CHAIRPERSON JAMES

Ms. Beverly Wright.

MS. WRIGHT: Thank you, Madam Chair. And I will say to you that I probably cannot make my ten minutes. I'm a Wampanoag woman and it's very hard in my culture to summarize. But I will try.
CHAIRPERSON JAMES: Unfortunately, I'm going to have to ask you to keep to the time constraints to be fair to the rest of the panelists. Thank you.

MS. WRIGHT: Good afternoon, Madam Chairwoman and Commission members.

My name is Beverly Wright and I am Chairperson of the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head Aquinnah. I am also a member of the Board and past vice chair of United South and Eastern Tribes which represents tribes from Maine to Florida and west to Texas.

I welcome you to our aboriginal territory on behalf of my Tribal Council of the United South and Eastern Tribes and the members and elected leadership of the Sovereign Indian Nations of the Northeast.

I have been given the awesome responsibility of setting before this Commission just a few of the many positive social and economic impacts that Indian gaming has and will continue to have on the
peoples of the Northeast. I will also attempt to address just a few of the many myths and untruths that have plagued Indian gaming operations since their inception in the early 1960s.

As an aside to my remarks, I would like to tell you something about my people. The Wampanoags were among the first Native Americans to greet European newcomers to this country. It was we who helped the Pilgrims survive the cruel winters of the 1620s, introduced them to what we call the three sisters, corn, squash and beans. And indeed it was we who feasted with them at their first Thanksgiving.

The upcoming television presentation of Herman Melville's Moby Dick serves as a reminder of the intimate association between the whaling industry and the Wampanoags. It was said that no whaling ship would ever leave the port of New Bedford without a Wampanoag in the crew, it would have been bad luck, otherwise. Luck or not, the tribesmen were prized as skillful, and therefore profitable, harpooners.
As you visit tribal gaming facilities across this country and review the many documents you will be receiving from Indian country, I would ask that you keep in mind, that you keep two things in mind. First, you are viewing gaming enterprises operated by sovereign units of government for governmental purposes, not for the benefit of individuals or corporations.

Second, you are seeing the sovereign tribal governments exercising the same inherent sovereign right to raise revenue to support their programs and services as are exercised by state governments throughout the United States. This inherent right to use gaming as a method to raise revenues for our programs and services was reaffirmed by the United States Supreme Court and again by the Congress through passage of Public Law 100-495, 497 excuse me, the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act.

When you visit our neighbors, the Mashantucket Pequot Tribe of Connecticut, and view the
materials you will receive concerning the Mohegan and Oneida Tribal gaming operations, you will undoubtedly be awestruck by their fabulous and their successful programs. I only wish I had a time machine that would allow you to see these communities less than twelve years ago so you could see the difference IGRA made in their lives.

Because the tribes of New England were the first Indian nations to meet our white brothers and sisters, these early encounters resulted in treaties that predated the creation of the United States. That lead to our being among the last tribes in this country to be legally acknowledged by the United States government. This lack of acknowledgement lead to the near annihilation of the Northeast tribes.

Thus each and every tribe in New England struggled to survive for generations with or little or no support from the state or federal government despite the loss of land and resources. As a result, it was less than twelve years ago that leaders like the
Pequot's distinguished chairman, Skip Hayward, were spending all their days and half of their nights struggling to obtain medical help for tribal members, funds to educate tribal children and meet the food, clothing and housing needs of their people.

All of the non-gaming tribes I speak for today are relying upon the meager federal budgets provided by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Indian Health Service and a few other federal and state agencies in order to survive and assist their members.

Those budgets are, by those federal agencies' own admission, less than 50 percent of the amount required to address only the most basic needs of our people. The Mohegan Tribe was not even getting these meager amounts because it lacked federal recognition. The same situation existed for the Pequots and the Oneidas before they opened their Class III gaming facilities.

As the chairwoman of a tribe that is not yet engaged in gaming, I can attest to the day to day
struggles that each of us faces in trying to help our people survive and better themselves. I spend at least six days a week trying to find ways of coming up with the money a tribe requires to meet such basic needs as medical assistance, housing and heat for our tribal members, not to mention telephone bills and paychecks for our tribal staff.

None of these non-gaming tribes has a tax base nor the funds to seek out and develop business ventures to supplement our meager federal budgets. The federal and state programs we receive, while greatly appreciated, come with so many strings attached that we spend more time trying to stay in compliance than we do in helping the people they are designed to serve.

So when you view the beautiful clinics, schools, police and fire stations, day care facilities, nursing homes and housing developments on those reservations having tribal gaming facilities, please be sure to look at when they were constructed and when many of the programs they house were initiated. With
rare exception, they were all constructed and developed after gaming. And they didn't cost the taxpayers a penny. These wonderful services serve as shining examples of what can be done when you eliminate federal and state budget problems and regulations and empower tribal communities to help themselves.

If you ask the Pequots and the Oneidas to list the tribal buildings and facilities that existed on their reservations before gaming you will find that they can probably count those facilities on the fingers of hand.

Then take a look at the federal needs assessment study prepared on each of these tribes the year before gaming commenced. And compare those statistics with those in existence today. These actual comparisons will tell you more than I could possibly tell you in this short testimony. We are very passionate about our right to conduct gaming and for that reason.
So, when you hear the unfounded criticisms of Indian gaming, please remember that these gaming businesses were opened to address the needs of governments that had no tax base, no investment capital, or infrastructure, but did have high unemployment, severe poverty and very little federal and state assistance.

It is these same types of problems that have lead my tribe, the Wampanoags, along with the Narragansetts of Rhode Island, the Malaseets, Pasamaquoddy and Penobscot Tribes of Maine and the Mohawks and Oneidas of New York to seek the necessary federal and state approvals for Class II and Class III gaming facilities.

It is ironic that you convene here in Boston where the First Circuit Court of Appeals upheld the rights of our brothers the Narragansetts to engage in gaming, only to have Senator Chaffee get a bill passed prohibiting them from having even a bingo game. And he did this without so much as a hearing.
Each of the tribes I've referred to has since been denied those rights through the actions of state governments. We, like all the New England tribes, as well as tribes throughout the country, who are concerned with any diminishment in the rights possessed by federally recognized Indian tribes, support the efforts of the Maine and Narragansett tribes to restore their gaming rights under federal law.

As you visit tribal facilities throughout the United States and view the real problems Indian people continue to encounter, I hope that you too will begin to understand why these injustices need to be addressed.

As the leader of a tribe seeking to establish tribal gaming, I hear all kinds of people telling the Wampanoag people that we should find another way to solve our problems. But as a Wampanoag woman and a tribal leader, I have yet to have any of these critics suggest a viable alternative.
None has shown me how to pay for the medical services required by our children. None has shown me how to deal with the Indian Health Service Policy of prioritizing health delivery that can result in a seven to ten year waiting list for some operations. Well before the time is up, the patient's condition is likely to worsen enough to cut time on the waiting time, that is some solution.

These are problems our critics fail to talk about, but they are the problems that I and every tribal leader in this country are faced with every day we are in office. I understood why the Commonwealth opened its lottery, I also wish that our critics would understand why we are seeking a similar solution to our even greater problems, and why we respond as we do when these Marie Antoinettes high handedly say, let them eat cake.

I would also like to ask you to seek out information on the economic impact that these Indian facilities have had on the states and the people and
the businesses in their surrounding areas. Examine the number of new non-tribal businesses that have been opened in each and every area around a tribal casino and the drop in the unemployment rate. Ask the local banks about the impact that these tribal dollars have had on their ability to make personal loans to local residents and finance business development. Ask the universities about the increase in the enrollment of Indian students and ask those long term merchants about their increased sales. Also, please take a thorough, honest and objective look at those rumors you will hear about increased crime.

Compare the crime statistics with those of other areas that have had major public entertainment facilities opened in their midst. Before blaming Indian gaming for any increase in the number of encounters between the police and members of the public, take a look at the same police statistics for such areas such as Kissimmee, Florida before and after the development of Disney World and Epcot Center.
If you do, you will see that mere increases
in the number of people visiting a given area for any
reason will lead to increases in certain types of
police encounters, traffic violation, bad checks and
the like. So don't blame Indian gaming for creating
the same types of minor problems that would be created
if Walt Disney or Sea World moved into town.

I would like now to just take a few minutes
to address some of the specific myths--

CHAIRPERSON JAMES: Ms. Wright, you have
about two minutes remaining.

MS. WRIGHT: Oh, okay. It's very hard for
me to summarize, I am representing 23 tribes. Let's
see.

CHAIRPERSON JAMES: Please be assured that
all of your, that the commissioners have in front of
them the complete testimony.

MS. WRIGHT: All right. I'd just like to
talk about the Wampanoags.

CHAIRPERSON JAMES: Certainly.
MS. WRIGHT: In the case of the Wampanoags we project that 99 percent of those hired to work at our proposed Fall River facility will be non-Indian. If we were to be allowed a Class II facility we could create 500 full time jobs with a like number of spin off jobs. With a Class II facility our agreement with the City of Fall River calls for the tribe to contribute $1 million for roadway infrastructure, $1.5 million for a new fire station. And with a Class II facility we would contribute $2.5 million for a new school under the agreement.

While there is much more I'd like to say, let me leave you with one last thought. In order to fully understand the impact that Indian gaming has had, and will continue to have on tribal communities, you need to understand the problems and human struggles that exist or did exist before Indian gaming.

In our case, we have difficulty living a decent life in our ancestral homeland of Gay Head where land now sells for $100,000 an acre, and many of us can
not afford to rent a house. Of the 860 tribal members
only 350 live on Martha's Vineyard.

Our gaming facility under IGRA is essential
to our continued existence. We have had a long hard
road, but we are determined to pursue our rights.

We are currently working toward an approval
of a Class II, high stakes Bingo facility in the City
of Fall River. And the people of Fall River voted to
legalize gaming by a majority of 22 percent.

I would just like to make one other
statement. I have heard comments from Senator Prague
as to the employee's rights practices followed by the
Mashantucket Pequot Tribe. The previous speaker's
observations about the low number of terminated
employees winning their jobs back ignores what I
understand is a pretrial process that indeed has
resulted in many terminated employees getting their
jobs back.

I would hope that if this Commission finds
this to be a relevant issue, they study it first hand
and not rely on the comments of those who might for political reasons be promoting a particular point of view.

And I thank you very much for allowing me to speak before you today.

CHAIRPERSON JAMES: Thank you.

COMMISSIONER LEONE: I'd just like to say that giving the limited time, and since we have the testimony and since the testimony raises some questions, and I have this feeling we're not going to be able to ask the questions before we leave for Foxwoods. I just hope that anybody who can summarize and enable us to use some of your time to ask you questions please do it. You know, we do read the testimony.

CHAIRPERSON JAMES: We do indeed. And we do have it in front of us, and so it really isn't necessary to read every word. I think the subject is so important but I do want to have the time for the interaction with the Commissioners. I did mention that
we would be juggling people around to try to accommodate schedules and try to accommodate travel schedules.