

# Cree Nation in Manitoba Thriving Under Anderson's Leadership as Chief

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Norway House

While things aren't perfect in Norway House Cree Nation, there's no denying prospects are getting better for one of the largest First Nations in Manitoba, which has about 8,700 members, 6,500 of whom live on reserve. When a former premier asked Chief Larson Anderson what his proudest accomplishment was, he said "I was not proud of what I had done because we still had members that were unemployed and we still had some members that were homeless." But things are improving considerably under Anderson's leadership, who has served as Chief for the First Nation since 2018 and, before that, acted as his First Nation's general manager, project manager, and property manager. "Norway House has strong leadership, engaged staff and is on an upward trajectory for achieving major economic development success," said Anderson. And he is rightfully proud of the positive changes he has made since becoming Norway House's Chief. For example, the First Nation's payroll was annually about half a million dollars when he

first became Chief. But in each of the past three years, Norway House's payroll has doubled and is now about one million dollars annually. Thus, more and more people are getting to work for the First Nation in various initiatives.

The First Nation was thrust into the national spotlight in 2023 when it was selected as Community of the Year at the Cando Conference, held in Membertou, Nova Scotia. Norway House Cree Nation beat out the Red Rock Indian Band, which is located about 120 kilometres east of Thunder Bay, Ontario, to capture the Cando Community of the Year accolade. "It's a very big honour," Anderson said of the prestigious award. "You're always doing a lot of hard work and you rarely get recognized for it." That said, this was actually the second time Norway House has captured the Cando Community of the Year award. Norway House's first Cando triumph had come more than two decades earlier in 2001, a few years after Anderson had served two terms as a Norway House councillor. Anderson believes he played an instrumental role in the projects his First Nation was involved with during this time and that those initiatives helped Norway House secure its first Cando award. The Cando conference is also a great networking opportunity: fellow winner, Rose Paul, CEO of the Bayside Development Corporation, noted she had made numerous contacts at the event and was keen to explore various partnership opportunities, including with Norway House Cree Nation. Anderson is obviously pleased his First Nation was singled out again, as the national recognition will help create other opportunities for the First Nation. "Norway House is being seen as a leader now," he said. "It brings us out into the open."

Indeed, the Cando designation of being the top Indigenous community in the country cements the fact Anderson made a wise decision to become the leader of his people. "I have always believed, given the right circumstances, I could make an impact as a Chief," he said. "I had unfinished work that was needed to make Norway House the best First Nation in Canada." Anderson credits social media for his current position, as he utilized it to publicly question the previous administration's tactics. His ability to openly speak his mind and question those in charge led several Norway House members to praise Anderson and see him as a better option to lead the First Nation, ultimately resulting in community members voting in Anderson as Chief.

And Anderson's subsequent actions have proven that he is indeed a good fit for the job. Norway House now has a detailed economic plan, approved by council in April of 2023. "We didn't have an action plan on how we could get more community members into business," Anderson said. "Now we've got the finalized version of our economic development strategy." Norway House Cree Nation hired one of its own members, Rob Campbell, to spearhead the economic development plan. Campbell is also the provincial and national director of Indigenous services for MNP, one of Canada's largest full-service chartered professional accountancy and business advisory companies. Even though the economic development strategy is now complete, Anderson said Campbell will remain an advisor for the First Nation as it moves forward. "It's onward and upward," Anderson said. "We're just starting off on our big economic development plan."

Anderson is particularly enthusiastic about a high-speed fibre optic infrastructure project constructed via a partnership with Cross Lake First Nation. "That is going to

set the stage for a better future,” he said. After receiving federal funding in 2021, “We built fibre from the Highway 6 junction into Cross Lake and Norway House,” Anderson said. “We partnered with Cross Lake to build that fibre ourselves. And it was the only project in Canada that had its own First Nations management build it. All the others were contracted from existing suppliers of that fibre. We managed to get that supported by the federal government to build it ourselves. And we were within budget.” Anderson added having faster and better connectivity on the First Nation will be beneficial for all and allow members to conduct their work at home instead of leaving the reserve.

Another major accomplishment was securing the funding to build the Norway House Cree Nation Health Centre of Excellence, the largest hospital on a First Nation in Canada. During Anderson’s first year as Chief, the Canadian government announced an investment of \$100 million for the facility’s construction. It was the largest health infrastructure project ever announced by Indigenous Services Canada and Norway House Cree Nation has been committed to the project for more than a decade.

Norway House Cree Nation has several other major projects on the horizon. These plans include building a new school and a new business centre. Officials with the First Nation are also keen to purchase heavy equipment, improve community infrastructure, and expand the York Boat Inn, which has already reopened a diner within the Inn to provide another culinary option for community members.

While various promising projects are in the works, Anderson has noticed a significant shift in people’s thinking, including Norway House Cree Nation members. “Pre-COVID to post-COVID things have changed dramatically,” he said. “People are not as serious anymore. People are not as believing now that maybe there will be a future. I find it different. It’s harder to get people to focus on the future. Look at what happened [with COVID]. Who knows if there is going to be a future the way things are going with wars and Ukraine and the Middle East. Things are a little bit different.” But Anderson, who is 55, plans to continue moving forward, with his Indigenous perspective always in the forefront. “I’m not traditional in the sense of spiritual traditional,” he said. “But I am traditional in the sense that I value our fishing and trapping and living off the land and working around the community. I value that.”