

# Former U.S. Marine Captures National Indigenous Economic Development Award

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Sam Laskaris



James Stevens

Although he's not seeking a third term as a councillor for Millbrook First Nation, James Stevens is still one busy guy. While he now has only one 'main' job as the director of commercial operations for his First Nation, Stevens still has plenty of other responsibilities at home. "My family is getting older," he said. "My [three] kids are into [various sports]." His older two children are enrolled in hockey, baseball, and tae kwon do, with the eldest also playing football. As a result, Stevens is thinking of taking classes so he can volunteer as a coach for his children's teams. "I'm there all the time anyways," he notes.

But being busy isn't new for Stevens. He is accustomed to having very little spare time, as work responsibilities have kept him busy around the clock for years. As a councillor, he was attending several Millbrook council meetings each month, and he often had to utilize his vacation days to fulfill his responsibilities. And this was on top

of his other jobs: Stevens was hired as Millbrook's economic development officer in 2019, and a year later, he was named Millbrook's director of commercial operations. "During the day, from 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., it's all economic development," Stevens explains. "And it does go into the weekend sometimes." Economic development is his priority. "I just want to focus on that," Stevens said, partly explaining his decision not to seek another term as a councillor.

Though he is a Millbrook First Nation member, Stevens was born in the United States, in the New Hampshire city of Manchester. He served in the United States Marine Corps from 2000-2004. He believes many of the skills he acquired during his military life are transferrable to his current position. "It definitely helped me with my discipline and my people skills," he said. "I can speak in front of people." Stevens added that his time spent in the military helped prepare him for the commitment required in his post-secondary studies, and he graduated in 2010 with a commerce degree from Dalhousie University in Halifax.

Stevens' current responsibilities include serving as his First Nation's leasing agent for its properties. He's also in charge of property and client relations management, meaning he frequently meets with tenants to ensure things are running smoothly and to address any concerns. And sometimes he just pops in to say a quick hello to tenants, maintaining a constant friendly presence.

Happily, Stevens' efforts have not gone unnoticed. In fact, he was chosen as the winner of the 2023 Economic Developer of the Year award handed out by Cando, a national organization that promotes economic development in Indigenous communities across Canada. He received the award at the Cando Conference, which was held last June in the Nova Scotia community of Membertou. The other finalist for the award was Thomas Benjoe, who was serving as the president and CEO of File Hills Qu'Appelle Developments, a Saskatchewan corporation representing the economic interests of a tribal council comprised of 11 First Nations in the province. Stevens and Benjoe both gave presentations about their careers at the conference, although Benjoe was forced to do a virtual presentation due to travel difficulties. "It was a pretty good experience," Stevens said of his participation at the event. "At the end of the day, to get to present in front of your peers and to be in the presence of all these other economic development officers from across the country was pretty great." And while Stevens had previously won a regional award for his economic development efforts, "it's nice to win the national award." He notes that "for the next 3-4 months I was still getting congratulated," adding that kudos were being directed his way from other delegates at a 2023 conference he attended in Gatineau, Quebec.

Working for his First Nation is a big deal for Stevens. "It's everything to me," he said. "I took a 10 percent pay cut from the position I was at before," when he was the business development officer for the Nova Scotia-based Ulnooweg Development Group, an Indigenous financial institution. He was with Ulnooweg for almost five years, assisting Indigenous entrepreneurs from across the province with term financing solutions and helping them to establish, acquire, or expand their businesses. Besides taking a salary cut when he was hired by Millbrook First Nation, Stevens also gave up the benefits he had been receiving with his previous employer. But he relishes working

for Millbrook. “It’s interesting,” he said of his current position. “There is something new that happens every day.”

Stevens is thrilled his First Nation is now thriving in terms of economic development. “I think it’s an amazing story,” he said. “We’ve come a long way.” And he can certainly take some credit for this uptick in economic development. For example, he was instrumental in the construction of a 68-unit apartment building that is now complete and housing tenants in Cole Harbour. “It was fully leased before construction,” Stevens said of the building. Stevens also played a role in the construction of a new 39,000-square foot building serving as the home office for the Confederacy of Mainland Mi’kmaq. “Bringing them along under one roof is a game changer,” he noted.

Another massive victory under Stevens’ leadership is the establishment of a Farm Credit Canada branch in Millbrook First Nation, the business’ first branch in an Indigenous community in Canada. “I think it’s huge,” Stevens said of this initiative. “It shows we can be a place where a crown corporation can locate to and be in our community ... And it will help in attracting Indigenous talent for them.”

Speaking of firsts, Stevens can also boast that his First Nation is home to Cedar House, a Nova Scotia Native Women’s Association residency centre. “It’s the first of its kind in Canada,” he said. Cedar House offers temporary housing to Indigenous women and 2SLGBTQQIA+ fleeing interpersonal violence and experiencing homelessness: Cedar House’s mission, besides offering temporary housing, is to reduce the risks associated with trauma by providing a safe space for healing and recovery through support services and educational opportunities.

Finally, with an upcoming inland shipping terminal project near Truro, Stevens is looking toward future success. Stevens said his First Nation has entered into a partnership with Canadian Rail Equipment Works and Services to build the terminal. The facility, which will be called We’kokekitk, will be built on land the First Nation purchased in 2020. “We’re just working through the process of identifying the land and working on a timeline,” Stevens said in early 2024. The facility is scheduled to begin construction later in the year.