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Indigenous rights and urban development: property and land title in the Tacoma-Seattle hierarchy

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The conventional wisdom surrounding central US cities and their smaller, regional siblings is that the larger city played a winning card somewhere in its colonial or industrial-area history: for instance, a deeper port, a better rail connection, a surfeit of resilient entrepreneurs. Seattle and Tacoma have their own version of this tale. As the story goes, despite a deep natural harbor and early designation as the western transcontinental railroad terminus, Tacoma was usurped in its expected regional primacy by the savvy boosterism and determined mountaineering of Seattle's pioneering early settlers. This paper examines the accuracy of such accounts of the region's persistent urban hierarchy, by introducing and documenting an alternative explanation - based in tribal oppression, property rights, and the role of legal land title in urban development and capital investment. Through close reading of historical sources and land use documentation, including 19th century treaty grants and reservation boundaries, as well as related secondary analysis regarding tribal sovereignty, urban development, and natural resource claims, the historical importance of Seattle's absence of Duwamish land rights, as compared to Tacoma's significant Puyallup reservation, is demonstrated. While early settlers and civic leaders in Tacoma did not diverge from dominant patterns of racism and indigenous oppression, they did occasionally acknowledge the presence and land tenure of Puyallup natives. Careful examination of two policy events - the Boldt Decision (1974) and the Puyallup Land Settlement (1988) – shows that for over a century, the costs and uncertainties of unclear tribal claims cast a long shadow over infrastructure and urban development interests in the Tacoma area. By contrast, Seattle's unwavering refusal to grant lands or place-based recognition to Duwamish natives, even as its White founders profited from indigenous knowledge and labor, enabled the city's

ascendancy within the region as a hub of capital investment and urban growth. Providing this alternative account of the region's history of urban growth helps to foreground the role of tribal oppression and land rights in producing distinctly uneven development across a metropolitan area – a phenomenon that is not unique to the Puget Sound region, and which is too often overlooked in post-colonial, settler societies.