

Another View: Time is now to restore, protect Puvungna at Cal State Long Beach



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LONG BEACH

By Matias Belardes

It's been one year since Puvungna, a 22-acre parcel of sacred Native American land on the CSU-Long Beach campus, gained a promise of permanent protection. After decades of conflict, the university negotiated with local Tribal leaders and agreed to protect the 11 undeveloped acres of Puvungna in perpetuity. Against all odds, we've preserved one of the most important Indigenous sites in Southern California.

However, significant work remains to restore Puvungna so it can once again function as a vibrant center of local culture and Tribal spiritual practice. November is Native American Heritage Month, a time when Tribes hope to be able to celebrate our heritage in our most meaningful places. But this November, Puvungna remains in need of significant attention before we can safely perform our ceremonies there.

Literally tons of potentially contaminated soil and construction debris, dumped on the site by the university over the years, remain on the land. Some of the soil berms are eight feet higher than the surrounding landscape. These huge berms could be crushing underground cultural artifacts and are currently rendering large sections of Puvungna unusable.

We also need to do more thorough testing of the soils that were deposited on the site. Preliminary testing found arsenic. While arsenic can be naturally occurring, the preliminary tests showed high enough levels that a soils expert recommended keeping children and the elderly away from the berms. The complexity of cleaning up Puvungna means the task will be expensive

It's also incumbent on CSULB, and the greater Long Beach community, to have a constructive discussion about where to put these soils once they are removed. Puvungna is part of a larger pre-contact village and sacred site now mostly occupied by university buildings and grounds. Some argue that the soil, having been taken from elsewhere on this larger site, is itself sacred and should not be removed from campus. But if the soil holds contaminants, we must ensure it won't contaminate groundwater or threaten the health of people or wildlife. Regardless, the soil must not remain on the last undeveloped portion of Puvungna, where Tribal members come to participate in cultural and religious ceremonies.

Even as we clean up Puvungna, the only way to completely ensure its permanent protection is to partner with a land trust so the university can fulfill its promise to place a conservation easement over the parcel. In addition to funding for the restoration of the site, maintaining the area will require long-term funding. The university is working hard to secure this funding, and the state can also play a role in these tasks. Given the cultural importance of Puvungna for the Long Beach community and Tribes, it's appropriate for these public agencies to support the site's restoration and maintenance.

The time to preserve and restore Puvungna is now. The state has a \$97.5 billion surplus, and communities around Long Beach have received millions of dollars for parks, community centers and cultural centers. Our representatives in Sacramento can allocate funding to support restoration of this unique cultural resource. And everyone in Long Beach can speak out about the importance of restoring and preserving Puvungna.

It's time to move past lip service when it comes to environmental and Tribal justice. If the community, the university, and the state each do their part, Puvungna can once again become a fully accessible center for spiritual life and a vibrant cultural resource for the entire region.

Matias Belardes is the Chairman of the Juaneño Band of Mission Indians, Acjachemen Nation. He is an original plaintiff in the 1990s case to save Puvungna. He lives in San Juan Capistrano, the village of Acjachema, and has been active for decades in the preservation and protection of sacred sites.