

A MARKETING SUPPLEMENT PREPARED FOR INDIAN
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On The Move

First Nations and Inuit entrepreneurs



Neegan General Manager Gareth Jenkins and David Tuccaro stand beside one of the company's 50-ton earth-moving trucks.

Entrepreneur provides international expertise

Businessman says corporate Canada must communicate with First Nations

David Tuccaro owns a lot of heavy construction equipment. He uses it to shift paradigms.

"It is becoming more and more important for corporate Canada to talk to the Aboriginal people," says the dynamic Fort McMurray businessman from the Mikisew Cree Band. "In the past, Aboriginal people were viewed as costly impediments. Now, there's a shift. We're being seen as valuable partners."

Tuccaro's been bidding to head the valuable-partner class: Tuccaro companies Neegan Development Corp. and Tuc's Contracting are key local allies for Syncrude Canada, a major player in the multi-billion-dollar development of northern Alberta's Athabasca oil sands.

Whether it's energy companies, forestry or mining, remarks Tuccaro, 42, "as the developers move farther north, they come across heavier [concentrations of] Aboriginal communities. Somewhere along the way they have to talk to the people where they impact the most, like it or not.

"If we don't take advantage and negotiate with the people who are developing near us, we're going to lose out again."

Entrepreneurial bona fides and high respect in his community have earned Tuccaro attentive listeners when he speaks out - without rancour but firmly - on such themes. After working a year as Neegan's president, he bought the earthmoving and mining services firm in 1991 from the four local First Nations who owned it. He had turned the struggling \$2-million concern into a robust \$10-million company by last year.

Neegan is 70 per cent staffed by Aboriginal workers. Tuc's Contracting, which provides water and vacuum trucks to clear industrial and human waste from work sites, has 60 per cent Aboriginal staff and has grown in seven years to become a \$4-million business.

"No longer can a corporation come in and develop resources and just leave a big hole in the ground," says Tuccaro. "The resources are there for everybody to share but they weren't shared in the past. Don't give us handouts, give us employment."

Not only has Neegan's relationship with Syncrude generated jobs, it has supplied cooperative expertise to the smaller firm in areas like elevating safety standards. Tuccaro wants to operate at world-class standards and that's winning new projects for him in another part of the world, New Zealand, where Aboriginal Maori communities have sought his help to create commercial properties.

"In a lot of cases what happens globally with Aboriginal people is that they have the lands but lack the management expertise to bring a deal," says Tuccaro. "And some of these projects are so huge, they need five to 10 years to leverage properly."

"What used to happen is that some huge multinational corporation would come in and buy the property and all they [Aboriginal landholders] got out of it was some menial work."

Instead, Tuccaro proposes to assist in developing a long-term management approach for his Maori clients, who he believes have similar goals to the people of First Nations communities in Alberta.

"The majority of the [Aboriginal] people I've encountered want to have a chance to play a part in the economies of Canada and the world," he observes.

There's an outsized personal determination at work here that has won Tuccaro national attention - he owns environmental consulting, furniture-making and other companies as well. Individual grit aside, youth need to be helped with access to the tools for success, he notes.

First and foremost, that means education.

"There has to be a huge commitment to education by the Aboriginal leadership at First Nation locations," he concludes.

"Economies come and go, up and down, booms and bust, but if our kids are educated, there's always something they can do."



Corey Hill runs a thriving health spa in Oshweken, Ontario



Entrepreneur Corey Hill now runs Oshweken's first health spa, Choosing To Live Health, on Six Nations lands in Ontario

'I'd worked hard for others, I just wanted to work for myself'

Corey Hill traded sweaty welding job to open a beauty salon and health spa

People got the message that Corey Hill was the determined type around the time she showed up for classes in welding at the age of 17.

She was the only Aboriginal person and the only woman in her class at the Guelph, Ont. technical college.

Not everyone was clear on what she was doing there, until she learned her trade well enough to get a job with the Six Nations Natural Gas Company.

After several years of taking care of herself with that skill, she startled everybody in her Mohawk community on southwestern Ontario's Grand River yet again by leaving her position.

"We kept getting laid off at the gas company," says Hill, 29.

"I realized I'd worked so hard for other people, I just wanted to work for myself."

Hill now runs Ohsweken's first health spa, Choosing To Live Healthy, with two full-time staff and a coop student helping out. The facility features a gym, whirlpool, a hair salon and juice bar, with such services as massage, aromatherapy, and an esthetician.

The property, for which Hill says with an amazed laugh that she is in debt for the next 12 years, features a building of her own design. While the spa was being constructed two years ago, workers would frequently turn to Hill's father, a carpenter, to ask where this or that piece of structure should go.

"What are you asking me for?" he would respond, pointing to his daughter. "It's her design and it's her building."

Yet if Hill affirms her energetic disposition and praises the way her family encouraged her to develop a career, she's also the first to dispel romantic notions of how business success follows hard on inspiration.

"I don't get paid as much as I used to," remarks Hill, who still has to fend off customer queries as to when she'll want a regular job again. "I always say it takes time. I love it but it's a lot of hard work. I don't want to show people that everything is just great. You have to commit your whole life to your business until it gets going."

Hill clearly has put in the requisite toil but also acknowledges, like many Canadian entrepreneurs of various stripes, getting key pieces of help along the way.

Firstly, Hill had been long interested in what she calls alternative therapies but needed practical experience in the field. She started by getting on-the-job training through the Grand River Employment and Training program (an agency supported by Human Resources Development Canada). That gave her background in aromatherapy, waxing, esthetician services and herbal products.

That list might sound oddly diverse in a metropolis. But in Hill's small community outside Brantford, it made sense that she would need dexterity in a number of related services to create a business drawing a potentially wide range of customers. And Hill was clear on wanting to work with all those customers.

"I'm a people person," she remarks. "I always liked working with people."

That wouldn't happen without a solid business plan, however. Hill was helped in developing one by Six Nations New Credit Community Futures program. The latter is supported by the National Aboriginal Capital Corporation Association, which promotes the growth of Aboriginal business through several dozen Aboriginal Capital Corporations across the country and Community Futures Development Corporations like the one Hill went to.

Aboriginal Business Canada, an initiative of Industry Canada, "helped me get my business plan paid for," she adds.

Impressed with her drive and carefully considered approach, the local Royal Bank gave her a modest start-up loan. Hill opened her first premises, a small rental space in a plaza, in 1996.

Low prices, diverse clients and lots of elbow grease got her to the point where she could consider her big step to property ownership two years ago. But even with a punchy new business plan, "I had a lot of ups and downs," notes Hill. She finally secured a loan through the reserve's Two Rivers Business Development Centre, but the cost for what was presumably considered a high-risk investment was steep.

"They're really good but their interest rate is really high, over 12 per cent," says Hill. "It's taking time to build the business because my overhead is really high and we've only been here two years."

Yet Hill continues to take courses to expand the services she's offering, and her staff are getting more training as well. In effect, running her own business was Choosing To Live Healthy on Hill's part - and not bad for the health of her community as well.

"Some days I get stressed," she says. "But in the long run it will pay off."

Aboriginal Capital Corp. creates new opportunities

Provide business keys to success

Proposed Aboriginal business ventures have had a long history of looking impossible to main-stream lenders.

In the Yukon, that reality spurred the 1985 creation of Dana Naye Ventures, an Aboriginal Capital Corporation (ACC) which not only lends money but helps clients produce business plans, offers them management consultation, puts on workshops and runs a Youth Business Program.

That's one example among the more than 30 ACCs across Canada, typically lending up to \$40,000 at a time, along with giving management support. The needs being addressed are acute. Because the Indian Act does not allow lenders to treat assets on reserve as collateral, banks have no security on their loans to Aboriginal applicants and would not advance money for building homes or to establish a business.

Indeed, it was usually not possible for an Aboriginal contractor to get a construction contract even on First Nations land if a bond was required in the contract specifications.

The Aboriginal Contract Guarantee Instrument, an initiative resulting from a two-year collaboration between the National Aboriginal Capital Corporations Association (NACCA) and Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, will soon be delivered through the NACCA network offering contract performance guarantees and helping Aboriginal businesses and contractors over-come such historic restraints.

"Section 89 of the Indian Act says a lender can't go onto a reserve to seize assets," explains Scott Drummond, eastern office manager for NACCA in Toronto.

"So in the 1950's, the (federal) government started doing direct lending to Aboriginal businesses. But this was civil servants doing this as opposed to lending professionals.

"Then, in the mid-eighties, Employment Canada, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada and Industry Canada came together to create these Aboriginal Capital Corporations, saying, 'We'll give you the capital, you go out and lend.'"

The premise, of course, is that ACCs are better placed to understand Aboriginal entrepreneurs and the obstacles they face when seeking capital for business needs.

"Our acceptance ratio [of loan applications] compared to banks is much, much higher," Drummond affirms. "But where we mitigate our risks is on the back end of it. We let the money out the door but we're on your tail about it. "The [main-stream] bank is low risk, high volume and we're the opposite."

Some of that risk is passed back to clients in the form of higher interest rates (about 11.5 per cent at present) to mitigate a 5 per cent loan-loss average. "We're unlike the banks that do formula lending, as in, 'we'll lend him 50 per cent of the net asset value, so we can't really lose,'" Drummond observes. "What we do is more what I call character lending. It's much more personal. We check out the community."

When Drummond started in the field a decade ago, the banks didn't want a First Nations deal without a guarantee from Indian and Northern Affairs Canada. But he believes that's changing. And so do some key banking officials.

"We have moved to build a profitable business with the Aboriginal community on a national basis," says Ron Jamieson, senior vice-president for the Bank of Montreal in Toronto.

"I am Native myself and, in fact, I still live on the reserve (Six Nations of the Grand River), so I am quite familiar with the challenges for Aboriginal businesses looking for access to capital."

Jamieson noted that ACCs needed to be formed "for the ex-press purpose of being development lenders because banks at the time were not going to loan them money on a startup business." But he also believes the environment is improving.

"An attitude of cooperation between government, mainstream lenders and, of course, the [Aboriginal] community, where everybody takes some responsibility in the transaction, can work," he declares. "I think we've shown it works."

A resonant example is that Jamieson's bank now does housing loans to individuals on the reserve without government guarantees, a previously unknown thing.

Close working relations with band councils have created the turnaround.

"We have been operating this way very successfully on 12 reserves, fully without any foreclosures as we speak," Jamieson reports.

That experience is echoed by the Royal Bank's Charlie Coffey, executive vice president for government and community affairs in Toronto.

"The default rate with these [Aboriginal housing] programs is less than the national average," he remarks.

Coffey has strong feelings on this theme, inspired by his involvement with the Aboriginal community while posted in Winnipeg over a decade ago.

As the banks began in the mid-90s to understand more about the Aboriginal market, "I said then that the status quo for Aboriginal people is not an option," says Coffey. "My belief is that economic development is the engine that will drive the creation of wealth and well-being in Aboriginal communities."

Historic mistreatment of the Aboriginal population makes support for such development a moral imperative, Coffey feels, but it also corresponds to sound business practices.

"I remind people that the strategic importance of the Aboriginal market should not be lost on any financial organization. Companies supplying services, financial or otherwise, ignore that market at their own peril."

Increased awareness of the needs has even led to the launch of the First Nations Bank of Canada, a joint venture between the Saskatchewan Indian Equity Foundation and the Toronto Dominion Bank.

The First Nations Bank is based in Saskatoon but offers account services through TD branches across the country, as well as through electronic and telephone services.

Aboriginal people have long been stymied in seeking equity financing, agrees bank chairman Keith Martell, but he points out that the whole model for Aboriginal loans is unique.

For example, a house needed in Nunavut may not have much collateral worth, Indian Act or not.

"It's more about access to an economy, to good-paying jobs and stability," Martell remarks. "The primary focus we need to be looking at is economic development. Access to capital alone doesn't take you very far."

As Aboriginal people have settled land claims, increased their participation in land use and become an important working-age demographic, the impetus for that development is growing markedly.

"The broader Canadian business community is looking around and saying, `Hey, this is an opportunity,'" comments Jamieson, "because Aboriginal people are in control of a significant amount of land and resources."

"Many companies are seeing that this is a growing workforce, a growing population, they need hundreds of thousands of homes. There's hardly a week goes by that I don't get a call about this from the head of a major organization."

Anokiiwin Training Institute opens doors

Aboriginal lands across Canada feature valued commodities ranging from gas and oil to gold and diamonds. But nothing in sustainable economic development can compete with the glitter of skills and jobs.

Understanding that immutable premise is what has driven the career of Elaine Cowan, whose Anokiiwin Training Institute in Winnipeg has taught over 1,000 students, many subsequently placed by sister firm Anokiiwin Employment Solutions.

"We've been there," says Cowan, the Ojibway business leader who received an award as woman entrepreneur of the year in 1999 from a Manitoba business association. "We've been raised in the [Aboriginal] community, we've faced some of the challenges ourselves."

Statistically as well as anecdotally, those challenges are steep and continuing to rise. Unemployment is substantially higher in the Aboriginal community than across Canadian society, while employment at the lowest skill levels is proportionally double that of the non-Aboriginal population.

Significantly, too, Canada's Aboriginal population of 1.4 million is considerably younger than that of Canada as a whole. The Aboriginal working age population of 621,500 in the last census in 1991 will have expanded by a staggering 300,000 persons by 2006.

"There is a great effort being made on hiring qualified Aboriginal candidates for jobs, but the challenge right now is the competition for those people," remarks Cowan. "That's why I think there has to be a very creative approach around this whole issue. You have a lot of unemployed Aboriginal people and very few of these organizations that are hiring are looking at this pool of human resources."

Education and training are obviously key whenever unemployment is discussed. Here, too, Aboriginal communities have a large gap to close, with just over half their population having completed a high school education (close to three-quarters of Canadians overall have finished secondary school).

The needed innovation Cowan refers to, in her view, must be applied both to skills development and job placement. That's what animated her to join with a partner in 1995 to start what has become The Anokiiwin Group, now with 40 staff and offices in Thompson as well as Winnipeg.

"I had been working primarily with government as a training director for the Aboriginal communities in Manitoba," relates Cowan, who previously worked with the provincial Minister of Northern Affairs and the Manitoba Energy Authority Task Force. "Because I had my years of experience in this area, I really had some creative approaches to HR development. I had talked quite often to a colleague of mine, saying, 'Couldn't we do this in a way that is not a generic approach but based on individual needs, a very customized approach?'"

Anokiiwin's training methods refine adult learning techniques to match the cultural learning styles of the different Aboriginal groups represented by participants. Aboriginal Elders take part in program activities and evaluations are made in a "sharing circle" that underlines the community orientation of the training process itself.

Management skills and computer training are among the most requested Anokiiwin programs, which also include such trade skills as heavy equipment operation, truck driving and carpentry. Regional jobs are often attached to resource-based industries, which require skills in construction trades, hospitality and health care. Urban-community needs tend to revolve around administrative and technical skills.

ADK Holdings generates \$38-million in revenues

Band benefits from resource ties

Shane Parrish is only joking when he tells his co-workers that he's going to put up a sign in his office that reads, "It's the land, stupid."

As general manager for ADK Holdings in Fort Liard, Northwest Territories, Parrish oversees daily operations for a group of resource-related Aboriginal companies that generated \$38-million in revenues in 2000. Some \$10-million of that was paid out in wages, a significant portion among workers from the Acho Dene Koe Band.

"It's the relationship to the land that is really giving us the work," says Parrish, who formerly worked on economic development with the government of the Northwest Territories. "It all comes back to the land."

The band's business relationship to the oil and natural gas resources of their lands was formalized in a prescient way with the creation of Beaver Enterprises Ltd. in 1976. Beaver started off doing the heavy construction work that energy exploration firms required. Trucking, camp operation and catering services were added.

Still the largest of the ADK companies, Beaver now models how virtually all tasks related to oil and gas sector activity in the field can be provided by even a modest-sized band of just over 500 members. A generation of ADK young people have grown up with training and work opportunities in road construction, heavy equipment operation, trucking and hauling, fuel service and maintenance of work camps with up to 1,000 people.

"We have some very skilled employees," says Parrish, "and if we've fallen short in the last few years [in filling staff requirements locally] it's because we've been very aggressive in going after the work."

That's apparent. A background in joint venture partnerships in drilling operations, a helicopter service and surveying projects is currently being translated into major deals for pipeline shares with such interests as Westcoast Energy and Shih Energy Transmission. Corporate mergers and acquisitions involving such participants as Chevron and Texaco are lately complicating the negotiating process, but ADK has already been in it for the long haul and intends to stay.

Along with part ownership of pipelines, such partnerships entail participation in gas gathering, processing and transportation in undertakings that may be worth in excess of \$30-million of operational spending.

To an extent distinctive in the North, ADK has displayed ambition to take the lead in ensuring its role.

"We were just at a seminar last month and pointing out that with all these relationships we have with northern companies and northern bands, we're the experts in partnerships at this point," remarks Parrish. "It will be exciting to get to the point where we can offer partnership opportunities to other bands."

Negotiations on that are already underway in the case of a gas drilling operation that will extract resources from ADK lands and those of the Kaska First Nation in neighbouring Yukon. The deal involves AKITA/SAHCHO Drilling Ltd., with which ADK is already established as a joint-venture partner.

"We will own 25 per cent of AKITA rig number 58 and Kaska will also own 25 per cent," Parrish explains. "It was our option to offer this deal to the Kaska. And we're not done yet. We're still growing into new and different areas."

Current Acho Dene Koe Chief Judy Kotchea comes into an ADK business approach that was ardently established by her predecessor. Long-time ADK Chief Harry Deneron had once remarked of resource development in the North that, "companies usually come in and then disappear." Breaking that cycle with long-term participation deals has been at the heart of ADK's success.

But if that's a case history worth emulating, Parrish cautions that it's not easily done. "Chief Deneron understood business, understood the opportunities in the oil field," says Parrish. "But it's tough doing business anywhere, it's tough doing business in the North, it's tough for an Aboriginal band to have sustained success. I think it's working here for ADK because they are also tough on themselves and they treat this as a business. They know that if it's not profitable, they can't achieve their other goals. If some of their own band members are not performing, there has to be an explanation why."

Canada working to strengthen business expertise

Economic and social development remain top objectives

Self-sufficiency, community reliance and a strong sense of purpose have been ties that have bound First Nations and Inuit in Canada for generations.

Those same characteristics will carry those peoples through the many challenges and opportunities facing them at the dawn of this new millennium.

For Indian Affairs and Northern Development, the department responsible for First Nations, Inuit and Northern development, the challenge is to provide skills and opportunities to enable Aboriginal communities to grow and prosper.

Robert Nault, MP for Kenora-Rainy River in Western Ontario, leads Indian Affairs and Northern Development, and is charged with the responsibility of providing the framework and tools to meet those challenges on behalf of First Nations and Inuit of Canada.

"In my mind, to prepare for the future, we need to continue to build First Nations and Inuit economies within Canada," says Minister Nault.

"We need to give the youth in these communities a brighter future to look forward to. A future that will foster self-sufficiency and provide even greater economic opportunities.

"We cannot and must not repeat the mistakes of the past. We need to create an economic climate that will allow these young people to thrive. And we need to do it now."

The Minister is acknowledging some of the compelling statistics of First Nations and Inuit youth.

In Aboriginal communities, 50 per cent of the population is under the age of 25 - a number that increases every year. In addition, more youth are taking advantage of post-secondary educational opportunities. Today, there are more than 27,000 First Nations and Inuit enrolled in colleges and universities.

"They are the best educated generation of First Nations people ever. They are well trained, and equipped to make their way in the new global, knowledge-based economy," says Minister Nault. "And I believe that the rest of the country, especially the business sector, is starting to wake up to this reality.

"Business can see that its future labour force, and its future consumer base, is comprised increasingly from the Aboriginal population. In communities right across the country, the private sector, provincial and territorial governments are leading the way in recognizing the benefits of tapping into the huge potential of this labour force, and in working more closely with Aboriginal communities."

In addition to the ever-increasing number of post-secondary graduates entering the workforce is the increasing number of Aboriginal businesses, in virtually every industry sector, that are also ready and willing to compete in Canada's economy. To date, there are more than 20,000 registered Aboriginal businesses across Canada.

"There are numerous Aboriginal communities looking for the opportunity to compete and do business on a regional or even international scale. In the past, one of the major hurdles facing Aboriginal entrepreneurs was the difficulty in obtaining outside sources of capital. Today, however, due to new programs the Government of Canada has been instrumental in implementing, Aboriginal entrepreneurs can now compete in today's marketplace."

While financial support mechanisms, such as assistance in securing venture capital, have allowed the Aboriginal business community to thrive, the Minister acknowledges that more must be done to help foster increased economic development.

"Aboriginal businesses want to become true business partners in large-scale developments," says Minister Nault. "First Nations and Inuit communities are going to be heavily involved in many of the major ventures now underway in the resource sector. So why should they not also derive the kind of benefits we associate with equity positions? Not only would the communities benefit financially, but the climate of stability created would also attract further investments."

"All levels of government have to work with Aboriginal people and the private sector to turn potential into reality. We have to sit down together to identify partnership processes and initiatives for greater Aboriginal participation and benefits in major regional economic development initiatives," he says.

In addition to supporting Aboriginal businesses with effective programs and policies, the Minister also sees that in order for First Nations communities to become truly economically self-sufficient, they must be in control of their own destinies.

Says Minister Nault, "Self-reliance and good governance are the basis for creating stable, self-reliant communities that can participate fully in the economic growth of Canada."

Research has shown that when First Nations build effective institutions that match their cultures, successful communities are a result.

"First Nations communities must have the ability themselves to administer the full range of local programs that affect everyday life such as education, social services, housing, and transportation. "How Aboriginal communities structure their governments and build their capacity to function effectively will have a long-term impact on how sustainable and successful these communities are. That is why we supported well over 100 capacity-building projects last year under *Gathering Strength Canada's Aboriginal Action Plan*," he explains.

"The end result has been the on-going development of new government-to-government relationships, in which there is a fundamental re-orientation in how the Crown and Aboriginal people relate to one another, and in the roles and responsibilities of the parties."

"There will always be an ongoing relationship between the Crown and Aboriginal people, but we must rethink our role and shift to being facilitative while Aboriginal communities build up the government side of the equation to develop more independence and autonomy," he says.

"I truly expect and hope that these initiatives will, over time, lead to self-government arrangements. But we cannot wait for the signing of self-government agreements to advance the good governance theme."

"We need to find ways for Indian Affairs and Northern Development to be ready and able to support change wherever there is a need and a willingness to embrace change," he says.

"We are already shifting the balance of accountability by working very closely, for example, with the Chiefs of Alberta to address the issue of Aboriginal governments' accountability to their citizens."

"And in British Columbia, we have developed a capacity-building workshop for our front-line officers, which is designed to strengthen Aboriginal governments and Aboriginal citizens alike."

The Minister identifies access to capital as the main impediment to building an Aboriginal economy.

"Overcoming this hurdle is critical to creating jobs and breaking the cycle of dependency that exists on too many reserves.

"Working in partnership with First Nations governments, provinces and territories, the Government of Canada is committed to addressing this challenge," he says.

"Effective in 2000/01, I have refocused departmental priorities to allocate an additional \$75-million on strategic economic investment, rising to \$100-million for the upcoming year.

"These funds will help us to increase the budget for initiatives that have been effective at promoting business development and First Nations employment," the Minister says.

"We have also announced a new \$5-million initiative that will provide contract guarantees to Aboriginal businesses and entrepreneurs."

"The Aboriginal Contract Guarantee Instrument draws on the expertise of Aboriginal financial institutions that know and understand the Aboriginal business environment. It's the first of its kind in Canada," he says.

Overall, though, Minister Nault is confident about the future.

"The road will be difficult, as all worthwhile paths are. But we also know the tremendous rewards that await us when opportunity is shared broadly and the tools of achievement distributed more fairly," he enthuses.

"Working in partnership with Aboriginal people, with the provinces, the territories and with the private sector, I am confident that we can create a better future for all Canadians."

Osoyoos Band are vintage entrepreneurs

Economic development usually requires strong governance, strategic partnerships and access to financing.

The Osoyoos Indian Band in the Okanagan Valley of B.C. adds another feature and puts it at the top of the list: A no-apologies entrepreneurial determination that's in overdrive.

"Aboriginal people," declares Chief Clarence Louie, the passionate leader behind a striking success story, "should be able to design their own future.

"If a Band votes in favour of a venture by referendum, that should be respected. It's time for First Nations to manage their own affairs. Let us learn, let us take risks. How do any people learn? They learn through trial and error."

Chief Louie means business.

The front of Osoyoos Indian Band Development Corporation literature features his quote, "The Band does not owe its membership dependency. It owes them opportunity and a chance to become independent."

His attitudes, which extend to wanting to put reserve lands at risk as collateral for investment, are hardly accepted across the board in Aboriginal communities.

But with the Osoyoos Band now running 10 business enterprises, most notably the creation of a first-rank winery, Chief Louie has made good on his mantra that the Band should be biased towards action.

Things were different not long ago, he told a gathering of the Council for the Advancement of Native Development Officers upon being given the 2000 Economic Developer Award.

"In 1994, our Band was in the same situation as most Bands in Canada," he related to the Yellowknife conference.

"Federal transfer dollars exceeded the Band's self-generated revenue. Today, the Osoyoos Indian Band's self-generated revenue is seven times more."

The Band, comprising about 370 members, had grown wine grapes in the Inkameep vineyards on its reserve for more than 30 years. Now, big changes to the B.C. wine industry - especially the development of world-class grapes, for which the Osoyoos fields have become known - have opened the way for a joint venture with a vintner.

Construction of a 540-square-metre facility is underway and the Band believes that as Canada's first Aboriginal winery it will be producing 25,000 cases, with revenues exceeding \$4-million, in a couple of years.

"First and foremost, you have to talk about the entire attitude which this Band has exhibited," says Chris Scott, economic development officer for the Osoyoos.

"This Band has adopted a very rigorous application of business principles. What there has to be is a willingness to encourage First Nations communities to enter into practices where they excel."

Those have been remarkably diverse for the Osoyoos, who run a recreational vehicle park, a construction company, forestry concern, golf course and residential seniors' community, among other initiatives.

It's not so complicated, Chief Louie tells non-Aboriginal audiences.

"We are business people much like yourself," the Chief says. "Our goals are basically the same as your goals, to build a strong future, to pursue the good life, prosper from our investments and earn our place in the local economy, thereby earning our freedom."

Sah Naji Kwe Wilderness Spa thrives on independence

Joyce and Moise Rabesca have always been able to manage without private bathrooms or the assistance of major lending institutions.

Their business, fixed at the northwest shore of Great Slave Lake in the Northwest Territories, has depended on it.

"In 1988, we set up a little tent-frame camp on the lake," recounts Joyce Rabesca, whose partner comes from the nearby Dogrib First Nation.

"People knew my husband. They knew he was involved in hunting, fishing and guiding in this area for years."

It proved a vital familiarity: The Rabescas got into the hospitality business by trading Moise's fishing services for the discarded wood boxes used in local construction.

"We could not get any financing from the government," Joyce remarks. "Banks wouldn't even look at us, being from the bush. We're a private enterprise and it's very, very hard to get funding if you're not a band."

Northerners, fortunately, were not reluctant to lend their patronage to what became the Sah Naji Kwe Wilderness Spa and Meeting Centre, which features the special natural marine clay of the lake, a host of spa therapies and conference facilities for up to 24 people.

Camp Ekwo, the nearby site of the Rabescas' fishing and hunting operation, has for a number of years assured profitability while the spa developed. The caribou season, in practical terms, runs just from mid-August to the end of September but a lot of sportsmen come through in that time.

"It's very packaged, very systematic, very professionally done," says Joyce, "and it's been a great business opportunity for Aboriginal people [working at the camp as guides]."

Meanwhile, there's been notable interest developing in the spa from around the continent. The therapeutic clay has inspired media attention in the southern cities, as have the Rabescas' wilderness programs in which guests are taken into the bush for five days to learn how to set fishing nets, hunt caribou, collect native medicines and make snowshoes.

But the washrooms are still shared.

"We get tons of inquiries from the south but they're still looking for something more upscale," sighs Joyce. "Northerners know what to expect."

Hearing that the spa employs tent-frame accommodations, city novices imagine being crammed in nylon pups with water dripping on their heads rather than the sturdy canvas rooms with wooden platforms and rugs that the spa actually affords.

For the last four years, the Rabescas have been looking to address the cavils of potential guests in a definitive way. The couple is negotiating with Asian investors to create an unarguably high-end premises of wood and stone that will house up to 120 guests. The undertaking would cost an estimated \$13-million and generate 50 seasonal jobs.



Photo: Courtesy of Mi'kmaq-Maliseet Nations News

Nova Scotia Premier John Hamm, Millbrook Chief Lawrence Paul, and Indian Affairs and Northern Development Minister Robert Nault cut the ribbon to officially open Millbrook's Power Centre on January 11, 2001.

Determination paved way for Millbrook Commercial Park

Running right through the community of the Millbrook Band is one of the busiest highways in Nova Scotia, with well over 20,000 vehicles whizzing by each day.

Enticing some of those cars to pull over and stop for a while has long been a notion with distinct commercial possibilities. And the completion of a \$7.4-million over-pass this spring should bring some of those to fruition, with the first commercial retailers signed on and more to come.

"It has been a struggle for many years to accomplish this, but now things are happening because of the efforts of a very proactive Band council and Band membership," says Lloyd Johnson, economic development officer for the 1,100 member First Nation near Truro.

Sturdy governance and a consistent goal have been needed on the Band's part to get through a complex series of regulatory entanglements to allow for a commercial park, now known as the Truro Power Centre. Federal money from Indian Affairs and Northern Development is paying for the overpass, which will be maintained by the Nova Scotia Department of Transportation and Public Works.

"Once the overpass is completed, this centre is probably second to none in Atlantic Canada in terms of highway visibility," says Johnson, who believes the development has the potential to attract the likes of such big-box retailers as Costco, IKEA and Future Shop.

The creation of Highway 102 in 1972 created a major link to the metropolitan Halifax area but divided reserve land.

"The trucks using that route would be going through the heart of the community," notes Johnson of Millbrook's early reluctance, adding that the Band Council "felt pressured" by Truro to make a deal allowing the road construction.

The arrangement at the time permitted very limited commercial enterprise alongside the highway and Johnson fumes that - "it's still a sore point with me . . . all we were entitled to was basket shops."

The province legitimately did have safety and volume concerns about the highway, which was only designated for a certain number of interchanges.

Negotiations on those points took years, again underlining the need for a well organized effort on the part of the Band, which also won a strong referendum decision among its members to proceed.

"The province was quite sticky with the safety standards and we jumped through every hoop," Johnson recounts. "And this was with Band money."

An Ultramar gas station, Tim Horton's and Sobey's convenience store are among the first businesses committed to the site. A compound of Aboriginal businesses, the Band Council anticipates, will grow much more slowly than the part of the park pursuing multinational concerns.

That's what has made vital an agreement that will allow Millbrook Band Council to levy taxes on businesses in the park, in this case at rates no higher than the most favourable rates in neighbouring Truro.

The language of the federal Indian Act, which did not anticipate such commercial developments on reserves, has had to be modified in recent years to permit such scenarios. Having such a tax by-law to favour the needs of the reserve is "an innovation in Atlantic Canada but it's commonplace in B.C.," says Johnson, recalling a landmark federal decision that stemmed from a plea for taxation rights from a Kamloops, B.C. First Nation community in the mid-80s.

Those rights were formalized in 1988 when amendments to the Indian Act extended Aboriginal powers of taxation to First Nations interests in "conditionally surrendered" or "designated" lands such as a commercial park on reserve terrain. The following year brought the creation of the Indian Taxation Advisory Board in Ottawa to work with First Nations councils and the federal government on tax issues.

"The tax law is budget-based," explains Johnson. "You have to demonstrate that the tax revenues are being used for infrastructure."

Overpass and tax structure in place, success for the Truro Power Centre will still not be a slam dunk. Millbrook lost out after a tantalizing series of conversations with representatives of Wal-Mart, who ultimately decided that the retailer prefers to own its property - not an option on the reserve.

More broadly, "In Atlantic Canada there's fear of setting up business on the reserve because of red tape, politics and the unknown," comments Johnson.

That gas station, convenience store and donut shop aren't a bad beginning, however. Over a cup of coffee and a respite from that busy highway, travellers may find the Millbrook Band community is becoming a bit more familiar.

Arctic Beverages serves unique niche

Lone Aboriginal Pepsi franchise in the world

Anyone interested 10 years ago in owning a company likely to excel at giving its salespeople ulcers couldn't have missed Arctic Beverages.

The Pepsi-Cola Canada bottler's territory consisted of frigid northern Manitoba and a chilly little chunk of Saskatchewan, places where communities are small, far apart and expensive to get to.

Yet, improbably enough, a consortium of 55 Manitoba First Nations representing 92,000 Aboriginal people got interested in buying the Flin Flon company in 1991.

"The response was basically that this was an impossible scenario and it was just not going to happen," recalls Marvin Tiller, chief executive officer and president of Arctic Beverages and of its parent, the Tribal Councils Investment Group of Manitoba (TCIG).

Tiller, who led the purchase of Arctic as TCIG's first acquisition, understood something Pepsi corporate headquarters didn't: That 80 per cent of the people who would be drinking Arctic's soft drinks were the people investing in the distributor through TCIG.

The new ownership started making its mark quickly, winning distribution rights in what is now Nunavut, along with northern Saskatchewan and northern Ontario. The basic challenge was as stern as ever - up to seven carriers were needed for a single remote delivery, making a 24-case of Pepsi or 7-Up cost \$30 to customers in Baffin Island.

But the company was growing. And growing. Arctic Beverages has doubled its sales since the purchase and, more remarkably still, has been acknowledged as the fastest-growing Pepsi bottler in Canada. "We are the only Aboriginal bottling franchise in Pepsi's system worldwide and they take great pride in this company," remarks Tiller.

Sean Post, Arctic's general manager, agrees. "It took a bit of selling to convince (Pepsi) but now they are our biggest supporters," he says.

Arctic found certain improved efficiencies in its network of road, rail, boat and plane, reducing costly breakage. But its real secret has been in working with the reverse of normal industry ratios in which bottlers usually sell 80 per cent of their products to national chain stores and the rest to small independents.

Given the company's territory, most of Arctic's retailers are small independents.

Again, many of the small independents, along with their own customers, rightly see themselves as Arctic's ultimate owners, which creates all sorts of receptivity to the firm.

"We have three-and-a-half people in sales and marketing," notes Post.

"If we were more of a traditional company, we'd have 10 times that many."

Both men praise the careful separation of Aboriginal politics from company operations; TCIG wants First Nations participation in the mainstream economy so Tiller insists on a consistently business-like approach to company issues.

What's made TCIG initiatives like the Arctic Beverages purchase successful?

First, says Tiller, must come scrupulous due diligence before entering a venture. Next, and always, comes strong governance.

"You really have to be committed to it," Tiller declares.

"It's just a no-win deal to push that aside or take it lightly."

Diamonds are Yellowknife's best friend

The new civic motto around Yellowknife is that the town is where "a golden history meets a brilliant future."

The gold ore that drove the early economy of Canada's North isn't entirely history, but depressed world prices for the metal keep potential mining operations mired below profitability in most parts of the region.

What glitters in recent years, of course, are the Northwest Territories' diamonds, the "brilliants" of the municipal slogan.

As several international firms work to extract the initial \$24-billion of the stones estimated to lie beneath their claims, Yellowknife has sprouted the least likely of Arctic industries: Diamond cutting and polishing plants.

"Normally, this industry has only been developed in Europe, Israel and India," remarks Darrell Beaulieu, chief executive officer of the First Nations-owned Deton' Cho Corporation, which runs one of those plants in partnership with Goldeos Ltd. of Calgary.

"What we're doing is finishing the products that are mined from the lands here."

Earning that right took a determined effort by the territorial government to insure that a portion of the stones are processed locally rather than in Antwerp or Tel Aviv. The result, says Beaulieu, whose company belongs to the Yellowknives Dene, has been significant for First Nations people in the region.

"We were looking at employing Aboriginal students from our community and this industry has brought a whole new component to the existing economy," he comments.

Deton' Cho's 25 workers in diamond finishing include Dene students who are under-going a three-to-five year training in sawing, lasering and polishing the stones.

"These skills are transferable and the students can take them wherever they want," says Beaulieu, noting that current projections anticipate some 25 years of diamond extraction in the Territories.

Deton' Cho's recent enterprise in diamonds is clearly a new direction for the community, yet not without analogies to its traditional activities. The company has long served the mining industry in the region, building and catering work camps and assisting with haulage.

Diamonds are in one sense just the latest example of how the community has managed to see to it that resources beneath the ground translate into opportunities on the surface.



David Lewis, founder of Taybridge Communications, says Aboriginal people can be at the forefront of the IT boom with proper training in science and math.

Taybridge Communications surfs latest IT trends

Something happened to David Lewis one day as he was en route to getting a degree in journalism: He got caught in the World Wide Web and has never quite found his way out again.

"I started dabbling in Web stuff before most people were doing that," says Lewis, 34, of Taymouth, N.B. near Fredericton. "And I always had the inkling that I'd do a business on my own."

Starting Taybridge Communications on a part-time basis in 1992, Lewis has been able to devote himself to his one-man information technology operation full-time for the last three years.

Taybridge does Internet project management, Web design, CD-ROM development and the like for a diverse array of clients currently all based in the United States. Company marketing is virtually built into much of the work because of its presence on the Web. And the small-town locale of Lewis's business has been irrelevant; Lewis has won customers ranging from a die cutting operation in North Carolina to the California software maker NetObjects Inc.

Information technology, remarks Lewis, who grew up in British Columbia and moved to New Brunswick nine years ago, has been "almost a combination of Industrial Revolution and the gold rush."

"The gold rush mentality came to a halt last April (when technology tocks fell), but the big thing is that it's a shakeout and things will grow from there. What it comes down to is if you can make the business profitable."

Requiring only a modest capital investment and being able to work from his own home have afforded Lewis a head start on gaining profitability.

He's also received about \$18,000 in contributions in the last several years from Aboriginal Business Canada, a federal initiative of Industry Canada.

"The big thing I've really tried to instill in my business is a high level of service and a high level of professionalism," comments Lewis, who believes quality work will continue to distinguish the myriad of players in the IT field.

Notwithstanding the recent turbulence in the IT sector, the need for skilled people in Canada is still considerable. That's both an opportunity and challenge for Aboriginal communities, where math and science have not traditionally been emphasized in schooling and entry rates to high-technology fields have been very low.

Overcoming that background will sometimes require concerted efforts involving several agencies. Saskatchewan offers a good example. There, the Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technology has designed a Careers in Electronics program that has been supported by Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, Human Resources Development Canada and SaskTel.

An initial program effort involved selecting 23 Aboriginal students in the province based on their academic background, which included algebra and physics courses in high school. Training in electronics was then provided by the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology while using the facilities and equipment of SaskTel. The trainees were then offered positions with the telecommunications utility.

Some trainees may remain with SaskTel while others will go on to seek positions elsewhere or further training. And what's being accomplished by the program, according to a report from The Conference Board of Canada, is not only career preparation for a specific group of young people but a generation of role models for others.

"Aboriginal people in Saskatchewan have traditionally gone into teaching, social work and health services," states the report. "Their schools have not recruited people in science and math."

Partly because of initiatives like the electronics program, however, a new generation of Aboriginal parents is "encouraging their children to take math and science because they now recognize the importance of these subjects."

SaskTel has undertaken negotiations with potential partners in such sectors as forestry, mining and oil and gas to establish comparable training programs of their own; in response, the company has received expressions of interest from a number of major organizations, including paper giant Weyerhaeuser and SaskPower.

Meanwhile, there are plans for the Careers in Electronics program to be offered at a number of locations in Saskatchewan to allow students to participate without being uprooted from their home communities.

The example of David Lewis and Taybridge, in any case, is that once acquired, these skills can be made useful more or less anywhere.



Signing of agreement with the First Nations Buying Group recently are, rear, left to right: Grand Chief Vern Roote, Anishinabek Nation; Grand Chief Leon Jourdain, Grand Council Treaty #3; Grand Chief Stan Beardy, Nishnawbe-Aski Nation; Grand Chief Larry Sault, Association of Iroquois and Allied Indians; and front, left to right, Michael Birch, President, First Nations Buying Group; Terry Mosey, President, Bell Ontario; Vice Chief Charles Fox, Office of the Ontario Regional Chief.

First Nations Buying Group's strength is numbers

Curiously, the opening lines in Michael Birch's resume tend to catch in a reader's throat.

"I did not continue my formal education after Grade 11," writes the once-timid man from Garden Hill First Nation in northern Manitoba, but "rather chose to educate myself through a process of trial and error.

"This trial and error process cost me over \$1-million and it could have been avoided if I had a business degree."

That unconventional commencement to a resume has a distinct uplift in its conclusion: Birch, just 32, is today a successful Winnipeg entrepreneur.

His First Nations Buying Group, the only such Aboriginal brokerage in Manitoba and perhaps the largest in the country, has grown like a brush fire in just over two years, signing deals with Xerox, Grand & Toy and Manitoba Telecommunications Services, among others.

Not the expected career trajectory for a knock-kneed kid from the reserve.

"When I came out of the North, I was just a shy, terrified individual," says Birch, who is these days pressed to speak at Aboriginal schools and community settings. "I wasn't used to mainstream business."

He learned in a hurry. Birch's Aboriginal Beverages Company was a going concern for four years in the mid-90s until the price war between Pepsi and Coke, along with a plummeting Canadian dollar, gave him his costly first diploma from the school of hard knocks.

"At the time," recounts Birch, "I said to myself, 'There isn't a lot of margin in this business as it is. Instead of making myself sick, I have an existing infrastructure here in Winnipeg I can use.'"

Birch well knew that the Aboriginal presence in Manitoba was substantial, roughly 10 per cent of the overall population with over 100,000 people.

First Nations communities in the province were spending tens of millions of dollars on telecommunications, office supplies and other goods.

"I thought, we've got 60 reserves here, why aren't we buying together?" says Birch, adding that Winnipeg itself, with some 50,000 Aboriginal residents, could be considered Canada's largest reserve.

His well-publicized soft drink company had already won Birch a high profile in the province, both with Aboriginal communities and beyond. That would prove valuable.

The crunch was that Birch was facing a year of transition to get the buying group going while continuing to pay out over \$150,000 in wages to his staff.

Following his usual approach, he declined to seek more in loans and just pounded the pavement while keeping alive such other paying interests as a convenience store in his community.

"We went to a number of the key suppliers, MTS (the provincial phone utility), Grand & Toy," says Birch. "We needed to convince these corporate bigwigs that this was the way to go."

But Birch, together with First Nations Buying Group director Barry Gibson, also had to convince his own community. Early on, he won a critical ally - Rod Bushie, Grand Chief of the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs which represented all the provincial bands.

"One of the biggest mandates of the Grand Chiefs' platform was economic development," explains Birch, who says Bushie saw business sense in the plan quickly.

Yet while Bushie's support was important, all the individual Chiefs of the participating First Nations would also have to sign on, which was far from automatic.

"In the beginning, it was a chicken and the egg problem," observes Gibson, meaning that the company initially had no suppliers to offer the Chiefs and no Chiefs to offer the suppliers. Moreover, a key to getting signatures was that the bands not be compelled to use the offered services, only committing to a modest membership fee that would entitle them to participate.

MTS couldn't long resist the apparent virtue of the approach; the phone company had block long-distance calling deals with sundry groups, including various Chambers of Commerce, "but the business we represent to MTS is bigger than all the other groups combined," Gibson notes.

Discount dialing for the tribal signatories soon followed, along with savings of about 40 per cent off catalogue costs with Grand & Toy and other block deals with Budget auto rental, Xerox, General Western Star Trucks, Fast Air charter services and a host of other firms.

With just the original four staff at First Nations Buying Group in Winnipeg, the business has already extended its reach to Ontario.

There, a deal involving Aboriginal communities and Bell Canada has been struck, with former national Aboriginal leader Phil Fontaine helping represent the First Nations Buying Group effort.

Birch says Quebec and British Columbia are next in his sights.

"I really look at all this as being without any territorial boundaries," says Birch.

"Just because we're from Manitoba, that should have no bearing. Aren't we all fighting for the same things?"

Blood Tribe members share \$67-million enterprise

Visitors from 15 countries around the world have showed up to watch farmers' fields being watered in southern Alberta just above the Montana border.

Those fields, in turn, are producing special high-grade crops that also journey around the globe.

The fulcrum of this unexpected international exchange is the Blood Tribe Agricultural Project, which has spanned many decades and many political agreements in becoming an Aboriginal model of foresight and innovation in reserve land use.

"We have now developed and built Canada's largest irrigation project," declares Clayton Blood, general manager and one of the 6,500 tribal members who share in the 10,000-hectare, \$67-million enterprise.

The critical juncture in the story of this accomplishment came in 1947 when district irrigation authorities approached the tribe to relinquish land. They were seeking to further the St. Mary's Reservoir development south of Lethbridge for the benefit of surrounding farmers. The response from the Blood Tribe was yes - in exchange for a future commitment to be aided in irrigating a vast tract of its own lands.

"The tribe's leadership was very astute," believes Blood. "The tribe saw the importance of trying to develop irrigation on the reserve and knew that the issue of access to reserve land was a politically delicate issue."

Many twists and turns would still ensue, with the federal government turning irrigation responsibilities over to the province, several re-workings of the original deal with the Bloods and intensive environmental surveys done. But in 1989, the three governments - federal, provincial and tribal - signed on for a six-phase development, collectively kicking in \$41-million at the outset.

With about 80 per cent of the intended area now operational, the long-term value of the project to this First Nation community is already apparent. Leasing dry land to area farmers would earn the Bloods about \$76 a hectare per season; irrigated fields are worth \$370 a hectare, particularly with the Bloods' state-of-the-art computerized operation.

"It's not just a matter of unskilled labour," notes Blood of the operation he oversees. "There are highly-skilled professionals that are being developed here."

Success has momentum. When the Bank of Nova Scotia wanted to see 10-year commitments from the tenant farmers before supporting the Bloods' \$5-million purchase of high-tech water pivots, the Bloods secured them readily, upping tenant obligation from what it had been two seasons in the past.

Blood's grandfathers were farmers and now he's farming himself, but with an emphasis on a value-added operation. The Blood Tribe runs a joint-venture operation with TransFeeders Group of Calgary which has seen the construction of a \$2-million plant for processing timothy hay.

Timothy hay is a high-fibre live-stock feed grass favoured by Asian farmers. It's grown on irrigated fields of the Blood Reserve, processed and compressed in the Blood plant, trucked to Calgary, shipped by rail to Vancouver and packed into container ships. From there it goes out to Taiwan, Korea and Japan, bearing evidence, as it were, of the Blood Tribe's remarkable stewardship of their lands.

Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner launched as first Inuit feature film

Zacharius Kunuk made the journey to Montreal 20 years ago with some of his carvings in hand. He returned home to Igloolik without them.

What he was clutching on that return journey instead was a Sony Betamax video camera. Two decades later, Kunuk has just completed work on Canada's first feature film made by Aboriginal people in an Aboriginal community and spoken in an Aboriginal language, Inuktitut.

"In 1996 we started to write a script based on Inuit legend," says veteran documentary filmmaker Kunuk, 43, whose Igloolik Isuma Productions with the late screen-writer Paul Apak and producer Norman Cohn is preparing to distribute the \$2-million dramatic feature *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner*.

"This is one of the famous legends we kept hearing about throughout our childhood," he continues. "It was seven or eight Elders telling the same story but the way they tell it is sort of in riddles from season to season."

The action-revenge tale set five centuries ago climaxes with the runner of the title fleeing naked across the Arctic ice with several men in pursuit.

If the original oral history here had its conundrums, financing a Native-language production on this scale in Igloolik seemed almost unsolvable at times. "There are three envelopes for funding at Telefilm Canada," Kunuk explains. "The first is for English-language production with something like \$64-million, then French-language production with about \$34-million and Aboriginal production with something like \$2-million for the whole country.

"In the Aboriginal envelope, each production was capped at \$100,000 [in Telefilm support]. That would never make a movie."

After a series of discussions, Telefilm offered increased financing from its general fund. The National Film Board had already signed on as co-producer, CBC entered the agreement and sundry support came from the territorial government, Aboriginal Peoples Television Network and Aboriginal corporations.

The result, two hours and 41 minutes in length, is a unique achievement that is already garnering international interest from film festivals, art museums and universities, the kinds of places where smaller Isuma productions had already made their home. Canadian distribution and airing for *Atanarjuat* is still being scheduled.

"All the props, all the clothes, everything for this movie is made in this community," says Kunuk, who also cast the actors and found the crew in Igloolik.

Not only are the materials indigenous, the creative talent and labour are Aboriginal. Isuma partner Cohn says the esthetic is itself something entirely different than conventional North American film-making - the very thing that drew video grapher Cohn from New York to Igloolik when he first saw Kunuk's short documentaries for television 15 years ago.

"I thought [the Inuit] were using television in a way that was original instead of imitative, that was story-telling without being didactic," re-counts Cohn, now a Nunavut resident who does much of the business travel to the southern cities for Isuma. "It was different than the North American model of TV which is pretty overbearing and word-based."

What Cohn calls alternative community-based TV "kind of disappeared in the 80's except that it seemed it could still be a reality in the North. "Pursuing that prospect, Igloolik Isuma Productions was intended to make television and film that would "stick to the basic principles," says Cohn. "Those are cultural self-representation and professional community-based film making."

That corresponded exactly to where Kunuk himself had come, having started with an interest in still photography, serving a number of years with the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation but eventually developing a determination to render Inuit storytelling in his own way.

Cultural authenticity has been an imperative for many community members in Igloolik. In two referendums in the 70's to determine if television service should be brought to his region, Kunuk re-counts, "We voted the TV out because it was all in English and our Elders felt, 'What's the use?' In 1981 I got my camera because I heard that in another community [in what was then part of Northwest Territories] someone else was doing things with video. I wanted to videotape my father going out to the hunt. He would come back, drink tea at the table, talking about the day."

Sometimes when Kunuk would look at the videotapes he made in those early days, he would see children from the community pressing their faces against his window to look in. Completing a feature-length run has taken time in Igloolik, but Kunuk has always known he was on the right track.

Tin Wis resort caters to huge tourist market

At a cove called Tin Wis, just south of Tofino on the west coast of Vancouver Island, squatted a residential school for First Nations children. It was closed in 1982 and later made the subject of an RCMP probe into alleged abuse.

This bleak piece of local history, paradoxically, is set in one of the most beautiful places in Canada, what is now the Pacific Rim National Park Reserve. And now the shore of the cove has been won back in service of a constructive Aboriginal future.

In reclaiming Tin Wis ("calm waters"), a landing place for their whale-hunting ancestors, the local Tla-o-qui-aht First Nation has proceeded to create one of the most successful Aboriginal tourism operations in the country.

Today's Tin Wis Best Western Resort Lodge has recently expanded to 86 rooms and will generate some \$3-million in revenues this year. About 70 per cent of the summer season staff is Aboriginal, turning around extremely high rates of local unemployment.

Moreover, as the resort increasingly incorporates Aboriginal culture in its programming and ambience, the lodge is itself becoming an international attraction within a wilderness area that is already drawing over one million tourists a year.

"Best Western is a name brand that is known all over the world," notes George Atleo, the Aboriginal assistant manager who has been there since the 1994 opening and who is being groomed to run the resort. "But working hand-in-hand has been not only good for us but good for them."

Not everyone believed that such a partnership could have even been brokered. In the first place, getting the capital to build the resort was a steep challenge for the First Nation since the property had been given reserve status in 1991 and couldn't be used as collateral.

Howard Tom, chair of the Tin Wis Board of Directors, has previously explained that, "It was still Crown land and no bank would touch us for security reasons."

Instead, the First Nation turned to the Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council, a 14-nation assembly that the Tla-o-qui-aht belonged to. The Nuu-chah-nulth Economic Development Corporation had a pension fund which could be used for such an investment - and when it emerged that a potential Tin Wis resort was lined up to become a franchise of Best Western, the deal was made.

Tla-o-qui-aht First Nation members have credited strong tribal governance for winning the association with the multinational hotel chain, a relationship which immediately gave the resort the benefits of global marketing and operational expertise. Few corporate organizations on the scale of Best Western would have embraced such a franchise, or allowed it the scope for such intended programs as Native storytelling, art exhibits and indigenous food preparation.

"Best Western was a very good choice because it's the only one of the major chains that gives you the latitude and freedom to develop your own identity," says Lynden McMartin, the current general manager who is preparing Atleo to become his successor.

McMartin, who has been in the hotel business for 24 years, says the governance of the Tin Wis resort reflects a community orientation rather than a more narrow business interest.

"I don't report to one owner or a small group of owners," he says. "Here I report to a group of directors, and three of the elected board have to be First Nations people."

The resort's success, with up to 80 customers turned away daily in high season prior to the recent expansion, has led to such future development plans as a marine service facility and nearby joint-venture tree farm. But it is jobs as much as revenues that have been key to the band.

"We've employed several of our people right out of high school with some training courses," says Atleo. "They've done sales, marketing, front desk work. Off-season, the ones that stay with us are returning to school and expanding their knowledge in management."

For those young Aboriginal staff who come just for summer employment in food service or housekeeping, he adds, "working here has allowed them to set some personal goals for themselves, to put aside a few dollars and then off they go to the University of Victoria or the University of British Columbia."

Come summer, neighbouring Tofino swells to quadruple its year-round population of 1,200. From such European countries as Germany, more than three-quarters of tourists have expressed interest through surveys in having an experience with Aboriginal culture.

Aboriginal businesses move to fore in Yukon

As land claims are being settled in Yukon Territory, Aboriginal businesses, a priority for the region's First Nations, are coming to the fore.

An essential equation is that Aboriginal economic development generates the revenues for Aboriginal self-government, notes Bruce Luznar, general manager of the Yukon Indian Development Corporation (YIDC) in Whitehorse.

"It's also about jobs and the opportunity for good jobs," says Luznar. "Today, there are quite a few First Nations people working in the First Nations businesses that are being created here, and in government."

Luznar sees this growth from several vantages. First, YIDC is now being restructured to include all 14 Yukon-based First Nations, as well as three northern B.C. communities in the region, for the purpose of joint ventures and investment.

Luznar is also a manager at Dana Naye Ventures, an Aboriginal Capital Corporation that supports Yukon businesses, and he heads economic development for the Carcross/Tagish First Nation in the Territory. They have undertaken one of those modest-scale but significant ventures that are bolstering the Aboriginal economy, in this case purchasing a service centre that includes a gas station, restaurant, laundromat and recreational-vehicle park. The 1998 purchase was accomplished with a \$250,000 grant from Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, a \$250,000 loan from Dana Naye and \$300,000 loaned by the Carcross/Tagish First Nation, which keeps business and governance issues separate.

Called Montana Services, the centre is now generating annual revenues over \$1.5-million, well above previous levels. And while profitability is a high priority, it isn't the only one.

"It would be more profitable to close Montana Services for four months in the winter," Luznar explains, "but no, we provide a service to the community and we provide jobs."

In other parts of Yukon, new projects have been created by Kwanlin Dun First Nation, which constructed a gas station and store in Whitehorse, and Selkirk First Nation, which built the Pelly Crossing Community Business Centre featuring a cluster of roadside amenities.

"The need for this kind of facility was quite obvious," remarks Alex Morrison, Selkirk First Nation member and a lead consultant on the project. "But this was a contract that was developed over five or seven years." Partners considering the \$1.3-million Pelly Crossing project were Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, Aboriginal Business Canada (an initiative of Industry Canada) and the territorial government, combining with natural-gas royalties that had accrued to the First Nations.

"This is basically the best facility along the Klondike highway," says Morrison. "It's a long-term benefit for the Selkirk First Nation and for the people of the Yukon, I believe. Over the last 10 or 12 years in the Yukon, things have been more positive, with more responsibility [for Aboriginal governance] shifting from Ottawa to here."

There's First Nation pride in the territory these days, says Luznar, over businesses like RAB Energy Group Inc., a \$6-million firm that manufactures thermal windows and has plants in both Whitehorse and Anchorage, Alaska. Two years ago, the company was bought by eight First Nations. It's showing good profitability and it now has Aboriginal managers who are moving up in the operation.



Saskatchewan's Doug Cuthand has been honoured for both his filmmaking with Blue Hill Productions and his journalism at the Saskatoon Star-Phoenix.

Putting Saskatchewan in the big picture

The locals tried to explain to Doug Cuthand that movies were made by white people in Hollywood, but for some reason he thought they could be made by Aboriginal people in Saskatchewan.

He was right.

"I think we're getting a critical mass in this industry here," says Cuthand, speaking from his Blue Hill Productions office in Saskatoon. "It's growing. I'm busier this year than I was the year before, and last year more than the year before that."

Indeed, filmmaking in Saskatchewan is becoming sufficiently familiar that the Royal Bank recently loaned part of the \$30,000 Cuthand needed for a digital video camera, which produces broadcast-quality images at a fraction of previous costs.

"It used to be hard to talk to somebody at the banks here about the film industry," offers Cuthand with a friendly laugh.

Not that he always figured to be having such conversations. Cuthand actually came to documentary filmmaking through print journalism. It's been a marriage of sensibilities that has served him well. On the same day in June last year he was formally acknowledged in both fields.

Cuthand's documentary on urban Aboriginal youth, *Circle of Voices*, won him the Banff Television Festival's best English-language Aboriginal production award. While in Fort Lauderdale he was recognized for writing the best print column in a non-Native publication by the Native American Journalists Association.

"From the very beginning, since I was a student, I was always interested in storytelling," says Cuthand, a member of the Little Pine First Nation who studied liberal arts at Simon Fraser University in the late 60's. "That's the one common thread. And when I got into video, I saw how you could layer the thing - with so many additional ways you could tell the story."

Cuthand started as the first full-time editor for the Alberta-based Native People periodical, returning to Saskatchewan in the 70's for a decade-long stint writing newspaper columns on Aboriginal issues for the Regina Leader-Post and Saskatoon Star-Phoenix.

After being invited to work as a co-producer on a video of an Aboriginal theatre project, however, he became hooked on a medium he had previously viewed as inferior to print.

The resulting one-hour TV documentary, Theatre for Change, won several awards.

In the dozen years since Cuthand formed Blue Hill Productions - named for a revered landmark on his home reserve - he has gone on to produce and direct a number of critically-acclaimed documentaries on Aboriginal life that have aired through educational broadcasting and on the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network. Cuthand was an easy choice as co-producer on Big Bear, a two-part CBC mini-series set in Saskatchewan.

"I'm busy now, so many projects, and they're all Aboriginal based," says Cuthand, who is currently working on Coming Home, a 13-part TV series on Aboriginal children who were removed from their families and raised by foster parents or in institutions.

Home's become a big place for this filmmaker from the reserve; if business is increasingly global, so is cultural collaboration.

Cuthand was invited to a festival of Aboriginal film in Australia a year ago and is now exploring project ideas with his counterparts on the other side of the world.

"It's really amazing in this industry," he enthuses. "It's a worldwide industry now and you have to be working internationally."

Sawmill in the bush was modest first step 30 years ago

A modest but critical step towards self-reliance for the Rainy River First Nations came with the construction of a portable sawmill in the bush over 30 years ago.

"This started in the late 60s," recounts Chief Jim Leonard of the First Nation's community situated at the western edge of Ontario just above the Minnesota border. "Like many [First Nations] communities across the country, we had a lot of unemployment. Many of our people went to the United States, working in logging camps and so on. The community was very poor."

No longer. The First Nation's Manitou Sawmill - Manitou is the Ojibway word for spirit - was expanded in 1974 and has since developed markets, particularly in the U.S., for such value-added wood products as wall paneling and flooring. The operation keeps busy enough to challenge the woodland resources of the 23 square-kilometre community, which has about 250 members.

"Today, we have a profitable company, fully computerized with dry kilns and planers," Chief Leonard says. "It employs 30 to 40 people in the busy time during the summer. We have double shifts. In winter there's about 25 people working there."

Keys to the success of the sawmill, he believes, have been the gradual expansion of its scope as Rainy River First Nations developed the necessary expertise, and also strong relationships between the First Nations community and surrounding municipalities.

A good foundation in the one business, moreover, has encouraged the development of new enterprises, with the last five years seeing the start at Rainy River of a sturgeon hatchery and window-manufacturing plant.

"Our unemployment rate is now zero - everybody who wants to work has work," declares Chief Leonard. "Our total payroll is somewhere around 80 to 90 people. In busy season we have to import people [from outside the community]."

Direction to create the recent ventures came directly from First Nation members, explains the chief executive officer for the Rainy River businesses.

"The hatchery started as an idea to protect the sturgeon here, which is also part of the culture for ceremonial purposes," says David Paul Achneepineskum.

"People said we should not leave this to anybody else but that we should do it ourselves."

The maturing of the fish for market will still take several years, but Rainy River meanwhile markets some of its hatchlings to other operations.

And starting the window-making plant, initially a joint venture, was another case of Rainy River First Nations taking charge of its own needs.

"Housing is a major aspect of people's lives here and Rainy River was buying [building] material from places like Winnipeg," Achneepineskum remarks.

"Really, it wasn't benefiting our own people."

Instead, Rainy River got nine First Nations in the region to agree to purchase windows from their plant, which was begun in 1995 with a five-year deal with a Manitoba firm which owned 25 per cent of the operation.

"Their role was to transfer the skills, the technology to our people," says Achneepineskum, noting that Rainy River has since taken full ownership of the business.

Meanwhile, even the Rainy River cultural heritage has become a basis for outreach to the wider world, with the creation of a visitors' centre near the site of the Manitou Mounds. The latter Aboriginal-made burial prominences, some as high as 12 metres, are found at Kay-Nah-Chi-Wah-Nung, "place of the long rapids," and mark a sacred terrain of early Aboriginal settlement and ceremony.

It represents a premise that increasing numbers of First Nations are remarking: to protect a proud past, take care of the future.

Caribou steaks served up in Florida

The recipe for their delicacies is 4,000 years old and the food has to travel a continent to end up on a plate.

That's the ambitious business plan of Nunavik Arctic Foods in Northern Quebec, whose caribou pate and steaks are on upscale menus in such remote locales as Colorado and Florida.

Nunavik comprises 666,000 square kilometres north of Quebec's 55th parallel, which puts the company at a very considerable distance from almost all its customers. What it is proximal to, however, is a very old way of life, here revisited for the purpose of contemporary business.

As did the first inhabitants of North America who were their forbears, Inuit hunters set out in mid-February to hunt and harvest up to 3,800 animals for the company, today employing the modern aid of portable abattoirs. The carcasses are frozen and sent out by Air Inuit, a sister company within the Makivik Corporation which runs a host of Inuit enterprises in the region.

"There are no antibiotics and no hormones in this meat, which is quite an issue these days," says Neil Greig, Arctic Foods general manager in Kuujjuak.

That doesn't mean Nunavik Arctic Foods has had an easy time of it since launching its pilot effort in the winter of 1996-97.

"Caribou as an industry is very small and the meat is very expensive to harvest," remarks Greig. "We spend a considerable amount of effort on promotion, keying on trade shows such as food and beverage shows. It's a cross between trade and public education for us."

Getting the harvest up to a quantity where the outfit could assure its customers of a steady supply was one issue, and not a simple one, given the unpredictability of the annual herd migration. The costs involved also necessarily made for an upscale niche market, including resorts in settings like Banff and Vail and on cruise ships.

Moreover, those upmarket clients initially were only interested in the prime cuts from the fleshy hindquarters of the animals. The company has invested considerable energy in developing and promoting such products as the burgers, sausages and pate that can make use of the rest of the meat.

All this adds up to a challenging way to harvest relatively modest revenues. Significantly, however, the company hunt directly employs 40 Inuit in a traditional pursuit that draws on the resources of lands which are their ancestral home.

"We have very few employment opportunities up here," notes Greig.

"Now there are more and more local people involved in these types of activities, and that's good. That's what it's all about."

This was a significant impetus behind the creation of parent Makivik Corporation, formed in 1978 by an act of the National Assembly in Quebec City, following the conclusion of the historic James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement three years earlier.

Diversification key element to Kitsaki enterprises

By conventional business standards, Harry Cook rates as a curious sort of employer. When his workers leave him for better jobs elsewhere, he's delighted.

That's also part of the reason why he's in his sixth term as Chief of the Lac La Ronge Indian Band in northern Saskatchewan, 250 kilo-metres above Prince Albert.

When the Band formed Kitsaki Development Corporation 20 years ago, it was hardly clear that it would go on to run successful enterprises and joint ventures in trucking, insurance, mining, lumber, food products and hospitality. What was certain was that training and jobs for its people, and self-reliance for its community, were critical goals.

"I believe we're trying to create our own opportunities for our people," says Chief Cook, 57.

"We're trying to mobilize our people to have the education and skills they need so they will be able to compete for jobs internationally."

Kitsaki Development Corporation has become Kitsaki Management Limited Partnership, a highly diversified entity.

Making adroit and timely use of the federal government's Aboriginal Procurement Strategy has helped lead Kitsaki to a series of strategic partnerships in the region and beyond that have returned profits in a host of major industries.

Beyond partnerships with other companies, the Band's strategy calls for cooperative dealings with virtually all potential stakeholders.

"We work with labour unions as well, and three of our companies are unionized," remarks Kitsaki CEO Ray McKay, also a Lac La Ronge Band member and a former provincial government deputy minister.

"We work with business in the community, we have very good relations with the (local town) mayors. For business, we choose a larger partner that is successful."

Northern Resources Trucking, for example, is a partnership between Kitsaki and a number of other Aboriginal communities in the province with Trimac Transportation, a major North American haulage firm.

Keewatin Mining involves Athabasca First Nations and Kitsaki with Procon Mining and Tunneling to provide services to that industry in the province.

In other cases, Kitsaki is the sole owner, such as with the snack products company Kitsaki Meats; or is partnered only with Aboriginal firms as in First Nations Insurance Services.

Chief Cook's personal experiences reflect some of this eclecticism. He lived for a time in Regina, was a journeyman welder, built homes, was self-employed.

"I enjoyed it," reflects Chief Cook.

"I made a good living. And I know that many of our community members understand what we're doing [through Kitsaki] and appreciate the opportunities that are made available to them."

As much as Kitsaki continues to grow - current ventures range from pursuing the European market for wild rice to having 100 Band members get training in forestry - Chief Cook knows community needs will expand as quickly.

"We run kindergarten to Grade 12 in all of our communities here and we also control our post-secondary education," he comments. "We try to prioritize post-secondary education for all of our people who can do it.

"Sixty per cent of our population is less than 25 years old. The process [of creating opportunity] takes time but we do have a lot of hope."

Athabasca Tribal Council inks historic oil sands deal

This time, the First Nations of northeastern Alberta are making sure they get their own chance, as it were, to tap a gusher.

With an anticipated \$25-billion expansion of the Athabasca oil sands underway, the Athabasca Tribal Council of five First Nations has brought about the signing of an historic deal with some of the world's largest corporations. Development programs will be unfolding for years to come and there is a myriad of specifics not yet fully anticipated, let alone planned for. But the crux of the matter is that the Athabasca Tribal Council (ATC) has spurred a landmark capacity-building agreement with such giant developers as Mobil Oil, Shell, Gulf, Syncrude Canada, Petro-Canada and Suncor Energy.

Key elements include:

- Support for First Nations development of environmental assessment and consulting capacity for the oil sands development;
- Aboriginal employment and training initiatives tied to the expansion;
- Providing for skills development including education and health care;
- Providing for technical training to maintain physical infrastructure in First Nations communities;
- Further long-term benefits to be determined that will continue beyond the period of resource extraction.

While ATC believes its people are clearly benefitting from this landmark agreement, the benefits are far from one-sided. While the region's First Nations clearly want training and jobs, their private-sector partners have evident self-interest in nurturing the skills in an Aboriginal working-age population that is growing over twice as fast as the national average.

Among other things, supporting social and physical infrastructure furthers the development of a stable workforce, while without local environmental consultation and sensitivity, development could be greatly hindered or blocked.

"We have come through a lot of trials and growing pains in the last couple of years," says Marlene Poitras, chief executive officer for ATC in Fort McMurray and a member of the Mikisew Cree of Fort Chipewyan.

"But because this is all so new for us, we couldn't see everything that would come out of this. We are still going through the issues."

Still, what has been accomplished to date has won praise from ATC's business partners, the federal government and within the First Nations.

Syncrude Canada, for one, has noted the participation of Alberta-Pacific Forest Industries in the capacity-building agreement as evidence that the deal is crossing industry lines to ensure lasting benefits for First Nations.

"We don't see this as a one-shot, short-term kind of deal," Syncrude executive vice-president Phil Lachambre said, indicating that plans will call for economic activity beyond the oil sands extraction.

Indian and Northern Affairs Canada has committed up to \$750,000 in support until 2001 for First Nations' economic development and infrastructure enhancement in the region, believing that the Athabasca expansion can further self-reliance for Aboriginal communities.

The agreement came to fruition through the efforts of the Alberta regional office of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada. The office, through a close working relationship with the provincial government and its support, was able to pinpoint areas of economic development and infrastructure that would facilitate growth.

The hard-working Poitras, whose strong working relationships with the various chiefs helped put her in the CEO role in 1997, believes there was sincerity on both sides of the negotiations that led to the agreement.

"The imbalances were evident but the will to work together was there," says Poitras, one of a growing number of strong role models for young Aboriginal women. "We always managed to work through the issues to everyone's satisfaction. The agreement is good."

Chief Jim Boucher, president of the ATC board of directors, feels ATC has negotiated an "impressive list" of understandings, including five environmental agreements and four socio-economic agreements with seven companies. Chief Boucher believes the capacity-building deal gives First Nations members jobs, business contracts, culture retention projects, respect for Aboriginal understanding of the environment and more. In turn, the oil companies have won dependable community contacts, means to get development done without needless delay and an understanding that lets them plan with greater certainty.

Relationships work in two directions. Athabasca-area companies are now thinking about Aboriginal people before they act. And vice-versa. When teenaged Leonard Black graduated from Chipewyan Prairie Dene High School last spring, he was asked about his career goals. "To become a heavy equipment operator and secure permanent employment with Syncrude," he responded.



The New territorial government in Nunavut needed 13,500 square-metres of offices and 250 housing units for employees, providing a \$130-million injection in the local economy.

Private-public partnership a model for Aboriginal peoples

The impending creation of Canada's Nunavut Territory on April 1, 1999 launched a private-public partnership in the Arctic region that has been a model for circumpolar nations around the world.

The premise was that a new territorial government would require 13,500 square-metres of offices and 250 housing units for employees, spread out among 11 Arctic communities.

This challenge was turned into an opportunity which has created a major Nunavut corporation with over \$130-million in assets, and given a significant kick-start to the local Inuit economy.

"The main goal was to maximize the benefits in the North," recounts Ernie Bies, project manager for the effort with Public Works and Government Services Canada, the technical advising body to Indian and Northern Affairs Canada on the job.

"We could have gone to the southern construction companies but they would not have used local resources in the same way," adds Bies from Ottawa.

The 1996 partnering agreement for the four-year project came out of the land claims agreement that created Nunavut itself. It paired the Government of Canada with Nunavut Tunngavik Inc., the corporation that spearheaded economic development for Inuit in the region. To actually build the structures, a Nunavut Construction Corp. (NCC) was created by bringing together four existing Nunavut firms.

"We did it as a community-based investment strategy," explains Bies. "We thought it was better to lease the space [from NCC]. That would minimize the upfront cost to the Crown and increase the benefit to the private-sector partner, who would get to own the properties and maintain them."

Holding the promise of leases from the government tenants who would be using the space, NCC executives needed to travel from Iqaluit to Toronto to support the undertaking. "One of the challenges for the corporation was to raise financing for the project in excess of \$130-million with major financial institutions," says Tagak Curley, the Inuit president of NCC - now Nunavut Investment Group - who started out by himself but during the course of the project needed to create 600 full-time jobs.

"This broke new ground on Bay Street," continues Curley, who engaged KPMG LLP for the process. "There were no government guarantees but we had 20-year leases with the federal government, and that was strong security for the financing."

Government's commitment to NCC for Nunavut's largest-ever capital project was earned by the company, Curley adds.

"This was negotiated, it wasn't a given. We had to make a completely marketable proposal and a sound business."

The NCC structures were done under budget and completed last March, one year sooner than had been projected. Most important was the way in which they were created and the impact they have on the local economy.

"Prior to this, major construction companies would go into a community here and end up with 10-to-15 per cent local hires," says Eugene Lysy, executive vice-president of NCC. "The first year we hired 80 per cent local people and instituted an apprenticeship training program. We were able to do things on a competitive basis, but in a way so we involved the private sector of the North."

Adds Curley, "right from the beginning we hired a specialist for labour and training. That person worked with the communities and pretty well had an idea about who was interested in training. We were not so much interested in unskilled labour. Some of these people who worked with us have now got permanent jobs with other agencies or with government. That work force is now here and it's quite evident that these people are not going to remain timid in their own communities [when other projects are undertaken]."

Having Inuit management was an important breakthrough. Notes Bies: "There were a lot of skills on the ground in Nunavut but there wasn't a lot of people who were being used at the higher levels [on infrastructure development]."

"It was unheard of in the North to have an Inuit person running a project."

The legacy of the undertaking, which brought NCC and INAC a national award of merit for innovation and excellence in infrastructure from the Canadian Council for Public-Private Partnerships, extends beyond the structures now housing the territorial government. NCC, now as Nunavut Investment Group, had \$12-million in bids this past construction season for everything from housing to schools and health clinics.

So impressive were the local hiring practices developed for the big partnership project that the company has been engaged to take part in the creation of a 40-unit apartment building in Warsaw, Poland.

"We are going to compete in the global economy," says Curley.

Muskeg Lake Cree created urban reserve for development

Ground-breaking agreement established new guidelines for Saskatchewan First Nation

Lester Lafond can tell you off the top of his head that it took four years and two months to complete the negotiations. If pressed, he could probably pinpoint the additional weeks and days as well.

What has fixed the experience in the minds of Saskatoon residents was not only the complexity of what Muskeg Lake Cree Nation was attempting but its ground-breaking nature. Just over a decade ago, the band secured approval to launch Canada's first urban reserve created explicitly for commercial development.

"At that time there were really no guidelines," recounts Lafond, lead business adviser to the First Nation in setting the 1989 precedent. "We had to sort of shop around each of the issues."

Today, the 35-acre reserve within municipal boundaries has just seen the \$3.6-million Cattail Centre office building and the \$1.2-million Kocsis Transport Ltd. headquarters added to its expanse. The new structures join McKnight Commercial Centre and Veterans' Plaza, the first tangible results of the Muskeg Lake venture which were erected in 1993.

This fresh phase of development creates work space for another 200 employees, most of them Aboriginal, in what has rapidly become Saskatchewan's model centre for Aboriginal businesses. And Lafond says there's plenty of room for more development on the 20 acres that remain open on the reserve.

"One of the things we've learned," he reflects, "is that there are Aboriginal businesses out there looking for a [commercial] park where they can be comfortable."

What has made the Saskatoon effort a meaningful case study for others, however, is not only that Aboriginal professionals and business people have been drawn to the park, but that the municipality at large has supported the undertaking from the start - and drawn pride from it.

Establishing a taxation approach that allows the band to collect revenues on its property at a rate comparable to other commercial developments has ensured that the park pays its way. Forty per cent of tax dollars from the site go to the city to defray service costs, equaling what municipal property tax would amount to. Well beyond getting its water and garbage collection expenses covered, Saskatoon now has in the reserve a prominent success story in what is an increasingly vital demographic for the province. Registered Aboriginal people, the youngest and fastest-growing population segment in Saskatchewan, will comprise 14 per cent of the general population in a decade.

Economic development in the province is thus in no small part reliant on the kind of advances made by the Muskeg Lake Cree.

"The business community at large gets a higher visibility when Aboriginal business succeeds," notes Lafond. "We've had visitors here from all over Canada."

Here's a brief overview of the steps that led to the development of Canada's first urban reserve created solely for economic development: Most important of federal criteria for allowing the project was that Muskeg Lake Cree Nation get an agreement from the City of Saskatoon relating to municipal services, taxes and by-laws.

That was a complicated matter, requiring intensive negotiations over a period of two years to arrange municipal services such as sewage and fire protection. But Lafond cites the matter of off-site development fees normally required by a municipality as an example of the attitude the City of Saskatoon took from the outset.

"Normally, a developer has to pay the off-sites immediately," Lafond observes. "We got a deferral on the off-sites. There are a lot of ways the city was very helpful in seeing this development get going."

The process had to follow Indian Act regulations, which stipulate that reserve land can't simply be leased for commercial development, but requires consent by the Aboriginal community through a designation process first, which includes a referendum. This effort was successful.

Attracting commercial tenants to a development on a reserve was hardly an automatic process. Companies had concerns about zoning, taxation and financing, all of which are usually different on the reserve than elsewhere.

At the time of the initial development, one of the lawyers working for the band council explained that, "we structured everything so it would track as closely as possible with the situation you'd find yourself in if you developed anywhere else in the city. By-laws, taxation structure, type of development, the general appearance of roadways and sidewalks."

Financing has always been a significant hurdle for Aboriginal businesses, which are not allowed to put lands or properties on the reserve up as collateral.

The historic Indian Act, which may see revision in years to come, could not have anticipated an undertaking like a commercial park on the reserve.

In this case, Aboriginal business came forward to advance Aboriginal business, with the Peace Hills Trust, owned by Alberta's Samson Cree Nation, lending early development funds.

That seemed to fit with everything that was intended for the project.

As former Muskeg Lake Chief Harry Lafond said in contemplating Saskatoon's urban reserve, "The answers to improving our quality of life and self-sufficiency are within ourselves."

Saskatchewan's wake-up call

Demographics speak loudly, they act as a wake up call - First Nations represent the youngest and fastest-growing segment of Saskatchewan's population.

- About 11 per cent of Saskatchewan's population are registered Indians.
- By 2011, there could be more than 130,000 registered Indians, representing 14 per cent of the population and more than one quarter of the primary school children in Saskatchewan.
- The non-Aboriginal population is aging. In fact, the average age of a farmer in Saskatchewan is 57 years old. The number of Aboriginals aged 35 to 54, who comprise the bulk of the workforce, is expected to grow 62 per cent by 2016.
- Saskatchewan will be facing a workforce shortage in the not too distant future and there is a growing realization the future of the province largely depends on its ability to tap the potential of First Nations.
- Economic development is a significant factor that has led to a 10 per cent decrease in the social assistance dependency rate on reserves over the last three years.
- There are now 15 per cent fewer recipients of social assistance in First Nations' communities than three years ago.

Donna Cona's founder remains passionate crusader

John Bernard has been hooked on computers since 1981, but it was another four years before he listened to his calling as a business-man.

Coming from the Madawaska Maliseet First Nation of New Brunswick, Bernard found himself working for a government agency when he ended up one day visiting an Aboriginal community hall in northern Manitoba.

Someone came in with a bag of what initially looked like blood but proved to be red nail polish that a youngster had been sniffing.

"I asked, 'Why are the kids doing this?'" recounts Bernard, 42. "They said, 'Because the kids have nothing else to do. If you have a job to offer, we're all ears.'"

Bernard has a job to offer. As president of Donna Cona Inc. in Ottawa, he employs some 40 staff in his information technology firm, which also has an office in Vancouver. And with a federal Procurement Strategy for Aboriginal Business that creates strong incentives for Aboriginal hiring and ownership, Bernard says there are jobs in his field for as many skilled people from the community as come forward.

"Aboriginal people with any type of [systems engineering] certification get snapped up right away," he remarks.

Software development and systems integration certainly snapped Bernard's interest. Programming a pocket computing device of his own during preparation for law school 20 years ago, Bernard suddenly noticed, "I didn't want to be a lawyer anymore."

A year ago he could make a gift of \$30,000 to Trent University to establish a computer science scholarship for Aboriginal students. Information technology (IT) continues to hold great promise for those who get the education to pursue it, he believes, while education is of service for those pursuing any other path as well.

"I do a lot of speaking," says Bernard, who last year won the National Aboriginal Achievement Award in Business and Commerce as well as the Indbusiness.net Business Person of the Year award from a leading Aboriginal business portal.

"I was on the road for almost two months last year visiting universities, Aboriginal communities, really pushing high school.

"I tell the kids, 'I was in Grade 10, too, and I wanted to quit. But if you can't complete high school, what makes you think a guy like me is going to hire someone like you?'"

As for IT in particular, "the very first thing I have to do is convince them that it's coming [to their communities]," notes Bernard. "I say, 'Finish high school, if [IT] is not there today, it's going to be there by the time your career starts.'"

With an Aboriginal labour force growing at over twice the national average, a reliable route to well-paying jobs is no small thing to be pointing at.

Certainly, for the many people who emphasize the need for strong role models in the Aboriginal community, Bernard and his unflagging enthusiasm have been unavoidable.

He first began a company called Aboriginal Informatics Services in 1983 to do IT training on New Brunswick reserves, keeping the concern going while spending eight years in systems support for government. Joining Systems Interface, a non-Aboriginal IT firm in Ottawa in 1992, he kept bringing First Nations people into the IT career stream through his new position and resolved to do more.

By 1996, Aboriginal Informatics Services and Systems Interface formed a consortium, Donna Cona. It was named for the Iroquois Chief who first spoke the word Kenneta (habitat) to Jacques Cartier, giving this country its name.

Bernard is Donna Cona's majority owner, with Sierra Systems Group acquiring a 49 per cent share in the company last year. The partnership has given Donna Cona a fast track to national prominence and international contracts for its various systems integration, technology engineering and Web development functions.

"Trying to own and run everything yourself is the biggest mistake you could make," says Bernard.

He's nonetheless been careful to adhere to the structural requirements demanded by the Procurement Strategy, which creates valuable inside-track access to government contracts for qualified Aboriginal businesses.

Bernard emphasizes that his company contributes to the public purse and the economy like any other: "Donna Cona pays as much corporate tax as the company next to it, and I pay taxes."