

FORT WILLIAM FIRST NATION

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Ross Smith

COMMUNITY BACKGROUND

Population in 1996: 661

Population in 1991: 638

% change 1991–1996: 3.6

Land area (square km): 57.54

Ross Smith is a doctoral candidate at the University of Saskatchewan, in the Department of Geography, with interests in rural communities and sustainability.

Getting Started

Fort Kaministiquia (renamed Fort William in 1821) was an early trading post built in 1678, it was the headquarters for the French fur trade on the north shore of Lake Superior for nearly a century. The original Fort William reserve was established along the Kaministiquia River, and was relocated to its present site in 1908. There are approximately 1500 people living on and off the reserve, and economic development has become an important focus for the community. With youth unemployment and few businesses on the reserve, there was a need for attraction of new business and investment funds in order to undertake economic development projects.

Organizations located on Fort William First Nation are the principal employers. The government, public, and the social service industry sectors account for two thirds of the labour force. Construction, transportation, communications, and other private businesses account for the remaining labour force. The head offices of Dilico Ojibway Child and Family Services, Wasaya Airlines, and Nishnawbe Aski Development are located on the reserve. Subsidiary companies of Fort William First Nation include the Anemki Mountain Corporation, which owns and manages a 35,000-foot commercial office complex. The Fort William First Nation (FWFN) Economic Development Corporation holds and manages 1100 acres of land within the City of Thunder Bay, currently zoned heavy industrial. The FWFN Development Corp. also holds a 15,000-foot commercial building. Local industries include a rock quarry, tourist lookout, four variety stores, private contractors, auto body repair shop, and campground.

There have been many successes over the past five years with new buildings being built and a new water line and natural gas line put in to service Squaw Bay. The current market demand for additional office space on the reserve from Aboriginal businesses and service organizations is strong and has prompted the planning of another office complex, adjacent to the Anemki Mountain Corporation run complex, started in 1997. The office complex has 11,000 square feet of leasable office space catering to First Nation businesses, a Health Canada Medical Services Branch, and other private businesses. The construction of a new arena, daycare centre, and improvement to many of the tourist attractions in the area have also improved the revenue

generation potential and the provision of social services.

Goals and Strategies

With the community relying on the fishing and tourism industry in the past, new strategies to attract more small businesses, improve local economic development, and retain tourist dollars in the community have become a priority. Improvement in the delivery of social services has become a priority for the community and the construction of the new office complex with a Health Canada tenant will help accomplish this goal. The community is building partnerships to create employment and bring in off-reserve businesses, giving youth career options at home, and improving the self-image of the community.

Activities and Early Outcomes

The community was able to build upon the capacity of many of its members, having heavy equipment operators, qualified carpenters and construction workers to assist in construction of the office complexes and new buildings. Individuals with business management skills were also available to assist in the management of the development corporation and development planning. Partnerships have been formed with the Fort William First Nation Construction Corporation and Tom Jones Construction Company. The First Nation Construction Company has successfully bid and completed work for Bowater and the City of Thunder Bay, as well as various community driven projects.

The construction of the new office complex required investment from a variety of sources, including DIAND, Aboriginal Business Canada, and bank partnerships. The First Nation has been able to generate funds and provide a lot of in-kind funding. This has created jobs for at least 12 members of the community during construction, and four permanent jobs will be created for the management, operation, and maintenance of the building and grounds. The office complex, once completed, will accrue revenues for the First Nation to invest in other community ventures.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

Some of the initial challenges for the community were the availability of funds to start and com-

plete projects in a timely manner and the lack of qualified people from the community to do the work. The importance of off-reserve partnerships and professional expertise were paramount in getting many of the projects off the ground. The First Nation has learned that new developments must have the willingness to seek out professionals for certain tasks. An accountable and effective governing body has also helped the community to successfully apply for funding and keep long-term projects going.

Community participation combined with adequate research at the initial stages of project development has been a key factor in project developments. While much of this focus has been on economic development, community-based research on issues of social security and social development will ensure that these projects are completed. The community recommends checking your information during the project planning stages; this will help avoid unexpected contingencies in the end.

What Next?

The community is planning the construction of a school, as all students are currently bused to Thunder Bay. A retirement home, culture centre, and a 55 plus centre are also future projects that Fort William would like to implement. Community economic development and education have become main priorities as the community continues to grow, with many members coming back to the reserve.

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