"Running in Prayer" Postponement: What Happened and Why

Summary

San José State University postponed, and did not cancel, the November 14, 2026 "Running in Prayer" exhibit and associated events because they were planned without the review and Tribal consultation that the California State University (CSU) Systemwide NAGPRA Policy requires. It is important to note that the CSU policy was developed with Tribal consultation across the State and its charge extends beyond the requirements of both California and Federal law.

The university learned of these gaps in review and consultation in late October, after Tribal leaders and Tribal organizations raised concerns. In reviewing how we got here, it was determined that the events were sponsored by a University unit without a review by the university's NAGPRA Presidential Designee, Repatriations Coordinator, or Community and Government Relations, which oversee the university's relationships with Tribal governments. We learned quickly that no formal consultation had taken place with area Tribes, including the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe, about the exhibit or the ceremonial elements of the event, including a prayer circle on campus.

In the words of Muwekma Ohlone Chairwoman Charlene Nijmeh, *"the Tribe wasn't involved in consultation or the planning."* SJSU, which is governed by CSU policy, could not sponsor such an event without that appropriate consultation.

Additionally, concerns were raised by the American Indian Movement (AIM) Grand Council, which was listed as a sponsor of the event. In their words, they also told us that *"It is clearly unethical that an educational institution would host this event without clear support and input from local community and tribal nations."* With the exhibit set to be installed on November 11 and the events set for November 14, there was not enough time to complete the steps the policy requires or that has been requested by the Tribes whose land SJSU stewards. **Postponing was the only solution to create the time needed to align our campus with the most appropriate ethical and responsible approach, as well as to comply with the first Guiding Principle of the CSU Policy, which is to recognize and honor Tribal Sovereignty.**

The university takes responsibility for these gaps. This situational update explains what was planned, what the university learned and when, which requirements were not met, and what happens next.

What was Planned

Three university-sponsored programs were scheduled for Saturday, November 14, 2026, connected to the California 500 Mile American Indian Spiritual Marathon. The university hosted the program in 2024 and 2025, and 2026 would have been its third year. CSU Systemwide Policy was officially put in place in 2025.

- **Third Annual Running in Prayer Run and Prayer Circle**, a run and prayer circle on campus

- **"Running in Prayer: A Spiritual Journey" exhibit**, a physical exhibit scheduled to run through mid-December, with a companion digital exhibit
- **Exhibit reception**, including a virtual conversation

The exhibit materials potentially included cultural objects, among them ceremonial staffs and blankets, along with photographs and film depicting runners, Elders, and children, and text describing the run's history and organizational affiliations.

Timeline: What the San José State University Learned and When

Date (2026)	What happened
September 11	The hosting unit opened its planning file for the 2026 program.
September 30	A space request for the campus prayer circle was signed as a routine administrative step after being requested by academic center leadership in our Library.
October 21–22	The hosting unit learned of general concerns about the run's leadership and met internally. No specific complaint was identified at that time.
October 23	SJSU Community and Government Relations briefly spoke to community members about their concerns about the event and the exhibit, where information was gathered.
October 23	A run participant sent a formal notice objecting to the use of her images without consent; the university was copied.
October 26	Twelve Tribal members, including Pit River Elders who host the run, wrote asking the university to cancel the November 14 event.
October 29	Indigenous Justice and the International Indian Treaty Council wrote to President Teniente-Matson. The matter was referred to Community and Government Relations the same day.
November 2	The university acknowledged receipt.
November 1–2	The event organizers submitted a written response and supporting materials.
November 2	Three Tribal leaders separately contacted the university to share concerns and ask how the exhibit was approved.
November 2	John Malloy of the California 500-Mile American Indian Spiritual Marathon Team contacted the university requesting confirmation that the events on November 14 will occur.
November 3	The hosting unit confirmed that no NAGPRA review or Tribal consultation had occurred, that written permissions from people pictured

Date (2026)	What happened
	were not on file, and that installation was set for November 11. It reported that a complete list of exhibit items was still being assembled.
November 5	An individual member of the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe wrote university leadership in support of the exhibit and offered the Tribe's participation in consultation. Muwekma Ohlone Tribe Chairwoman Charlene Nijmeh indicated to leadership that the Tribe had not been involved in consultation or planning, and asked for time to review before the Tribe endorses anything formally. SJSU Community and Government Relations spoke directly with Muwekma Ohlone Chairwoman Nijmeh and culture bearer on the evening of November 5 where they shared that they were not consulted and that they had concerns about the events and exhibit as planned.
November 6	The university decided to postpone the events and exhibit pending NAGPRA review and Tribal consultation.
November 6	The Chair of the American Indian Movement Grand Governing Council wrote in support of opposing the November 14 events; the email was forwarded to Community and Government Relations.
November 12	A member of Leonard Peltier's family contacted the Native American and Indigenous Student Success Center, expressing concerns that photographs of Mr. Peltier and his family were used without releases and that the family and Mr. Peltier's team were excluded from planning the exhibit.
As of this update	The university has not received an itemized list of the items to be displayed in the exhibit.

Concerns raised by Tribal leaders and Organizations

Concerns came from several Tribal Nations and Indigenous organizations, not from a single individual or family.

Who	Concern Raised
Joey and Cecelia Silvas, Pit River Elders and longtime hosts of the run, with ten other Tribal members (letter of October 26)	Asked the university to cancel the event; stated that Elders and minors appear in exhibit film without consent
Joey Williams, Vice Chair and Councilmember, Kern Valley Indian Community (signatory to	Concerns about the event and how the exhibit was approved

Who	Concern Raised
the October 26 letter, and separately on November 2)	
Vanessa Esquivido-Hernandez, Ph.D., Vice Chair, Nor Rel Muk Wintu Nation	Concerns about the event and how the exhibit was approved
Shirley Guevara, Dunlap Band of Mono Indians	Concerns about the event and how the exhibit was approved
Indigenous Justice	Display of eagle staffs and feathers contrary to cultural protocol and federal law; unverified claims of American Indian Movement authorization; historical accuracy of university publications; requested presidential review and consultation with affected Tribes
International Indian Treaty Council	Review of sacred and ceremonial materials and images of minors; a consultation and consent process for university activities involving the Marathon; accuracy of the university's public statements
Lisa Bellanger, Chair, American Indian Movement Grand Governing Council	Stated the Council's support for opposing the November 14 events, citing its mission to protect sacred sites, ceremonies, traditional protocols, and related items; stated that such an event should not be hosted without clear support and input from the local community and Tribal Nations
A member of Leonard Peltier's family	Stated that photographs of Mr. Peltier, his son, and his grandson were taken and used without releases or approval and that Mr. Peltier's family and team, all Tribal citizens, were excluded from planning an exhibit about him

The correspondence also described a dispute over the leadership of the run. The university takes no position on that dispute and has made no findings about any individual.

Input from the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe. The university also heard from the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe of the San Francisco Bay Area on November 5. A member of the Tribe initially wrote in support of the exhibit. She asked which items would require Tribal consultation and offered the Tribe's participation in consultation and review.

Chairwoman Charlene Nijmeh then wrote that this was the first time she was hearing of the event, that "the Tribe wasn't involved in consultation or the planning," and that she wished to review the matter

personally "before the Tribe endorses anything formally." The university respects the Chairwoman's request and will consult with the Tribe through its leadership.

Policies and processes that were not followed

Because the events were university-sponsored, the CSU NAGPRA Policy applied. It covers "all CSU employees... at all CSU locations and properties" (Section I.A), and multiple requirements were potentially not met.

Requirement	**CSU NAGPRA Policy**	**What happened**
No new holdings that "contain or may contain" cultural items without an approved Tribal request and a written agreement before custody	Sections II.E.16 and II.E.17	Ceremonial objects were to be accepted for display with no Tribal request, review, or written agreement
"Enforce prohibition on the use of Human Remains and Cultural Items in research, teaching or display"	Section II.B.4.a	Objects that may be cultural items were scheduled for public display before any determination of their status
Free, prior, and informed consent from culturally affiliated Tribes before any exhibition	Section II.E.2	Consent was not sought and obtained
"No decisions are made without meaningful Tribal consultation"	Section I	No formal consultation with area Tribes, including the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe, on the exhibit or the prayer circle
Tribal traditional knowledge is "the authority" in identifying cultural items	Section II.E.1	Whether the objects are cultural items was never put to Tribes, nor was it clear that Tribes themselves were directly providing these items, as is their sovereign right

The review also found **four** gaps in university process:

- **No referral to the offices responsible.** The program was not referred to the university's NAGPRA Presidential Designee, Repatriation Coordinator/Tribal Liaison or to Community and Government Relations, which oversees Tribal government relations.
- **No itemized list of items.** The university still has not received an itemized list of the items to be displayed in the exhibit, which any NAGPRA review requires.
- **No written permissions on file.** The hosting unit did not hold written permissions from people pictured in the exhibit, including parent or guardian consent for minors.
- **Unverified statements.** Event listings, signage, and the digital exhibit stated that the American Indian Movement authorizes the run. The university had not verified that statement, and it has been disputed.

Why Postponement was Necessary

The decision rests on specific, published policy requirements, and on the calendar.

- **The requirements must come before the event, not after.** The policy requires a Tribal request, Campus Committee review, a presidential decision, and a written agreement before the university takes custody of cultural items (Section II.E.16). Consent must be obtained before exhibition (Section II.E.2).
- **Consultation takes time by design.** The policy's consultation procedures call for multiple attempts to reach each Tribe by phone and email over 20 business days, separate meetings with each Tribe, and documented outcomes (Section II.E.8). This approach respects Tribal sovereignty and Tribal capacity, and it cannot be compressed into the days that remained.
- **Proceeding would have meant acting against the policy.** Installing the exhibit on November 11 and holding the events on November 14 would have required the university to accept and display ceremonial objects without the steps the policy requires. The university also could not determine which objects needed review, because it still has not received an itemized list of the items to be displayed.

The university considered whether to go forward in a modified form. Because the concerns reached the exhibit's core materials, its ceremonial elements, and the absence of consultation with the Tribes on whose homelands the university sits, a modified version would not have resolved them.

What this Decision is Not

- **It is not a cancellation.** The program can be rescheduled once review and consultation are complete.
- **It is not a judgment about any person.** The university has made no findings about the run's leadership, its organizers, or anyone who raised concerns.
- **It is not a step back from Native American Heritage Month.** Native student success centers, registered student organizations, and other campus programs are continuing their celebrations, and the university supports them.
- **It is not the university choosing among Native voices.** The policy exists so that Tribal Nations, through their own governments and traditional knowledge, guide how their cultural items and ceremonies are treated. Following it is how the university honors that.

Next Steps

1. **NAGPRA review.** The university's NAGPRA Presidential Designee, Repatriation Coordinator/Tribal Liaison, Community and Government Relations, and Campus NAGPRA Committee will review the proposed materials once the university receives an itemized list of the items to be displayed.
2. **Formal Tribal consultation.** Community and Government Relations will coordinate consultation with area Tribes, including the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe, and with Tribal Nations connected to the run and its materials. The Muwekma Ohlone Tribe has indicated its willingness to take part.
3. **Meetings with Tribal leaders.** The university is meeting with Tribal leaders who contacted it, and welcomes others who wish to be heard.

4. **Guidance from the CSU.** The university has asked the CSU Office of Tribal Relations to meet with campus staff on what consultation under the policy requires.
5. **A campus protocol.** The university is developing a protocol so that future events and exhibits involving ancestral remains, cultural items, or ceremony are screened and consulted on before they are approved.
6. **Rescheduling.** The university will consider new dates with the organizers once review and consultation are complete.

Policy References

- CSU Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) Policy, effective November 13, 2025
- San José State University NAGPRA and CalNAGPRA information
- Federal Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, 25 U.S.C. §§ 3001–3013, and regulations at 43 C.F.R. Part 10
- California Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, Cal. Health and Safety Code §§ 8010 et seq.