



GREAT LAKES AND ST. LAWRENCE
CITIES INITIATIVE

L'ALLIANCE DES VILLES
DES GRANDS LACS ET DU SAINT-LAURENT

FIRST NATION AND TRIBAL ENGAGEMENT COMMITTEE REPORT

MAY 2026



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INTRODUCTION

The Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative is a multinational coalition of municipal and Indigenous government executives representing communities in the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River region that is working to promote economic prosperity and protect our fresh water for the benefit of current and future generations.

Members of the Cities Initiative recognize the importance of working more closely with Indigenous communities to protect and restore our precious freshwater resources, promote community resilience, modernize water infrastructure, and advance economic transformation in the spirit of true partnership. The Turtle Island Scholarship was the first major step in our journey towards reconciliation with Indigenous peoples as an organization and to raising the profile of Indigenous voices in our collective action.



The Turtle Island Scholarship was created in 2023 with the goal of removing barriers to access for First Nations and U.S. Tribes. The program provides complimentary membership to the Cities Initiative for First Nations and Tribes, fostering collaboration among local governments.

The Cities Initiative’s membership currently includes the 12 U.S. Tribes of the Great Lakes Intertribal Council (GLITC), the Anishinabek Nation, the Mohawk Council of Kahnawà:ke, and the Wendat Nation.

CURRENT MEMBERSHIP	
U.S. TRIBES	FIRST NATIONS
▪ Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa ▪ Forest County Potawatomi ▪ Ho-Chunk Nation ▪ Lac Courte Oreilles Band of Lake Superior Chippewa ▪ Lac du Flambeau Band of Lake Superior Chippewa ▪ Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin ▪ Oneida Nation of Wisconsin ▪ Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa ▪ Sokaogon Chippewa Community Mole Lake Band of Lake Superior Chippewa ▪ St. Croix Chippewa Indians of Wisconsin ▪ Stockbridge-Munsee Community	▪ Anishinabek Nation (ON) ▪ Mohawk Council of Kahnawà:ke (QC) ▪ Wendat Nation (QC)

In August 2024, the Cities Initiative, in collaboration with the City of Chicago and Biinaagami, hosted Honoring Our Waters – the Tribal Connection to Stewardship. The event included an

augmented reality experience of water in the eyes of over 200 sovereign Indigenous communities. Attendees of the event were joined by Biinaagami's Shared Circle to tell the story of the Great Lakes and advocate for their protection.

The Cities Initiative continues its partnership with Biinaagami, a multimedia story-telling initiative rooted in Indigenous knowledge that aims to uplift voices, tell stories that engage and inspire, and bring people together to understand the history and the future of the Great Lakes. Members of Biinaagami's Shared Circle have participated in various organizational activities, including the Annual Conference, Ontario Water Leaders Summit, and the Honoring Our Waters event.

In January 2025, the Cities Initiative offered membership to members of GLITC through the Turtle Island Scholarship. In April 2025, the GLITC Board of Directors passed a resolution confirming their membership with the Cities Initiative.

The Cities Initiative's current First Nation and Tribal leadership include the following:

Grand Council Chief Linda Debassige, Anishinabek Nation - **Cities Initiative Board Member**

Chairman Joey Awonohopay, Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin - **Cities Initiative Board Member**

Additionally, the Cities Initiative's First Nation and Tribal Engagement Committee was formed via member resolution in May 2025. The resolution, sponsored by the Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin, mandated that the Committee discuss engagement, recruitment, and reconciliation with First Nations and Tribes as membership to the Cities Initiative increases among these communities.

Current Committee leadership is as follows:

President Shannon Holsey, Stockbridge-Munsee Community - **U.S. Tribal Co-Chair**

Kahsennenhawe Sky-Deer, Mohawk Council of Kahnawà:ke - **First Nation Co-Chair**

As mandated in the approved resolution, the First Nation and Tribal Engagement Committee met regularly from October 2025 - May 2026 to discuss strategies for improving Indigenous membership and participation in the Cities Initiative and prepare a report for the Board of Directors for consideration at the 2026 Annual Conference in Hamilton, ON.

Enactment of the following report will help guide the Cities Initiative over the next three years as the organization makes strides towards reconciliation, inclusion, and collaboration with First Nations and U.S. Tribes.

Miigwech, Pinagigi, Yaw[^]ko, Waewaenen, Nia:wen, Anúshiik. Thank you. Merci.

SECTION I - RECONCILIATION

Reconciliation is a method in which a non-Indigenous organization can take strategic action to advance trust-based relationships with First Nations and U.S. Tribes. The goal of reconciliation should be to build meaningful relationships and foster genuine dialogue and action around areas of mutual concern.

The Cities Initiative will make reasonable efforts to engage in reconciliation with First Nations and U.S. Tribes, recognizing the historical harms of removal and assimilation policies, environmental degradation, and systemic exclusion of Indigenous voices. It is crucial that there is an acknowledgement and understanding of this historical context, so that the Cities Initiative can begin building a path forward for reconciliation.

While the Cities Initiative should defer to the expertise and leadership of First Nation and Tribal members in relevant decision-making, non-Indigenous members and staff should take personal agency to learn about the history and current sociopolitical situation of First Nations and Tribes with which they interact. Cities Initiative staff members will work with partners to provide relevant educational materials and opportunities to facilitate the learning process for non-First Nation and Tribal members.

It is also important to remember that while members are encouraged to connect with First Nation and Tribal members to learn about their communities and lived experiences, they are not a monolithic culture; what may be acceptable for one group may not translate to the next.

Best practices for reconciliation include:

- **Acknowledgement of History and Status** - accepting that trust must be built through action and that First Nations and Tribes are sovereign nations with unique treaty rights and spiritual connections to the land and water. This includes consulting First Nations and Tribes when organizing events on their ancestral territories.
- **Engagement and Consultation** - soliciting First Nation and Tribal feedback on new and existing initiatives and integrating these perspectives through demonstrable reforms.

- **Respect of Relationship** – allowing relationship-building to happen over time and avoid transactional interactions or tokenism, which may occur when First Nation or Tribal leaders are included solely for optics or to “check a box.”
- **Transparency** – being transparent about both opportunities and challenges with respect to First Nation and Tribal engagement and broader reconciliation efforts while not shying away from difficult conversations.

Reference: Indigenous Corporate Training, Inc.

Examples of reconciliation include the following:

- **Land Acknowledgement and/or Ceremony** – asking a First Nation or Tribal leader or knowledge holder to give remarks or conduct a cultural ceremony at the opening of an event. This individual should be adequately compensated for their time and knowledge. The respective nation should be consulted to determine the appropriate practice/protocol.
- **First Nation and Tribal Representation** – ensuring that all events include First Nation and Tribal representation and perspectives.
- **Municipal and First Nation & Tribal Relationship-Building** – facilitating introductions between municipal and First Nation & Tribal leaders to strengthen relationships and trust between communities.

Reference: Reconciliation Toolkit – Congress of Aboriginal Peoples

SECTION II - RECRUITMENT

As the Cities Initiative expands, it is important that the organization’s membership remains reflective of the region and the organization’s reconciliation goals by expanding membership among First Nations and U.S. Tribes. Recruitment of these communities must be rooted in relationship-building and with the goal of increasing trust between municipalities and First Nations and Tribes.

The recruitment targets are based on current Cities Initiative membership and their proximity to the following nations.

2026 - 2027 TARGETS	
MICHIGAN	Pokagon Band of Potawatomi Little River Band of Ottawa
MINNESOTA	Grand Portage Chippewa Red Lake Band of Chippewa
NEW YORK	Oneida Indian Nation Tonawanda Band of Seneca
ONTARIO	Mississaguas of the Credit First Nation Six Nations of the Grand River
QUEBEC	Abenaki Nation Wolastoqiyik Nation

Initial outreach to potential members must include an overview of the organization's efforts as they relate to First Nation and Tribal engagement. An introductory call with Cities Initiative should take place so that the First Nation or U.S. Tribe can identify potential areas of collaboration and become acclimated with the organization.

In addition to an organizational overview, potential members should also be made aware of ongoing reconciliation efforts, such as the First Nation and Tribal Engagement Committee and the Turtle Island Scholarship program. The Cities Initiative should continue to provide membership, travel assistance, and access to events via the Turtle Island Scholarship program.

Each year, the Cities Initiative should develop a targeted list of communities based on current membership and work with municipal leaders to conduct outreach and identify areas of collaboration between the communities. The Cities Initiative staff and members should understand that this process of recruitment will likely take more time compared to other communities - this is common with First Nations and Tribes.

Alternatively, if a prospective or existing First Nation or U.S. Tribe exercises their sovereign right to not engage with the organization, that decision must be respected.

Over the next year, the Cities Initiative should work to increase membership among First Nations by engaging with entities such as the Assembly of First Nations, the Chiefs of Ontario, and the Assembly of First Nations Quebec-Labrador to have strong representation at the 2027 Annual Conference in Quebec City.

SECTION III - COLLABORATION

In 2026, the members of the First Nation and Tribal Engagement Committee assisted in identifying policy priorities to be included in the Cities Initiative U.S. and Canadian Federal Priorities.

The U.S. Federal Priorities included:

- **Appropriate \$25 million for the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) Distinct Tribal Program** to support U.S. Tribes in contributing to the responsible, intergovernmental stewardship of freshwater ecosystems, consistent with the GLRI Action Plan, longstanding Tribal practices and Tribal treaty rights
- **Withdrawing the December 2025 rule proposed by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE)** revising the definition of “Waters of the United States” under the Clean Water Act and restore federal protections for millions of acres of critical wetlands and streams
- **Partner with local governments and Tribes to attract half a million new businesses to the Great Lakes** over the next decade with an emphasis on strategic, innovative and water-intensive industries, continuing the region’s proud legacy of manufacturing while safeguarding the health of our lakes and rivers

The Canadian Federal Priorities included:

- **Establish a dedicated water and wastewater program** delivered through the Build Communities Strong Fund that prioritizes municipalities and First Nations and is coordinated with the Trade Diversification Corridors Fund to align local water infrastructure upgrades with nationally significant supply chain and trade corridor investments
- **Enact federal legislation that defines water, source water, drinking water, wastewater and related infrastructure on, in and under First Nation land**, establish enforceable standards to uphold treaty rights of First Nations and guarantee access to clean, safe and affordable water to all Canadian residents

The First Nation and Tribal Engagement Committee has identified the following issue areas as priorities for collaboration and reconciliation going forward:

- **Source water protection** - protecting water quality and freshwater ecosystems by combating pollution, invasive species like purple loosestrife, and harmful algal blooms.
- **Water access** - ensuring that communities have access to clean, safe, and affordable water and advocating for funding and technical assistance to support necessary infrastructure projects.
- **Economic transformation** - creating employment and wealth-generation opportunities for First Nations and U.S. Tribes while collaborating with municipalities to ensure economic development does not jeopardize the health of our fresh water.

Additionally, the First Nation and Tribal Engagement Committee will continue to provide recommendations for the U.S. and Canadian Federal Priorities each year.

The Cities Initiative shall also continue to build their network with Indigenous organizations and partners such as the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission (GLIFWC), the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI), the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), the National Tribal Water Council, and Native Americans in Philanthropy (NAP). Partners from these groups should be regularly consulted to assist in identifying additional policy priorities, funding opportunities, and subject-matter expertise.

As membership increases, the Cities Initiative should serve as a conduit for First Nation and Tribal leaders to connect with additional Great Lakes partner organizations, such as the Great Lakes Commission and the International Joint Commission. The Cities Initiative should additionally connect First Nations and Tribes to federal, state, and provincial governments when Great Lakes issues are concerned.

NEXT STEPS

COMMITTEE - It is advised that the First Nation and Tribal Engagement Committee continue to convene throughout the next year, to oversee the recommendations given over the three-year timeline. The timeline will be reviewed at an in-person committee meeting at the 2027 Annual Conference in Quebec City.

The Committee shall meet virtually, on a quarterly basis to discuss progress on recruitment, reconciliation, areas of collaboration and any action items for in-person events, such as regional meetings, plenary sessions, Great Lakes Day and Annual Conferences.

After each Annual Conference, new First Nation and U.S. Tribal co-chairs will be appointed to lead to the committee. Each year, the committee will approve a workplan for its objectives and meeting cycle. To sustain momentum beyond leadership transitions, the Cities Initiative should establish a co-chair transition process to ensure continuity of roles and workplans.

The Committee should continue to serve as an advisory body for the Cities Initiative activities as they relate to First Nation and Tribal engagement, collaboration, and recruitment. The Committee should assess the implementation of the recommendations outlined in the report at each Annual Conference via a “report card” or a similar assessment mechanism.

Starting in 2026, the Committee should have at least (1) municipal leader from the U.S. and (1) municipal leader from Canada to serve as non-voting members.

RECONCILIATION PLAN - The Cities Initiative should create a reconciliation plan that outlines how the organization and members can take strategic action to advance relationships with First Nations and U.S. Tribes. The plan should include Cities Initiative commitments, as well as

recommendations for members to advance reconciliation at the community level. Additionally, the plan should be drafted in collaboration with the Committee and partners.

The reconciliation plan should have a form of accountability measurement that determines how and when progress is evaluated. The Cities Initiative reconciliation plan should ensure that the evaluation of progress does not fall solely on First Nation and Tribal members.

The reconciliation plan should clearly state that:

- Committee engagement does not replace government-to-government consultation obligations
- Treaty and trust responsibilities remain the duty of Cities Initiative members
- Tribal participation in the development of a reconciliation plan does not constitute consent or endorsement

STAFFING - The Cities Initiative should continue to have an Indigenous staff member to lead First Nation and Tribal engagement work, recognizing the importance of reflecting the region in staff composition, as well as the cultural sensitivity of such work. However, non-Indigenous staff should also be actively involved in First Nation and Tribal initiatives to prevent these issues from becoming siloed or the sole responsibility of the Indigenous staff member.

FUNDING - The Cities Initiative should seek funding from a private foundation and/or corporate sponsor to execute current and future First Nation and Tribal engagement initiatives. The Cities Initiative currently provides several benefits to First Nations and Tribes - including free membership and travel assistance via the Turtle Island Scholarship - that cost significant funds, even though the Cities Initiative does not currently have a dedicated funding source to support these activities.

Given the intensive nature of First Nation and Tribal outreach, dedicated funding sources must be identified to ensure the sustainability of these activities over the medium and long term. Multi-year funding should be achieved through meaningful partnerships with philanthropic organizations that can assist with funding opportunities, specifically for First Nations and Tribes.

ISSUE-BASED DIALOGUES - The Cities Initiative should hold a series of issue-based dialogue between First Nation and Tribes and municipalities. These topics should be determined by the First Nation and Tribal Engagement Committee and begin in September 2026. Potential issues to explore in these issue-based dialogues include:

- Impacts of natural resource extraction, such as mining or drilling
- Climate change and effects on traditional harvesting, hunting, or fishing practices
- Jurisdictional challenges when enforcing water quality standards
- Sustainable industry attraction practices

INTEGRATION - First Nation and Tribal leaders will continue to be integrated into the current Cities Initiative activities:

- **Mayors Commissions** - Mayors Commission on Water Access & Mayors Commission on Economic Transformation should be additional forums that First Nation and Tribal leaders can actively participate in, rather than being siloed into one committee.
- **Programs** - The Resilient Coastal Projects Initiative (RCPI) supports communities in planning sustainable, fundable projects that protect shorelines and community assets. The projects address coastal hazards like flooding and erosion, which could greatly benefit from Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) practices that have been used by First Nations and Tribes for generations.
- **Events** - The Cities Initiative should continue to feature First Nation and Tribal perspectives at Water Leaders Summits and Annual Conferences.
- **Advocacy** - Participation in Great Lakes Day & Ottawa Day provides members an opportunity to engage in advocacy at the federal, state, and provincial levels. Delegations for these advocacy days should include First Nation and Tribal perspectives as they relate to the U.S. and Canadian Federal Priorities.

Additionally, the Cities Initiative should commit to having at least (1) First Nation leader and (1) U.S. Tribal leader on the Board of Directors.

RECRUITMENT

The following targets are based on organizational growth from 2026-2028.

YEAR 1	YEAR 2	YEAR 3
▪ 8 active members of FN&T Engagement Committee ▪ 2 new U.S. Tribal members ▪ 3 new First Nation members	▪ 10 active members of FN&T Engagement Committee ▪ 2 new U.S. Tribal members ▪ 3 new First Nation members	▪ 12 active members of FN&T Engagement Committee ▪ 2 new U.S. Tribal members ▪ 3 new First Nation members

CONCLUSION

The Cities Initiative remains committed to its allyship with First Nations and Tribes. We recognize that their stewardship has held strong for generations and that their cultural and spiritual knowledge can guide our collective effort. We are thankful for the First Nation and Tribal leaders within our organization and their support in advancing our engagement with their communities.

While we have made great strides towards progress, we acknowledge that our work with First Nations and Tribes must not end here. We will continue to include and uplift First Nation and Tribal voices as we propel towards our goal of preserving our region's fresh water for generations to come.

The following report was drafted by the Cities Initiative staff, with advisory recommendations and approval from the First Nation and Tribal Engagement Committee.



Members of the inaugural First Nation and Tribal Engagement Committee:

*President Shannon Holsey, Stockbridge-Munsee Community
Kahsennenhawe Sky-Deer, Mohawk Council of Kahnawà:ke
Chairman Joey Awonohopay, Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin
Grand Council Chief Linda Debassige, Anishinabek Nation
Vice Chairman Ken George Jr., Forest County Potawatomi
Bryan Bainbridge, CEO, Great Lakes Inter-Tribal Council*



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