

# BUFFALO POINT FIRST NATION

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Ross Smith

## **COMMUNITY BACKGROUND**

(Lake of the Woods)

Population in 1996: 134

Population in 1991: 30

% change 1991–1996: 346.7

Land area (square km): 11.87

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## Getting Started

The Buffalo Point First Nation is located on Lake of the Woods near the U.S. border and provides an excellent location as a tourist destination from both Canadian and US visitors. Members of the First Nation had been talking about the potential for development in the tourism sector for a few decades, but no concrete plans had been made and many ideas were left to pass. When Jim Thunder became Chief in 1969, he decided it was time to start developing the potential of his community. Buffalo Point is located on a peninsula and provides an attractive site for boating, fishing, and beach development. The proximity to the American border also provides good opportunities to attract the American tourist market.

The development of a world class tourist facility became a priority and development has been ongoing for more than two decades. Today, the tourist facility offers summer and winter tourism experiences and provides employment and support for the Buffalo Point community. The success enjoyed thus far ensures more development for the community.

## Goals and Strategies

Approaching the planning and development of a tourist destination was a big task for Buffalo Point First Nation. With less than 80 members and little human or financial resources upon which to build, the capacity building process had to be undertaken in stages. Careful management and evaluation over the years has kept the development of a tourist resort and supporting resources on track. In 1974, four consulting firms were hired to help put together a tourism development plan. This plan called for the development of cottages, a golf course, and a hotel over a 20-year period.

The importance of a long-term plan has contributed immensely to the economic and social development of the community over this time. With a professional blueprint for development in place, investors and other interested parties were brought onside as partners in the developmental process. New ideas have been added to the plan over the 20 year period, and the ability to revisit and adjust existing plans, while keeping the end goal in sight, has allowed the community to keep focused throughout political, social, and economic changes.

Environmental management and preservation have been important goals for the community, and the development of a tourist location allows for economic generation and preservation concurrently. The community recognizes that the main attractions for tourists are the beautiful scenery and wildlife on the peninsula. While hunting for traditional use is allowed, Buffalo Point First Nation understands the importance of the long-term sustainability of the wildlife and fishery resources; thus, hunting and fishing are being monitored carefully, keeping with the goals of the community.

## Activities and Early Outcomes

Buffalo Point First Nation has learned that the community must build upon existing resources in order to accomplish the goals of the development plan. While it is necessary to use professional expertise when needed, this must be balanced with the values and assets of the community. Initially, it was difficult to obtain funding for the construction of a road out to the peninsula, but the leasing of land to cottage investors helped to finance construction of infrastructure and to provide development of resort housing at the same time. The ability to integrate short-term revenue generating activities into the long-term plan of the community enabled the community to finance road construction and build resort cottages. The construction of further cottages followed this initial construction and there are currently 550 cottage lots. Half of them have long-term leases to the occupants, providing steady income for the community. The money from rental properties is reinvested back into the development corporation and used to fund further infrastructure developments.

Additional funding was obtained from a variety of sources, including grants from government agencies, bank loans and employment programs for community members on Employment Insurance. The creation of a development corporation in the community provides a venue to apply for grants, provide job training and negotiate loans. John Thunder, business manager of the Buffalo Point Development Corporation, is looking ahead to outside investment sources for future development. First Nation investment, granting agencies and private investors may help the construction of a hotel and casino. The consideration of a franchise hotel would add a recognized name to the resort and provide the

professional management to run a hotel, attracting both tourists and investors.

Today, Buffalo Point International Resort features a world-class marina, an RV campground, luxury rental cabins, and many hiking trails in summer and skiing and snowmobiling trails in winter. Tourism is growing every year in Buffalo Point with the majority of visitors coming from the United States. Thunder expects the number of visitors to increase as the resort gains more exposure and develops the facilities in the future.

The First Nation has benefited from the development of the resort in several ways. Twenty-five people are employed full time, year round, and another 25 are employed for half of the year. Fifty percent of the resort's employees are Aboriginal and from the community. In many cases, the development corporation has relied on expertise from outside the community to fill its ranks, as there is almost no unemployment in the community. The resort has increased the human resource capacity of the community, providing many opportunities for young people to gain experience and maintain employment as they move into the community. The spin-off effect of this sort of meta-development has resulted in many private businesses, owned by community members, that serve the needs of incoming tourists.

### **Challenges and Lessons Learned**

The past 30 years have provided the First Nation with a good perspective and valuable experience from which to grow and promote economic development. The small size of the community and the lack of training in business and economic development were difficult obstacles to overcome. Accepting outside partnerships to gain training and expertise has allowed the community to develop critical capacities and pass on the lessons learned.

The partnerships and sharing of stories with other First Nation communities is an important lesson. Often, other communities are experiencing or have experienced similar growing pains in the course of development. In particular, other communities that have experience in similar sectors can provide valuable lessons and contacts to

shorten the learning curve. The development of a tourist resort required legal fees and consultations for the adoption of local bylaws and regulations; this effort can be adapted from the work of other communities.

The importance of the written agreements is also a valuable lesson. It is often easier and more traditional to accept oral agreements and to take people on their word, but large investments often require legal agreements and signatures. This does provide security for both parties and is just a part of the culture of the business people involved in these sorts of investments.

The planning stages of development are crucial to the success of any new idea and effort and it is important to be patient in this process. Buffalo Point First Nation benefited from a long-term strategy, a clear vision, and the patience to carry out a development plan over 20 years. The development must be done in stages and a reflective process put in place to adapt and continue the original long-term plan.

### **What Next?**

Further plans include an 18-hole golf course, the construction of the hotel and casino, a museum, and an Aboriginal theme park. The First Nation is also interested in setting up a lumberyard that would serve future development. The development corporation has been a tremendous resource for the community and currently grosses about \$1.5 million per year. Building upon previous success and utilizing the lessons learned has positioned the community to continue its economic development. Using the development plan as a blueprint, the Buffalo Point First Nation has successfully overcome many obstacles and become experienced in economic development and tourism.

### **Contact Information**

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