

Indigenous People's Day bill defeated

Phil Drake | April 2, 2019

HELENA – A bill that would have sent Columbus Day packing and replaced it with Indigenous Peoples' Day was defeated by a state Senate panel whose chair said she hoped to see the proposal return someday with a solution more lawmakers could support.

House Bill 219 sponsored by Rep. Shane Morigeau, D-Missoula, was defeated 5-3 Monday, then tabled, by the Senate Administration Committee.

Two amendments had been proposed Monday for the bill. One would have dropped Columbus Day altogether and replaced it with Indigenous Peoples' Day the Friday after Thanksgiving.

The other would have kept Columbus Day and added Indigenous Peoples' Day the Friday after Thanksgiving as another state holiday.



Sen. Dee Brown, R-Hungry Horse
(Photo: State of Montana)

The second proposal did not have a fiscal note estimating its cost, prompting committee chair, Rep. Dee Brown, R-Hungry Horse, to say she could not vote for it.

"I can't support another state holiday," she said. "We are trying to scramble for money for in-home health care for people."

HB 219 would have observed Indigenous Peoples' Day the second Monday in October. It passed the House, 62-35, in February. Many of the Native American members of the House spoke out in favor of the bill.

One Native American lawmaker said on the House floor discussion that Columbus Day celebrates a man who killed and tortured Native American people and compared it to having a holiday that would celebrate Nazi Germany.

Sen. Bryce Bennett, D-Missoula, criticized explorer Christopher Columbus, credited with discovering America. He said it was wrong to have a celebration in Montana for a "colonizer who came into the Americas-ish and brutally mutilated Native populations just doesn't match up with the culture we have here in the state."

He said Montana has a lot to celebrate "and a guy who has no connection with the state of Montana ... has got to go."

He knew that adding a state holiday would have a tremendous fiscal note.

Sen. Douglas Kary, R-Billings, said Columbus was "a bad dude. He was sent out to a place where he was probably not expected to come back, but he did."

He said Columbus also did some good.



Sen. Bryce Bennett, D-Missoula
(Photo: State of Montana)

"I did not choose to claim my Columbus Day celebration," he said.

Brown said she would like to see another proposal submitted in a future session.

"I see as a real solution we could have a celebration, I really do," she said. "But when it starts costing everybody a bunch of money, I have to step back and say 'I have responsibilities to the taxpayers too.'"



Rep. Shane Morigeau, D-Missoula
(Photo: State of Montana)

Morigeau said Tuesday he would continue efforts to get the proposal passed.

"It's disappointing that, once again, the opportunity to celebrate the rich cultures of all Montanans has been pushed to the sidelines," he said.

He said Indigenous Peoples' Day would have let Montanans honor shared successes and challenges "rather than a man who has a legacy of committing atrocities against innocent people.

"We're all equal under the Big Sky, and we're going to keep telling our story -- and the horrific true story of Columbus -- until this gets done," Morigeau said in a text.

"I am not done with it this session, and I'm not done with it if we can't get it done this session," he said.

Columbus Day is reportedly not observed in Alaska, Florida, Hawaii, South Dakota and Vermont. They have replaced it with Indigenous Peoples' Day.