

Communication from Public

Name: Sophia Borgias

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Comments for Public Posting: Dear City Council Members, I would like to draw your attention to a letter sent on August 26th to the Council, as well as to Mayor Karen Bass, Deputy Mayor Nancy Sutley, and the Water and Power Commissioners. The letter is from a group of more than thirty scholars urging Los Angeles to commit to settlement negotiations regarding Tribal land and water rights in Payahuunadü (Owens Valley, CA). We have asked that the city commit to these negotiations by September 30th, 2025, and that its representatives come to the table with a new approach that centers on the need to make the Bishop, Big Pine, and Lone Pine Paiute-Shoshone reservations viable homelands with sovereign control over their land and water. Please see the attached letter for more of the historical context and current day implications of this issue. We look forward to seeing the city's engagement on this issue and will be glad to offer support as needed. Sincerely, Sophia Borgias, Ph.D. Assistant Professor Interdisciplinary Programs, School of Public Service Boise State University

The Honorable Karen Bass
Deputy Mayor Nancy Sutley
Los Angeles City Council
200 North Spring Street
Los Angeles, CA 90012

August 26, 2025

Board of Water and Power Commissioners
111 N. Hope Street
Los Angeles, CA 90012

Subject: Tribal settlement negotiations in Payahuunadü (Owens Valley, CA)

Honorable Mayor, Deputy Mayor, City Council Members, and Commissioners,

Los Angeles has the opportunity to make history by addressing an injustice perpetuated for far too long. A 1939 Land Exchange between Los Angeles and the federal government left the Bishop Paiute, Big Pine Paiute, and Lone Pine Paiute-Shoshone Tribes on some of the smallest reservations in the state and left the city in control of their water rights. Los Angeles currently holds the water rights attached to these three reservations in Payahuunadü (Owens Valley, CA), while the Tribes' federally reserved water rights are trapped beneath the lands that the city acquired through the exchange. Since the 1990s, there have been efforts to negotiate a settlement to rectify this situation. However, these have been unsuccessful, in part because they have focused narrowly on quantifying the federally reserved rights without attending to the interrelated issues of land and sovereignty left in the wake of the exchange. With the recent reappointment of a federal team, there is an opportunity to reopen negotiations, but only if the city comes to the table. **We urge you to commit to these negotiations by September 30th, 2025, and to come with a new approach that centers on the need to make these reservations viable homelands with sovereign control over their land and water.**

We are a group of more than thirty scholars of environmental studies, Indigenous studies, law, and history with direct ties to this issue, whether through our research, teaching, or collaborations with Tribal partners. We have watched over the years as the Tribes' calls to resolve the core issues of this dispute have gone unheeded. We have also watched as city officials have made public statements about the importance of addressing historical wrongs and collaborating with Tribes and Indigenous communities.¹ Reinitiating settlement talks opens an opportunity for the city to act in alignment with these words.

It is time to listen to what the Tribes are asking for, which is, as we understand it, the land and water rights needed to make their reservations viable sovereign homelands, now and into the future. These are not unreasonable demands. The Tribes are merely asking for a commitment already made – by the federal government through its trust responsibilities and by the city through the 'moral obligation' it acknowledged in the 1930s² – to be fulfilled.

This expectation is rooted in the broader history of relations between Los Angeles, the federal government, and the Tribes. These relations date back to the early 1900s, as a long string of

¹ For example, Mayor Bass' [Statement Honoring Indigenous Peoples' Day](#) (October 9, 2023) and the [Owens Valley Tribal Engagement Policy](#) of the Los Angeles Board of Water and Power Commissioners (January 8, 2019).

² Porter, E.A. 1936. *Final Report on the Owens Valley Indian Situation Including a Suggested Plan for Adjustment of the Same*. Department of Water and Power of the City of Los Angeles. January 9, 1936.

federal interventions on behalf of Los Angeles systematically constrained and reduced Tribal land and water rights in Payahuunadü.³ The land exchange accounted only for what remained after those decades of dispossession, and it further consolidated the land and water rights of the Tribes. It left them without enough land to support their growing nations or to sustain the type of agricultural production originally envisioned. Furthermore, it left the reservations with a contract for delivery of irrigation water from Los Angeles rather than water rights of their own, while trapping their federally reserved rights beneath the lands traded to Los Angeles.

To truly resolve the disputes that the land exchange left in its wake, it will be necessary to not only address this question of the Tribes' access to federally reserved water rights, but also their need for land and for sovereign control over their land and water resources. Many of us have been involved in or borne witness to the efforts of the Tribes and the Owens Valley Indian Water Commission to bring awareness to this important history and its ongoing legacy. All eyes are now on Los Angeles to see if the city will come to the table to make history by addressing this injustice in a meaningful way.

Sincerely,

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³ For further discussion, see Borgias' (2024) article [Reassessing the History of the Los Angeles Aqueduct and its Implications for Indigenous Land and Water Rights](#).

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