

Blood Tribe Goes Shopping

by Sheldon Hughes

Blood Tribe members will soon be able to go power shopping right in their own First Nation.

Moccasin Flats Plaza is a newly constructed mall complex that will cater to local members as well as surrounding areas.

The mall is built on a 2.5 acre site accessible from two major highways and is close to the town of Cardston and the Moses Lake community. Cardston has a population of approximately 3,500 and the southern end of the Blood Reserve, including Moses Lake, has about 2,500 members. Both are expected to provide the location with a steady stream of business based on sales results gathered from the Moccasin Flats Mini-Mart, a Blood Tribe-owned convenience/grocery store that operated on the same site for the last five years.

The Mini-Mart, established in 1994, started out as a convenience store that provided tax-free gasoline and tobacco for band members. It later expanded its operations to offer meats, produce and clothing. This venture quickly exceeded the projected returns within the first few years of operation, according to Hank Shade, Director of Economic Development for the Blood Tribe.

"Our first five-year plan was developed with the goal of grossing \$1 million in revenues. We accomplished that feat within three years of opening our doors," said Shade.

In fact, the Mini-Mart was so successful that Blood Tribe was forced to close its doors.

"The Mini-Mart was a band-owned enterprise. The membership felt there was some unfair competition in that the band was competing with about 15 privately-owned operations. It's ironic, but the success of the Mini-Mart was the catalyst for the expansion into the Moccasin Flats Plaza," said Shade.

Although Blood Tribe stood to profit substantially from the Mini-Mart, it decided

that those profits would be better circulating within the community.

The decision came from the Tribe's principles of operation that helps the Tribe maintain a strong and viable economic development program. Besides the intention of keeping business and politics separated, one of the principles is to limit band involvement in business projects. This encourages the private sector, or membership, to become more involved.

Furthermore, many of Blood Tribe's 8,000-plus members are becoming entrepreneurs or seriously considering careers in business. This is due, in part, to the large population and the high level of business support available for band members.



Moccasin Flats Plaza during construction

"We have extremely high numbers of people getting into business all the time," said Shade.

"The last thing we want to do is compete with our own members."

The band decided that the best course of action with Moccasin Flats was to expand the existing operation into a band-owned mall facility and lease the office/commercial space to private entrepreneurs.

Blood Tribe accessed the Indian and Northern Affairs Canada Economic Development Opportunity Fund (EDOF) and the Community Economic Development Program (CEDP) to assist in the expansion project.

The CEDP is designed to generate long-term employment and business development opportunities by helping First Nations effectively implement and manage capacity-building projects, economic institutions and business enterprises. The Moccasin Flats Plaza project received \$150,000 in CEDP funding.

The EDOF is primarily used to expand viable businesses and provide equity gap assistance. Recipients of this funding must demonstrate a proven record in business developments and show a strong history of regular and acceptable reporting. Moccasin Flats received an additional \$150,000 from the fund to put toward the project.

Tenants for this new mall complex include a hair salon, a video arcade and pool hall, a laundromat, a delicatessen and an arts and crafts store. Only the hair salon, video arcade and delicatessen are currently operational. The other tenants are undergoing renovations and are expected to open soon. A grand opening has been tentatively scheduled for Spring or Summer 2001.

Shade is acting manager of the mall and currently has three security and janitorial staff. An additional 10 to 20 full-time positions may be created as other stores become operational.

With the construction of the Moccasin Flats Plaza, Blood Tribe has demonstrated its commitment to empowering membership and creating a strong environment for its economy to flourish.



Moccasin Flats Mini-Mart before construction of Moccasin Flats Plaza



Architectural sketch of Moccasin Flats Plaza

Beaver Lake Turns to Tourism

By Terry Lusty

Many northern Alberta communities that have no desire to log out their timber have little else to turn to if they wish to become self-sufficient.

But, if one is willing to take a risk and apply some creativity along with a few dollars, there is no end to what can be achieved. Take, for instance, the Beaver Lake First Nation in northeastern Alberta. They, like a number of other northern communities, took a long, hard look at the tourism industry. The band planned, drafted and fired off a tourism business proposal that received approval from the Economic Development Opportunity Fund of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada.

The funds – \$125,000 – provided that almighty shot in the arm that is often necessary. It could not have arrived at a better time, said Russell Whitford, the economic and human resources development manager for Beaver Lake First Nation.

“Thanks to the infusion of new money, the Band was able to put in a water system at Spruce Point (beach) Resort,” said Whitford.

Now they are concentrating on a sewage system for the resort, which should be in place “before the snow flies,” he said.

The resort, 22 kilometres southeast of Lac La Biche along Highway 36, includes four log cabins and 300

camping stalls that dot the beach. Fifty stalls have electrical service with another 25 to 50 planned in the near future. The Band hopes to construct another four log cabins and add more water lines to the campsites.

Like anything else, improvements are often dependent on revenues.



“This summer was a bit of a washout,” said Whitford.

Too much rain meant too little income. With only a bit of revenue, developments were limited.

Plans are to upgrade the children’s playground, designate an area for canoes and paddleboats, a day-use area and a nine-hole golf course. The golf course is a long-range project, perhaps five years down the road.

Until several years ago, the beach was only accessible by gravel road. This generated criticism from tourists and prospective clients. It was upgraded to a cold press road, which resulted in increased business. Fifty per cent of the visitors are from the local region, 20 to 30 per cent come from Edmonton and southern Alberta, while the rest are from the northern United States, the Territories and western Canada.

The resort employs 10 or more staff over the summer months. According to Whitford, they are looking at staying open all winter. By winter, they would be forced to cut back to a skeleton crew of about three.

Long-term employment for people who are normally only employed seasonally is their goal.

No matter how one looks at it, it’s a win-win situation for Beaver Lake,” said Whitford.

Among Alberta’s 44 First Nations, he figures that Beaver Lake is one of five in the entire province that has tourism as its number one industry.

In the interim, more proposals are being drafted and submitted to the Alberta government, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada and anybody else the Band feels may be in a position to help them. As well, the Band is developing marketing strategies such as setting up a web page on the Internet and working jointly with the Alberta government and the Chamber of Commerce. Whatever happens, we can look forward to more from Beaver Lake.

Paul First Nation Taps Into Increased Oilfield Activity

by Sheldon Hughes

Open since 1999, We H'nay M'nay Enterprises is rapidly becoming Paul First Nation's flagship for new business.

According to Paul First Nation Economic Development Officer Johnson Rain, this unique venture evolved in response to increased oilpatch activity in 1997-1998.

"We noticed a real increase in oilfield activity and put the wheels in motion for this new company," said Rain.

We H'nay M'nay is a band-owned company that is concentrating on obtaining oilfield contract work for its assembled fleet of heavy equipment and trained operators. The equipment is used primarily for oilfield related contracts but the company will be keeping its options open. According to Rain, innovation and adaptability will be key to the company's success.

The company is currently involved in a number of different activities, ranging from landscaping and road building to seismic work and herd management. We H'nay M'nay has positioned itself to respond to any opportunities that may come its way.

Rain said one key reason for creating We H'nay M'nay was the First Nation's high unemployment rate. A strategy was developed (in partnership with Paul's human resources team), enabling them to focus their workforce in a specific direction.

"We created training programs and oilfield certification courses that helped equip our workers with the necessary requirements for success in the oil and gas industry," said Rain.

"Betty Rain, our human resources officer, was a great help."

Despite having a newly trained work force, opportunities were missed because of We H'nay M'nay's shortage of equipment.

"It took at least 10 years to acquire our present equipment and we're still not done," said Rain.

"It all kind of fell into place one piece at a time. When we dealt with different companies, I

noted what types of equipment and services they were looking for. We kind of based We H'nay M'nay's direction on that."

We H'nay M'nay's fleet of heavy equipment includes a D-6 Caterpillar crawler tractor, 320 excavator, grader and an IT-24 front-end loader as well as various riding lawnmowers and landscaping equipment. The machinery is used primarily for oil and gas lease construction and maintenance, seismic line construction and other construction and road building contracts.

The company does not want to limit its



Betty Rain (left) and Virginia Rain (right) stand beside a front end loader while operator Isaac Rain sits inside. The loader is just one piece of heavy equipment that We H'nay M'nay Enterprises owns.

opportunities for contracts and are actively pursuing other types of work that complement its business plan. While oil and gas projects remain the company's main focus, it is continually exploring other ventures.

"We put on many hats; we don't want to deal exclusively with heavy equipment," said Rain.

"We are currently involved in lawn and park management, environmental reclamation projects and other related ventures. We pride ourselves on being able to adapt to whatever projects come our way. The heavy equipment is more or less the foundation upon which the company has been built."

Rain credits Finning (Canada) Inc. with assisting in the development of its financing arrangement. This capital replacement plan allows for equipment upgrades every four years to keep maintenance overhead minimal. Rain said Finning's financial management team was instrumental in creating a repayment plan tailored specifically for We H'nay M'nay Enterprises and its needs.

We H'nay M'nay applied through the Indian and Northern Affairs Canada Economic Development Opportunity Fund (EDOF) in 1999-2000 to assist with the further development of the company. With the capital assets from Finning (Canada) already in place, the only piece missing was a low-bed tractor trailer to transport equipment to the various work sites.

Through the \$142,000 EDOF contribution, the company was able to purchase a service/maintenance truck and is in the process of obtaining a tractor and trailer. Once the trailer is in place, Rain expects increased demand for their services.

We H'nay M'nay Enterprises is working on a number of contracts that includes a labour contract with TransAlta. It employs four people in the nearby plant and an additional eight to 10 people who provide reclamation services to TransAlta.

The company also has a service contract with TransAlta that involves providing sanitation, maintenance, landscaping and firewood supply services to the Wabamun Lake Day Use Area. As well, it is looking to expand the band-owned Ironhead Golf Course

to include a joint venture project involving the construction of a hotel/conference centre and interpretive centre.

In addition, We H'nay M'nay has expanded into agriculture with the construction of a bison paddock and a cattle ranching operation that has just been developed.

"In economic development, my focus has always been to make the best of what we have. We have to actively seek alternatives and options to make things happen. Chief and Council have been instrumental in supporting We H'nay M'nay from the beginning," said Rain.

Hopefully, We H'nay M'nay Enterprises enjoys much success with its unique business approach of community employment and self-sufficiency through adaptability and versatility. This innovative approach should ensure the company remains an integral part of Paul First Nation's economic development program.

Loon River

Heavily Involved in Heavy Equipment

by Sheldon Hughes

Located in the heartland of Alberta's oilpatch, Loon River Cree Nation has found a strong niche market for Loon River Cree (LRC) Contractors Ltd.

This successful oilpatch construction company has been in business since 1992 and both management and staff are looking to recent expansions as stepping stones to a very productive future.

LRC Contractors Ltd., now a multi-million dollar operation, can trace its roots to a community-based work program that provided training and equipment to 36 power saw hands back in 1992. The company began as a means to lower the numbers of social assistance recipients on the reserve and encourage band members to join the work force.

Manager Robert Noskey began working with LRC Contractors Ltd. as a power saw operator in December 1993 and has been overseeing operations for the company since 1994. Noskey said the transition from LRC Contractors Ltd.'s humble beginnings to the wide range of services now offered was just good business sense.

"We recognized a need for heavy equipment. Everyone was looking for big Caterpillar tractors and we felt we were missing out on many lucrative contracts," said Noskey.

"We were using subcontractors to do this heavy work but we figured we could make increased profits if we owned our own equipment."

Band owned, LRC Contractors Ltd. has amassed a number of pieces of heavy equipment that includes five company trucks. They now offer a wide range of services including lease and road construction, seismic line clearing and cleaning, crude oil transportation, road maintenance, meter reading, Caterpillar tractor services and water hauling.

The creation of this dynamic enterprise did not occur overnight, according to Band Manager Brian Pitcairn. Pitcairn said much of LRC Contractors Ltd.'s success was due to changes in management policy and would not have been possible without the support of the board of directors.

"Our board of directors, comprised of Chief Paddy Noskey and Loon River Cree Nation's band councillors, was instrumental in helping Noskey and I put the necessary tools in place to further our management goals," said Pitcairn.

"Chief and Council stood behind us all the way. Much of the credit for LRC Contractors Ltd.'s success rests with them and their clear vision of where we needed to improve.

"We needed to change our management system; the monitoring of accounts payable and receivables needed to be improved. Some of the things that the

It was at this time that LRC Contractors Ltd. applied to Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) for Economic Development Opportunity Fund support in purchasing new machinery. The Opportunity Fund was designed specifically to provide viable businesses with an "equity gap" contribution for use in obtaining financing for business expansion.

"With the help from the Opportunity Fund, we were able to get into something that we were not able to get into on our own," said Pitcairn.

"We had enough money to make a down payment on new equipment, but the payments would have been really high. We had the philosophy that we were going to deal with only new equipment to avoid breakdowns and high maintenance overhead.

"As an equity grant, the Opportunity Fund helped us reduce our debt load so we had more equity up front. This had two beneficial effects: it reduced the monthly payment so our fixed operating overhead was reduced and made

our balance sheet with the bank look better in order to obtain outside funding."

Obtaining the support was not a difficult process, said Pitcairn. After providing the previous year's financial statements and a detailed business plan, it was just a matter of receiving approval from INAC.

LRC Contractors Ltd. used the program twice in 1998 for the purchase of two Caterpillar tractors and again in 1999 for the purchase of a D-6R Caterpillar tractor. The total project cost for the purchase of the tractors was \$580,000 with INAC contributing \$100,000 through the Opportunity Fund.

"The whole process was pretty straightforward. We had great support from the Region," said Pitcairn.

LRC Contractors Ltd. is well positioned to remain a successful operation with its winning combination of hard work, visionary thinking and strong management.

"We ended the 1999/2000 fiscal year in the black and so far this year we're in a positive cash position with our working capital. We're looking forward to have the success carry on throughout the winter," said Pitcairn.



Heavy equipment hard at work for LRC Contractors Ltd.

company was doing were not being charged out. The company was severely undercapitalized and the Band didn't have the required capital. As well, there was a lot of resistance to our entering the field by many of the local companies."

After revamping their management strategy, LRC Contractors Ltd. aggressively pursued more lucrative seismic work and lease-building contracts. Pitcairn said the company then found an oil company willing to give LRC Contractors Ltd. its much needed start. Star Oil & Gas and Alberta Energy Corporation (AEC) contracted with LRC Contractors Ltd. to construct oilfield leases, but the company's lack of heavy equipment created another obstacle. Fortunately, LRC Contractors Ltd. was able to secure the rental of the necessary equipment from local companies and the projects proceeded as planned.

This venture proved to be the first of many successful contracts for the company and set the stage for LRC Contractors Ltd. securing another large seismic job over the winter of 1996/1997. Pitcairn said these initial seismic contracts helped solidify the company's position and create a strong foundation for further expansion.

Northern Trophy Lake a Fisherman's Dream

By Terry Lusty

"It's been a very busy summer, probably our best since we opened (in 1992)."

These are the words of Ron Laframboise, the economic development officer for the Little Red River Cree Nation at Jean D'or Prairie in north central Alberta.

The good news from Laframboise is that the talk of the reserve, situated 150 kilometres northeast of High Level, is its fishing lodge at Margaret Lake.

The fishing lodge is one of four that are owned by Little Red River and is nestled in the picturesque Caribou Mountains, about 70 kilometres northeast of Jean D'or along the western edge of Wood Buffalo National Park. It is a serene and idyllic setting but is not the only selling feature of the lodge.

What attracts so many tourists is the great fishing in the area. Northern Pike, Arctic Grayling, Walleye and up to 30-pound Lake Trout are the norm for these waters, which run cold and deep and measure 19 x 7 kilometres.

Margaret Lake Lodge received a grant of \$70,000 from the Economic Development Opportunity Fund of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada in the 1998-1999 fiscal year. Combined with an additional \$140,000 from the Band, the carpeting was replaced and new beds were purchased along with kitchen appliances, other furniture, boats and motors.

With hot and cold running water, the heated units include a 40 x 70 foot, two-storey main lodge complemented by



One of the smaller log cabins that accompanies Margaret Lake Lodge.



Margaret Lake Lodge, nestled in the Caribou Mountains.

smaller log cabins which can accommodate 35 people.

The main structure also boasts a conference room, sauna, jacuzzi and washrooms with showers, as well as a fireplace, lounge, pool table and shuffleboard. Classified as one of Alberta's "trophy lakes," Margaret Lake is only accessible by air. Its usual season runs from May through September and provides employment for eight people, with two of the positions reserved for summer students.

The Band also operates three smaller operations at Eva Lake, Pitchimi Lake and Wentzell Lake. Eva Lake is a short 1.6-kilometre trek from Margaret Lake and serves as an outpost day camp. Pitchimi can house up to 10 people and is serviced with mobile telephones and two-way radios. As for Wentzell, its two tent-frame cabins cater to those who appreciate roughing it a bit more.

All three sites are equipped with boats and motors, a blessing for anglers. The lodge at Margaret Lake also

contains a boating dock, fuel, fishing gear and life jackets.

"We hope to expand to other lakes," said Laframboise. He said they are taking a real serious look at two other lakes in the area, plus one in Wood Buffalo National Park.

"But there are more hoops to jump through to establish a lodge in the park," he said.

The lodge business markets itself by participating in eight to 10 trade shows a year. Most customers, said Laframboise, are from the United States and Alberta. People generally book their selected sites between January and May.

Due to a cool, wet spring this year, the season started later than usual. The owners hope to start by mid-May in the coming year.

For further information, the Little Red River Band can be contacted by telephone at (780) 759-3929.

Strategic investment funding in Economic Development Announced by Minister Robert Nault

On May 18 in Winnipeg, Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development Robert Nault announced a major shift in focus in the department's spending.

This year, a \$75 million increase will be strategically invested in First Nations and Inuit economic development.

"Since my appointment as Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, I have given a lot of serious consideration to what my department does," the Minister told the audience at Vision Quest 2000, a major Aboriginal economic development conference.

He said an important element of his consideration involved examining departmental spending in light of questions like: "How can we do a better job of building First Nations and Inuit economies?"

The Minister said he came to a conclusion that was confirmed by his visits in the past eight months with Elders, leaders and individuals in about 65 First Nations and Inuit communities across the country. That conclusion was that chiefs and leaders want to get on with the business of building stronger communities and economies — the kind that give their young people hope and the promise of prosperity.

Acting on that message, he aligned departmental priorities to focus the additional \$75 million on strategic investments in economic development. In essence, this more than quadruples the strategic investments the department is making towards building First Nations and Inuit economies.

"Increased funding for the year 2000–2001 and beyond will be used to enhance our

efforts to develop partnerships with communities and businesses, other governments and the private sector," the Minister said.

Specifically, the department is adding a total of \$17 million to four of its current initiatives that have already proved effective at promoting business development and First Nations employment.



*Minister of Indian Affairs and
Northern Development Robert Nault*

Two of these initiatives relate to resources. These are the Resource Partnerships Program, which aims to increase First Nations and Inuit participation in major natural resource development projects and the Resource Access Negotiations initiative which assists First Nations and Inuit communities to access and manage off-reserve natural resources, and attract investment in natural resource projects. The third current initiative to receive increased funding includes business development programs like the Economic Development Opportunity Fund, which provides equity for the start-up and expansion of community-based businesses and the Resource Acquisition Initiative, which assists communities to acquire

natural resource permits and licences. Together, these two business development programs will see an increase of \$10 million. The fourth existing initiative benefiting from the additional funding is the Aboriginal Workforce Participation Initiative, which works with the private sector to promote Aboriginal employment throughout Canada.

Minister Nault also announced four new initiatives. First, an additional \$3 million will go into supporting an Aboriginal Contract Guarantee Instrument to help Aboriginal companies access bid and performance bonds. Secondly, \$500,000 will be allocated this year to work toward finalizing the design of a new venture capital initiative tailored to meet the needs of First Nations entrepreneurs.

The department's third new initiative will make \$10.5 million available for the balance of this year to help First Nations take equity positions in major business ventures. And, fourthly, \$40 million will be allocated for regional partnerships to assist First Nations and Inuit participation in — and benefit from — major regional economic development projects in partnership with the private sector and other levels of government.

Taken together, these initiatives will make an immediate and positive contribution to Aboriginal economic development, the Minister said.

In addition to the overall \$75 million increase this year for economic development, the Minister said he intends to add another \$100 million next year. "I believe the transition from \$25 million to \$200 million a year will result in significant progress towards our goal of building strong First Nations and Inuit economies in Canada," he said.

INAC Employee Always **Ready** For Economic Development Proposals

Johl Ready is a name that First Nations' members in Alberta have been hearing since 1973.

He is the Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) guy First Nation clients go to when they need assistance and advice in preparing business plans and proposals to access the Opportunity Fund and other INAC funding sources for business.

Ready joined INAC with a resumé that included consulting and engineering experience as well as self-employment as a sub-contract in the construction industry. After realizing he was more interested in people than the "net profit at the bottom of a financial statement," he sought other opportunities. That is what landed him at INAC.

His first job was area superintendent in economic development of the Lesser Slave Lake and Edmonton-Hobbema districts. Eventually, he worked in just the Edmonton-Hobbema area and in 1978 he moved to the regional office in Edmonton.

In the past 23 years, Ready has seen many positive changes in economic development. In 1973, Alberta was booming and First Nations were eager to get into mainstream economic activity. To aid the First Nations, INAC staff did the bulk of the work, including going to the communities to write the business plans. Back then, there were 32 staff members.

Today, there are seven people in the economic development unit. The dramatic decrease is due to the devolution of economic development to First Nations.

"The devolution was timely but it had a missing component," said Ready.



Johl Ready and his son Curtis proudly display his 2000 Regional Director General Award of Excellence.

"No capacity building was provided to the communities or its economic development officers. Capacity building through education is so important."

Ready sees education and self-sufficiency as the first steps to self-government. He has seen significant progress in the past few years. For example, it appears that every five years, the average education level of First Nation members goes up by one year and more people are going on to post-secondary education. With the present tremendous business opportunities in Alberta, there are opportunities for First Nations to bring in millions of revenue to their communities and employ hundreds of their own members.

"This not only benefits the First Nations, but surrounding communities and the province as a whole," said Ready.

Another change that has occurred is the way the federal government funds First Nation business. In the 1980s, a national economic development program was established by Industry Canada. It provided economic development services and funding that eventually became Aboriginal Business Canada (ABC).

By 1995, First Nations across Canada were concerned that most of their business opportunities were falling between the cracks of the ABC funding. INAC responded by creating the Opportunity Fund, which allowed the department to provide "equity gap" funding. The fund matches the First Nation's new cash equity and together provides enough project equity for a financial institution to loan the balance without guarantees from the federal government.

Ready was recently awarded the 2000 Regional Director General Award of Excellence from INAC – Alberta Region. He assisted Alberta First Nations in getting 21 business projects approved in 1998–1999 and 18 in 1999–2000, a record unsurpassed in all of Canada. Ready sees this as a shared success with the chiefs and councils, the community economic development officers and the INAC Alberta regional staff.

With only a little less than two years to retirement, Ready is preparing to hang up his hat with the federal government. What will he do in his retirement? If it is anything related to his present work, it will be capacity building in the communities.

"Other than that, it will be to prove that there is a life after work," said Ready.

For more information about the INAC Economic Development Opportunity Fund see the back page article entitled "Factums."

Factums

What is the Economic Development Opportunity Fund?

It is a program offered by Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) that provides "equity gap" funding to existing First Nation businesses in order to attract joint venture partners or secure conventional debt financing to take advantage of business opportunity.

What are the criteria?

The activities must lead to the expansion of a viable business opportunity which will result in the creation of jobs, enhanced community wealth and the reduction of social dependency.

Who is eligible to apply?

First Nations communities or their economic development organizations are eligible to apply.

How do I apply?

An acceptable business plan must be submitted to INAC – Alberta Region. Your business must also demonstrate a need/opportunity, have the organizational development capacity with proven record in business development and have a record of regular and acceptable reporting.

Who can I contact for further information?

Fred Sacha
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INAC – Alberta Region
780-495-2780

or

Johl Ready
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