The Issue of State Recognition

One of the most controversial issues facing Native Americans in Kentucky today is the issue of state recognized tribes.

What does it mean to be state recognized?
According Santa Clara Law review, “State recognition is an alternative tribal status to formal federal recognition much like federal recognition, it operates as a means for states to acknowledge the longstanding existence of tribes within their borders and to establish a government to government relationship to coordinate and communicate with tribes. State recognition is also a prerequisite to certain federal and state benefits meant to foster and preserve indigenous communities and to facilitate mutually beneficial relationships following centuries of conflict."

Why is there controversy over this issue?
Those opposed to state recognition believe that these groups will siphon off federal grant and scholarship money away from established groups. They also have conflict that many of these groups are frauds, who have lax requirements for proof that their members are of Native American decent, and that many charge for membership, or they are really just social clubs.

In Kentucky:
Three Kentucky Cherokee “tribes” have been determined to be frauds by the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, including the Cherokee Tribe of Kentucky, The Kentucky Cherokee Heritage Group, and the Southern Cherokee Nation of Kentucky. The last group, the Southern Cherokee Nation of Kentucky sought federal status in September of 2006. They did not receive federal status and tried to pass off a letter of tribute by the governor of Kentucky as state recognition. For several years there have been resolutions brought to the Kentucky legislature to set up a program to recognize state tribes. While passed by the house on most occasions, none of these bills has passed the Senate.

The Ridgetop Shawnee Tribe of Indians located in Southeastern Kentucky received a recognition by the Statehouse in both 2009 and 2010, and according to their website, this is all the recognition that they require.

As of February 21, 2013, representatives in the Kentucky Statehouse voted overwhelmingly to recognize the Southern Kentucky Shawnee tribe. The tribe is working to get the Kentucky Senate to recognize House Joint Resolution 44, to complete the process needed for state recognition. If you wish to keep up with their progress for state recognition you can follow the tribe on Facebook.

Images courtesy of the tribes’ websites