support:** Ensure fair and timely compensation for facilitators and consultants involved in Indigenous reconciliation work, advocating for sustained funding to implement the Indigenous Reconciliation Action Plan fully.
 - **Leverage Renaming for Broader Education:** Use the place naming efforts as a powerful educational tool for Native and non-Native communities.
 - **Share Histories:** Highlight the true histories of places and the impacts of colonial naming, making this information accessible to the public (e.g., through signage, audio tours, educational programs).
 - **Internal Training:** Continue to offer comprehensive training for MPRB staff and elected officials on Indigenous history, culture, rights, perspectives, and the complexities of tribal government-to-government relationships.

Reinforcing Accountability and Transparency

The Minneapolis American Indian community and the Dakota people wish to be recognized as partners in this process. Building trust requires MPRB to move beyond mere acknowledgment to demonstrable action. The community is "getting tired" of providing input without seeing progress and stressed the need for a "level of trust for each other." Transparent communication, clear decision-making processes, and consistent follow-through on commitments are essential to rectifying past harms and ensuring that Indigenous voices play a leading role in shaping the future of park spaces.

Conclusion

The Indigenous Place Names Roundtable on May 20, 2025, underscored the profound significance of place names for Indigenous communities and the urgent need for MPRB to embrace a truly Indigenous-led, culturally informed, and transparent process. The

report aims to guide MPRB and their future commitments in restoring indigenous place names back on the public map, honoring and celebrating Indigenous Peoples rich heritage and kinship to land. By adopting the recommendations outlined in this report, MPRB can transform its relationship with the American Indian community, move towards genuine reconciliation, and set a new precedent for urban American communities in co-governance and co-management of ancestral lands. This work represents a significant stepping stone toward fostering a more just, equitable, and historically truthful public landscape for Indigenous Peoples and all residents of Minneapolis. Additionally, it is essential for the MPRB to consider itself as a vital part of a larger ecosystem, working collaboratively with the Dakota and the American Indian community instead of functioning solely on their behalf without their free, prior, and informed consent.