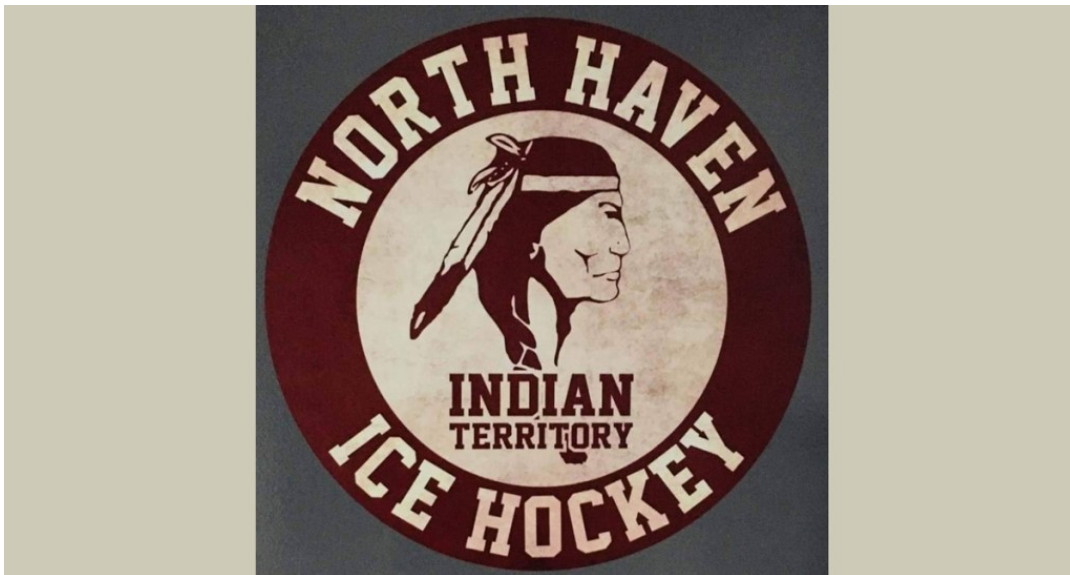


# North Haven School Board Drops Indians Mascot

by **Christopher Hoffman**

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The North Haven Indians varsity ice hockey team's logo, from the team's Facebook page.

The North Haven Board of Education voted unanimously Wednesday to retire the district's Indians mascot, ending a bitter controversy that has roiled the suburban New Haven town off and on for six years.

Most of the approximately two dozen people attending the meeting, the board's first in-person gathering in more than a year, burst into applause and cheered after the vote.

Board member Dorothy Logan said two things drove her decision: the realization that the Indians mascot was dividing the town and stories board members heard and studies they read about the harm and pain that the name inflicted on

Native American students and students of color.

“Native Americans living here, the Pequots and the Mohegans, have all been united in asking towns to stop using ‘Indians’,” Logan said. “As a teacher and a mother, I would say to my students and my children, if someone asks you to stop because you are causing them harm and discomfort, then you need to stop.”

Not everyone was happy with the decision. In remarks to the board before the vote, Joan Mazzurek condemned the board for not allowing voters to decide the issue in a referendum.

“I say this is a Marxist regime,” Mazzurek said. “This is a town-wide issue and a democracy. All North Haven taxpayers should have a right to vote on it.”

North Haven joins Guilford, Newington, and Farmington in dropping their Native American mascots over the last year. The state gave North Haven an added incentive with new legislation withholding funds from school systems that still use Native American-themed mascots. Under the new law, North Haven schools stood to lose about \$87,000. The system also faced a possible lawsuit by the state Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities, which announced this spring it would sue school districts that persist in using Native American mascots.

Board Chairwoman Anita Anderson emphasized in remarks shortly before the vote that members were casting their votes based not on politics, loss of funds, or litigation, but instead on their extensive study of the issue.

“We heard the public on both sides of this issue,” she said. “Our votes are for what we as individual board members feel is the right thing to do for our students’ social and emotional wellness. I ask . . . that the public respect the decision of the board, and we move together as a community.”

The vote came after more than an hour of often impassioned public comment, most of it urging the board to drop the Indians name. Wendy Marks, who is Native American, told the board how she felt taunted by mascot images when she attended North Haven High School.

“The name of North Haven Indians has never been an honor to our people,” Marks said. “It is hurtful and reflects systemic racism.”

Hazetta Jackson said her family has lived in North Haven for 70 years and has Black, White, and Native members and called it “a wonderful town.”

“We wouldn’t injure anyone,” Jackson said of her family. “That includes our white heritage as well. Let’s think about what’s really real and let’s think about having sports teams that really celebrate the town.”

North Haven High School student Benjamin Rudikoff said that he didn’t think the Indians mascot was offensive but over time changed his mind after hearing the pain that it caused his Native American classmates. The mascot harms students of all races and backgrounds, he said.

Speaking for the other side, resident Barbara Fruin said the Indians mascot honored the Native Americans who lived in North Haven and strongly denied it was derogatory.

North Haven first considered retiring the Indians mascot in 2015. The proposal sparked a ferocious backlash, leading opponents to pack a public hearing that grew so heated that Anderson shut it down. Board member Jennifer Cecarelli commented that during her time on the board, she has received far more communications on the mascot than any other issue, including COVID-19.

The board began to consider dropping the mascot again last year following George Floyd's murder.

Anderson said that the district will work with the state's tribes to come up with a new mascot that respectfully honors the town's strong Native American heritage. It could be, for example, an animal that was important to local tribes, she said.

"There's too much history here, and we want to keep it," she said.