

Kahnawà:ke Governance Project

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT REPORT

Executive Summary

The Kahnawà:ke Governance Project was chartered by the Mohawk Council of Kahnawà:ke (MCK) to work independently and at arms-length to listen to community members' ideas and opinions on governance in order to discover a shared vision and a pathway to restoring traditional government. The goal is to unite Kahnawakerò:non in a system of government based on traditional values and principles that serves the interests of all the people of Kahnawà:ke and that ensures that the voices of all Kahnawa'kehró:non are included in decision-making.

Since starting its work in November 2021, the Project has completed three phases: a needs assessment, an information sharing process, and a community engagement process. Resources were gathered and created to meet the needs that were identified by community members, and a series of activities were conducted to share information about Kahnawà:ke's history and historical and contemporary governance with community members. Information on the Project's activities and all of the research gathered is online at the [KGOV Resource Database](#).

Previous draft **proposals for the transition to traditional government**, produced between 1992 and 2013, were reviewed and analyzed, with the following important findings:

- the Mohawk Nation Office developed the concept of an Interim Government that would bridge the gap between the Longhouse and MCK and allow for cooperation “until such time that traditional government by and according to Kaienerakowa be established”.
- the MCK developed a vision of a “Contemporary Mohawk government” based on the Great Law of Peace “whereby existing *Indian Act* institutions of government in this community could possibly be engaged under a Traditional governmental structure.” Strategies to strengthen Kahnawà:ke’s jurisdiction by transitioning to traditional government included five possible options, from maintaining existing institutions and processes but with enhanced administrative capacity through replacing the *Indian Act* format with traditional structures and processes.
- A community member developed a draft strategy, which is still in-progress, laying out a vision for traditional government based on “the full implementation of existing traditional bodies” (the Longhouse) and “amalgamation with an already existing administrative body” (the MCK).

A **Historical Chronology of Kahnawà:ke Governance** was researched using all available sources of information. The Chronology is a detailed timeline of the evolution of Kahnawà:ke's governance that lists all major events impacting the evolution of both the traditional and elected systems. It is intended to be used as a reference resource for community discussions on governance and to clarify the facts on important turning points in Kahnawà:ke's history. Most notable among these facts are:

- Kahnawà:ke's original system of government was a Haudenosaunee traditional government.
- In the mid-1700s, Kahnawà:ke transitioned to a seven-clan Council of Life Chiefs system.
- In the late-1800s, the Life Chiefs system was gradually replaced by an elected chiefs system.
- A majority of Kahnawakeró:non supported a deal to sell the reserve and move to Oklahoma in 1875.
- In 1887 a group of 54 Kahnawà:ke men petitioned to have the *Indian Act* applied to Kahnawà:ke.
- On March 5th, 1889 the *Indian Act* was applied and the band council system came into effect.
- The majority of Kahnawakeró:non rejected the *Indian Act*, favouring a return of the Life Chiefs.
- The Thunderwater Movement was active between 1915-20 advocating for a return of the Life Chiefs.
- Kahnawà:ke transitioned from the Life Chiefs to Haudenosaunee Confederacy chiefs system in 1923.
- In the 1933 band council election, traditionalists were nominated and elected by acclamation.
- In 1942, the Longhouse and the band council agreed to form a unified government.
- In 1946, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy conducted a condolence and installed Kahnawà:ke's chiefs.
- The band council and Longhouse united in political action in 1948 and again in the late 1950s.

An **opinion survey** with a set of questions for gauging community members' opinions was developed based on themes identified in targeted consultations with the Community Advisory Group and put forward in the form of a survey that received 209 responses. Aside from demographic information, four questions were asked: *Do you agree that Kahnawà:ke should transition to a traditional form of government? What does "Traditional Government" mean to you? What should be the future role of the Mohawk Council of Kahnawà:ke? Which of the following (listed items) needs to happen in Kahnawà:ke?*

The results of the survey are a snapshot of people's opinions in Kahnawà:ke and as such indicate strong community support for the transition to traditional government, with a minority being unsure or needing more information to make a decision and only 6% of respondents disagreeing. Individual views on what "Traditional Government" means vary significantly. The survey also indicates strong support for the idea of the MCK continuing in some form (70%) and specifically in the form of evolving into an administrative role taking direction from a traditional body (57%). The survey indicates a minimal and equal level support (12% for each) for two opposite views on the MCK: that the MCK should be abolished and that it should continue as a governing body. Finally, the survey indicates equal and strong support for the need for more education on culture and history, healing work and internal reconciliation of the Longhouses.

The community engagement process included targeted **consultations and conversations** with members of the Project's Community Advisory Group, key individual knowledge holders, elders, political leaders and youth activists, and then shifted to open ended Kitchen Table style conversations with individuals, families, workplace and other groups in the community, as well as engagement through several public

kiosks and continuing informal conversations in Sunday morning Cornbread Sessions. Interviews focused on the questions contained in the survey, but were open-ended discussions, and on average were one hour long. There were 45 individual interviews, 4 workplace sessions (30 total participants), 4 family group sessions (25 total participants) and 2 Cornbread Sessions during this phase (15 participants each).

The interviews were wide ranging, yet participants' perspectives revolved around certain main themes:

- 1) *Traditional Government vs. Band Council*, indicating a widespread desire to transition from the current system, generally perceived as a colonial imposition, to a traditional governance model rooted in Haudenosaunee culture and values.
- 2) *Community Healing and Unity*, where interviewees emphasized the need for healing of inter-generational traumas and divisions as necessary for establishing a successful governance system, including addressing lateral violence, fostering trust, and promoting open communication.
- 3) *Inclusivity and Representation*, expressing the need to ensure all community members, including those not affiliated with the Longhouses and those with no clan, are represented and have opportunities to have their voice matter in decision-making.
- 4) *Education and Knowledge*, recognizing the need for education about history and traditional governance, Kanien'kéha, Haudenosaunee ceremonies and culture, and the principles of the Great Law.
- 5) *Adaptation and Modernization*, revealing that while traditional values are central in people's minds, there is recognition of the need to adapt traditional governance structures and processes to the context of modern life, potentially incorporating new elements or "extending the rafters" to address contemporary challenges facing Kahnawà:ke.
- 6) *Role of the MCK*, where participants expressed a general distrust of the institution and see it as an obstacle to traditional government, but also with the prominent view that it should continue to serve as an administrative body and transfer its political authority to a traditional body.
- 7) *Practical Steps*, challenges such as developing a clear and workable governance structure, ensuring accountability and transparency in both the MCK and Longhouse, and addressing the financial and legal implications of the transition from the *Indian Act* system to empowering a traditional government as the community's decision-making body were identified.

Drawing on key ideas developed in previous work over the years by the Longhouse and MCK on the subject of the transition to traditional government, and factoring in all of the feedback and information collected in this community engagement, a set of conclusions and recommendations are offered for the community's consideration. This **pathway to traditional government** contains three elements that address the challenges facing Kahnawakeró:non: principles, priorities and process.

Kahnawakeró:non will support a transition to traditional government reflecting the following **principles**:

- Use peaceful and democratic methods to achieve an orderly, consensual transformation.
- Acknowledge all current forms of political association and valued social spaces.
- Recognize the connectedness of everyone and of our community to the natural world.
- Respect the diversity of spiritual beliefs and multiplicity of identities within the community.
- Cooperate on common ground for the common good.

The following **priorities** have been identified as crucial to Kahnawà:ke's vision of traditional government:

- Unifying and consolidating governance in Kahnawà:ke.
- Eliminating the application of the *Indian Act* and removing the MCK from the *Indian Act*.
- Recognizing the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and Mohawk Nation's jurisdiction in Kahnawà:ke.
- Enacting reforms to reposition the MCK as an executive council responsible for administrative affairs, infrastructure, services, and as a funding conduit liaising with external governments.
- Regenerating a stable, effective, accountable and transparent system of *traditional* government operating within the parameters of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and the Kaienerekowa.
- Restoring nation-to-nation relations with Canada and Québec based on Kahnawà:ke's existence as a community within the Mohawk Nation, the Two Row Wampum, and all our treaties.

The following elements are part of a viable **process** for the transition to traditional government:

- Implement more initiatives focusing on inter-generational knowledge transfer, the impacts of colonial traumas, and trust re-building – immediately and for the foreseeable future.
- Institute a community process to restore clan families, reconcile clan titles, and formally adopt all those Kahnawakeró:non with no clan.
- Address disagreements about the Code of Handsome Lake and different versions of the Great Law of Peace and conduct a community Condolence ceremony to begin the process of healing, internal reconciliation and an era of cooperation.
- A declaration by the MCK accepting the Haudenosaunee Confederacy's "8 Points of Jurisdiction".
- Form a Traditional Government Working Group involving representatives of the MCK, the Longhouses, the Mohawk Nation, and relevant organizations to develop transition strategies for each jurisdiction, the overall structuring of the MCK-Longhouse relationship, and the mechanics of re-arranging and transitioning governing authorities in the community.
- Cooperate on institutional development and effect the incremental transfer of political authority from the MCK to the traditional government as governing capacity in each jurisdiction is achieved.
- Formalize a new governing structure through ratification by the community using people's chosen forum (Longhouse clans and Referendum) when leadership agree on a workable arrangement.
- Negotiate the unified Kahnawà:ke government's formal recognition as a village government within the Mohawk Nation and Haudenosaunee Confederacy and legal recognition as the governing body for the Mohawks of Kahnawà:ke by Canada and Québec.