



Piscataway Conoy Tribe™

Ancestral Stewards to the Chesapeake Bay's Western Bank
We are the People Where the Rivers Blend

4/4/2025

Charles County Commissioners
200 Baltimore St.
La Plata, MD 20646

Subject: In Opposition to Land Donation to "*the Official Piscataway Conoy Tribe*"

Dear Charles County Commissioners,

As Chief of the Piscataway Conoy Tribe, a direct descendant of Wannas, the chief who met the colonial settlers on Maryland's Western Bank, member of the Beaver Clan, and a lifelong Charles County Resident, I formally express my opposition to the proposed land donation of the former Nike Site to nonprofit organization, "*the Official Piscataway Conoy Tribe*."

My foremost responsibility is to safeguard the integrity, well-being, and future of the State-Recognized Piscataway Conoy Tribal Community. We have long struggled for the restoration of our ancestral lands and the affirmation of our sovereign rights. While I wholeheartedly support land repatriation in every way possible, this particular proposal raises serious and ongoing concerns regarding misrepresentation of tribal leadership, lack of accountability, potential legal and ethical conflicts, environmental risks, and the threat of deeper divisions within the tribe.

It is imperative to address the misrepresentation of tribal leadership that underlies this proposal. Mr. Francis Gray does not serve in any legitimate leadership capacity within the Piscataway Conoy Tribe, nor does he hold a seat on Tribal Council. His term as a councilmember ended years ago following a vote by tribal citizens. Despite this, Mr. Gray has continued to publicly present himself as the sole leader of the tribe, calling himself the chairman of the council, has refused to assist in tribal elections, all while operating outside of the Tribe's own governance structure.

Most of his former council members, who were likewise voted out or reached their term limits, have since distanced themselves from tribal affairs. Their absence raises serious concerns about the concentration of power and lack of accountability within Mr. Gray's misrepresentations. His ongoing claims of authority are fundamentally false, and his continued efforts to seek land, funding, and influence under these pretenses are damaging to our community. These concerns have been shared with the County previously, and I am disappointed to now see them sidestepped.

The entity seeking this land, led by Francis Gray and his associates, does not represent the Piscataway Conoy Tribe. "*The Official Piscataway Conoy Tribe*" is not the State-Recognized Piscataway Conoy Tribe. Despite its misleading name, this nonprofit organization does not have the trust or backing of our community, nor should it be recognized in tribal affairs. This "official" naming has caused public confusion and has been used to secure resources while shutting out the

broadier tribal community. The land donation proposal by this organization is not received as an act of support for the Piscataway Conoy people; it is a politically motivated maneuver that may reward an organization with no legitimate standing, and an individual who has dishonored their community-elected duties.

The misrepresentation has caused confusion among local agencies and concern within our community, many of whom have voiced distress over the implications of the ongoing claims and new actions of Mr. Gray and his organization. This is no longer just an internal tribal matter that the county wanted no part in, it is a direct challenge to our sovereignty, self-determination, and wellbeing that is now seeking public support. It is unacceptable that this decision can be made without consulting with the Piscataway Conoy Tribe at large nor with its leaders. The County cannot disregard internal governance matters when those same issues are now shaping public decisions and knowingly aware among the commissioners.

Without clear oversight or measurable outcomes, this donation risks enabling continued mismanagement while creating long-term liabilities for both the County and the Tribe. There is an alarming absence of transparency regarding this organization's use of acquired public resources. Funds granted for cultural institutions, including a museum and community center, have yielded no tangible results, nor have they been accompanied by adequate reporting or community engagement. If the public is to entrust land to an entity in the name of progress, then it is crucial that said entity be accountable, not only to partners but to the community it claims to serve.

At the same time, Through Piscataway Eyes (TPE) Inc., the nonprofit designated to support the Piscataway Conoy Tribe, has actively secured land for a tribal homebase, cultural museum, community center, medical clinic, and other infrastructure to support our people. Despite these demonstrated efforts and growing programs, such as the housing & medical safety nets, educational scholarships, and cultural preservation efforts, all support from the County has been largely withheld.

The lack of dialogue, circumvention of tribal input, and endorsement of individuals no longer vested with authority will only deepen fractures within the tribe and turn out to be yet another moment where impactful opportunities are harmed in the long run for Piscataway Conoy Citizens. In appropriating his claims of tribal leadership through this nonprofit structure, Mr. Gray and his affiliates seek your support to undermine the legitimate authority of our Tribe, further erode internal cohesion, and weaken the collective efforts of all who are working to support our citizens.

Beyond the political and ethical concerns, the Nike Site itself is a hazard. This property has been documented for soil and water contamination, drainage failures, and failing infrastructure. There are serious health and safety concerns about repurposing this site for any kind of long-term use, let alone one intended to serve our community. A supposed environmental survey was previously placed on the Cedarville Band of Indians as tenants, indicating that the burden of making the land usable may fall on those occupying it. These issues have been documented yet now the County considers donating the land to an organization with no clear plan, no proven capacity for stewardship, and no history of community-driven environmental restoration, after having evicted the Cedarville band of Indians.

Let us be clear: Francis Gray is not a leader for the Piscataway Conoy Tribe. His term ended, he was voted out, and he holds no legal or political authority to act on behalf of our people. He continues to falsely claim leadership, leveraging relationships to obtain outside resources through his nonprofit organizations under false pretenses.

To reward disingenuous actors with a gift as significant as land, without engaging in consultation with tribal leadership or members, invites the very opposite of what this proposal should be. Rewarding such conduct with land donations, regardless of what they consist of, sets a dangerous precedent in our community, one that undermines our internal processes and reinforces external forces as an influence over our tribal politics. If land donations are to be meaningful, impactful, and ethical, it must be pursued in partnership with community-backed leaders and organizations, under a process of integrity and collaboration.

The decision calls for due diligence. The County must recognize the magnitude of these issues and weigh if the voices of Piscataway Conoy Tribal Citizens will matter. This currently proposed donation will not serve our people, nor does it reflect the principles of tribal sovereignty, self-determination, transparency, or justice.

The Piscataway Conoy Tribe would be willing to revisit this conversation regarding the donation in the future, but only once all the active lawsuits involving Mr. Francis Gray, his organization, and associates are fully resolved and have exhausted all measures of an appeal. Additionally, if the County is prepared to outline a clear, transparent, and community-inclusive course of action for the environmental rehabilitation of the old Nike Site, the Tribe would be open to re-engaging in good faith discussions. Until then, moving forward with this donation would be premature, irresponsible, and harmful to the interests of the Piscataway Conoy people.

I call upon Charles County Commissioners to reject this proposed land donation until a thorough review of the receiving organization's legal standing, community legitimacy, and plan of stewardship has concluded, and agreed upon by the Piscataway Conoy Tribe.

Sincerely,

Chief Jesse James Swann Jr.

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Court
System: **Circuit Court For Charles County - Civil**
Location: **Charles Circuit Court**
Case
Number: **C-08-CV-24-000942**
Title: **Piscataway Conoy Tribe of Maryland, Inc., et al. vs. The
Official Piscataway Conoy Tribe of Maryland, Inc., et al.**
Case
Type: **Declaratory Judgment**
Filing
Date: **12/18/2024**
Case
Status: **Open**

Involved Parties Information

Defendant

Name: **Gray, Francis C**

Address: **7060 Wood Glen Drive**

City: **Hughesville** State: **MD** Zip Code: **20637**

Plaintiff

Name: **Swann, Jesse James Jr.**

Address: **7750 Pomfret Road**

City: **La Plata** State: **MD** Zip Code: **20646**

Attorney(s) for the Plaintiff

Name: **COCKEY, ROBIN R**

Appearance Date: **12/18/2024**

Address Line 1: **Cockey, Brennan & Maloney, PC**

Address Line 2: **313 Lemmon Hill Lane**

City: **Salisbury** State: **MD** Zip Code: **21801**

Name: **Gankiewicz, Kyle A.**

Appearance Date: **12/18/2024**

Address Line 1: **Cockey, Brennan & Maloney, P.C.**

Address Line 2: **12216 Ocean Gateway**

Address Line 3: **Unit #500**

City: **OCEAN CITY** State: **MD** Zip Code: **21842**

Defendant

Name: **Penny, Diana Monica Harley**

Address: **4840 Pisgah Marbury Road**

City: **Marbury** State: **MD** Zip Code: **20658**

Defendant

Name: **Harley, John Mario**

Address: **2405 Berry Thick Court**

City: **Waldorf** State: **MD** Zip Code: **20603**

Plaintiff

Name: **Piscataway Conoy Tribe of Maryland, Inc.**

Address: **7750 Pomfret Road**

City: **La Plata** State: **MD** Zip Code: **20646**

Attorney(s) for the Plaintiff

Name: **Gankiewicz, Kyle A.**

Appearance Date: **12/18/2024**

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Address Line 2: **12216 Ocean Gateway**

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Defendant

Name: **The Official Piscataway Conoy Tribe of Maryland, Inc.**

Address: **4840 Pisgah Marbury Road**

City: **Marbury** State: **MD** Zip Code: **20658**

Document Information

File Date: **12/18/2024**

Document Name: **Line**

Comment: **Line**

File Date: **12/18/2024**

Document Name: **Case Information Report Filed**

Comment: **Civil - Non-Domestic Case Information Sheet**

File Date: **12/18/2024**

Document Name: **Complaint / Petition**

Comment: **Complaint**

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Document Name: **Supporting Exhibit**

Comment: **Exhibit A**

This is an electronic case record. Full case information cannot be made available either because of legal restrictions on access to case records found in Maryland Rules, or because of the practical difficulties inherent in reducing a case record into an electronic format.



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