

Trustees OK heritage resolution

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SPRINGFIELD – In passing a resolution to preserve and celebrate the state's American Indian heritage, University of Illinois officials hope to make it easier to reach an agreement on the future of Chief Illiniwek.

But one American Indian student at the UI says she doesn't want any celebration.

"The board has no business highlighting a culture or ethnicity they have no connection to, especially when the foundation of the state and nation was built on persecuting Indians," said Genevieve Tenoso, a UI senior who is a Lakota and Ojibwa Indian. "We're not clamoring for recognition."

"Why are they not trying to honor African-American history or Chinese history or the history of Chicago immigrants?" she continued. "They are trying to use it to legitimize the mascot's presence."

The resolution, which calls for the state's heritage and its American Indian culture and traditions to be "preserved, affirmed and publicly celebrated," was passed unanimously by the UI Board of Trustees without discussion at its meeting Thursday in Springfield.

UI President James Stukel said the rhetoric of the issue has revolved around honoring American Indians. He said the resolution will refocus the debate on recognizing the state's American Indian heritage.

"What is needed is a broader policy that begins by asking the question whether a public event is suitable to remind us of our heritage," Stukel said. "We're not talking about honoring the Chief. We've never talked about heritage. Words matter. Honoring and heritage are very, very different things."

But Tenoso and some other American Indians in the community are skeptical.

They're using flowery language and a lot of smoke screen to fool us (that) they are doing something positive for us, thinking we'll drop the issue and walk away," said Dave Wegeng of Urbana, who is of Lakota descent.

"It's a way for them to bow out of the issue without saying they are wrong," Tenoso said.

But trustees hope the resolution will make the Chief debate less contentious and help them reach the "consensus conclusion" they pledged to find.

"For many years, the debate has been black and white," said UI Board of Trustees Chairman Larry Eppley. "When you have only two choices, there is anxiety because you create two camps and only two camps."

"We're trying to move away from charged words," said Trustee Frances Carroll, who is one-quarter Creek Indian. "Once we say honor the Chief or eliminate the Chief, we can't get anybody to talk past it. We weren't getting anywhere there. I can embrace this new direction of coming up with a solution, to find a way to honor and celebrate the heritage."

With approval of the resolution, the board must now decide what is an acceptable activity to recognize American Indian heritage.

"This resolution does not guarantee the current celebratory activity will continue as is," Stukel said. "It never seemed reasonable to me that there was no celebratory activity that could be embraced by the Urbana campus."

Wegeng and Tenoso said an acceptable way to recognize their heritage could be providing historical information to the public about the abuse of American Indians throughout the nation's history.

"The imagery, the Chief head logo, has to go," Wegeng said.

Carroll, who proposed retiring Chief Illiniwek last November and then withdrew her resolution when it was clear it didn't have enough votes to pass, said she hasn't changed her mind about wanting to eliminate the Chief.

Carroll would like the university to recognize American Indian heritage by establishing an academic chair in American Indian history or culture and with a commemorative park on campus, named after an American Indian.

"I think we should do that and get out of this dogfight," she said.