

**To: Leelanau County Board of Commissioners**  
**From: Northwest Michigan United for Racial Equity**  
**Date: December 15, 2020**



Northwest Michigan United for Racial Equity was formed after a racist incident occurred this summer in Leelanau County. In an effort to bring awareness and education around issues of equity, inclusion, and tolerance, we launched a 10-week ad campaign in the Leelanau Enterprise and also ran several of the ads in the Glen Arbor Sun and, by request of Benzie residents, one in the Betsie Current. The first ad directly quoted Mr. Eckerle’s racial slur as well as provided the direct verbatim responses of several commissioners to the incident. If anyone on this Board might have felt ridiculed, we ask that they reflect upon the words quoted in the ad and what about those words causes their discomfort. The remaining ads highlighted particular aspects of racism that occur immediately in our County—to our Native American community and to our Latino community—and more generally across the state and country. We ask that you review the ads again (or for the first time if you haven’t already) and read the words of your neighbors about their experiences of racism and how we can start making Leelanau County a more welcoming, inclusive, and tolerant place to live and visit. The ads can be found at [LeelanauUnited.com](http://LeelanauUnited.com).

We write today to extend a sincere THANK YOU to the four Commissioners who voted last week to support the request of the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians to seek just compensation for land taken in violation of the Treaty of 1855.

Although at a recent meeting, Commissioner Rushton suggested that a focus on racism was unnecessary—because it wasn’t as if the house were burning down—for the Grand Traverse Band, the house has been on fire since 1855. During the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, virtually all of the land the Band was promised—by the federal government—was sold off to settlers, lumber businesses, and speculators, leaving the Tribe virtually landless, jeopardizing their ways of life, and consequently locking them into poverty.

For those who wonder how beautiful, friendly Leelanau County could ever be considered racist, the callous disregard for this history and today’s implications is just one example. We recognize the hard work and persistence of the Grand Traverse Band to continue fighting for what is owed to them, and we appreciate those on the Board who have the courage and foresight to understand this initiative’s importance in making Leelanau County a better place for all of us to live in respectful relationships with one another.

During last week’s meeting, Commissioner Bunek remarked that all this attention to racism is “making us look bad.” We believe the opposite is true—that focusing on equity and justice makes the County look good, shows that it is a welcoming place for everyone, whether a resident or one of the thousands of visitors who travel to our community and support our local economy, and demonstrates that we are willing to do the hard work to create a more peaceful county and country.

Saying, as one Commissioner did, that all of the County’s policies have been examined and none were racist is simplistic thinking. This, coupled with the failure of some Commissioners to recognize the Band’s right to just compensation and extending to our Sheriff department’s determination to claim themselves as victims of the movement to advocate for police accountability, is all built on the same kind of simplistic thinking.

We are disappointed that the Commission, which agreed in a formal resolution adopted before the election to condemn racism and pursue additional awareness training, seems to be heading toward allowing this pledge to slide. Being educated on racism, and dedicated to addressing its many manifestations, must be a key part of your ongoing work in next year's cycle. Your continued focus on antiracism can be a model for other Michigan counties, and we are committed to holding you accountable to your pledge to commit your "full attention to advocating for equality, equity, and improving the quality of life and health of all of our residents," as the resolution states.

We stand ready to help you build critical awareness of these issues in Leelanau County and, in doing so, strengthen our local government and community.

Sincerely,

**Northwest Michigan United for Racial Equity**

[www.LeelanauUnited.com](http://www.LeelanauUnited.com)

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