



Provincial Budget Consultations

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Minister Friesen and Panel Members, thank you for inviting me to present this evening.

Recent developments in Churchill and The Pas have focused public attention more on the North. Part of the reason for the growing crisis there is that economic activity has been driven by people and companies that do not have a lasting connection to the places they are doing business, nor have they worked to reduce inequities or respected local cultures.

When we talk about the Northern economy, we should be putting it in the context of the predominately Indigenous population, keeping in mind that it is diverse, young and growing faster than the non-Indigenous population. If this government wants to see meaningful improvement, it needs to listen to the people who live in the North.

Grand Chief Sheila North Wilson of the MKO (Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak) Inc. wants local Indigenous enterprise to take over the Tolko mill in The Pas. We understand that an American firm may also be interested. Given the problems we're having with Omnitrac, one may ask why we're going so far afield to secure a new owner, especially because there is no shortage of development ideas right here in Manitoba.

For example, there is a consortium of First Nationsⁱ interested in running the port at Churchill and taking over the railway.

MKO came up with a 10 point plan for Northern economic developmentⁱⁱ that both the federal and provincial governments should be looking at closely. The plan turns community challenges, such as the high diabetes rate and lack of affordable energy into job-creation schemes that will make First Nation communities self-sufficient. Such initiatives, spearheaded by Aki Energy, have already taken shape in other First Nations such as Garden Hill and Fisher River Cree Nation.

MKO's economic plan also embraces alternative energy. If the current government were to modernize Manitoba Hydro to include biomass (woodchips) to heat new homes, and convert existing homes, it would open up opportunities. And where better to source this renewable fuel than in and around The Pas? High European demand for biomass is commanding premium prices and product could also be shipped by rail through the Port of Churchill. Could government help with a plan to see an Indigenous enterprise provide woodchips to replace imported oil? This plan would create more jobs, be eligible for emission credits, and possibly be cost-competitive. A viable model to subsidize conversion to more affordable geo-thermal, while employing local workers, already exists with Manitoba Hydro and Fisher River Cree Nationⁱⁱⁱ; such a plan could be tailor-made to fit any number of business plans using biomass.

Alternatively, maybe the Tolko infrastructure could be converted to meet the many different needs in the North. For example, home construction for First Nations – including provision of construction materials - could be turned into viable development initiatives with wide-reaching benefits. Over time such development may even provide transport opportunities for the rail line.

Why not start investing in local First Nations? The potential for capacity building is tremendous. Take Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation^{iv} (NCN), for example, which has been able to benefit from development agreements with Manitoba Hydro and flood compensation funds from the Northern Flood Agreement. It has invested in community-based economic initiatives, some located in the newly formed Urban Reserve in nearby Thompson, where it owns and runs the Mystery Lake Hotel.

According to Chief Marcel Moody:

“It’s not all about us. We have a vested interest in maintaining the economic viability of Thompson. The more people we can attract to Thompson, the better it is for both NCN and for Thompson.”^v

NCN Development Corporation also owns a variety of businesses in Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation ranging from a building supplies store, food store, gas station, restaurant and even a radio and TV station.

Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation has also used resources from its relationship with Manitoba Hydro to run the Ataoskiwin Training and Employment Centre (ATEC) Inc.^{vi} ATEC provides specialized training to residents. Its model meets the needs of Indigenous jobseekers and employers who wish to hire them. It includes an extensive intake process to determine trainees’ education and employment interests, education levels and upgrading needs, as well as other social and cultural needs. One of its most innovative programs trains local youth to build much-needed housing and puts them to

work so they can earn their Red Seal accreditation. Twenty one youth are currently enrolled in the Red Seal program.

At a time of crisis in Northern Manitoba, communities need more than a \$25,000 grant for tourism development and pension-plan payment exemptions for foreign companies. They know what they need and want, and they have viable plans to develop their communities. Long-term investment in community-led initiatives will build local capacity and healthy communities.

There's no doubt that the challenge is great, but so is the promise of shared opportunity and prosperity in our North.



ATEC students on the job at Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation

ⁱ Annable, K. July 28, 2016. "No bailout for Omnitrax: Pallister." Winnipeg Free Press. Available at: <http://www.winnipegfreepress.com/local/no-bailout-for-omnitrax-pallister-388572871.html>

ⁱⁱ Manitoba Keewatinowí Okimakanak Inc. May 26, 2016. "A Community-Based Economic Action Plan for Northern Manitoba First Nations." Available at: <https://www.scribd.com/doc/313941256/2016-May-25-MKO-Economic-Development-Strategy-DRAFT>

ⁱⁱⁱ Fernandez, L. January, 2015. "How Government Support for Social Enterprise can Reduce Poverty and Greenhouse Gases." Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives MB. Available at: <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/how-government-support-social-enterprise-can-reduce-poverty-and-greenhouse>

^{iv} also known as Nelson House

^v Antoszewski, K. "Mystery Lake property receives urban reserve status." Thompson Citizen. Available at: <http://www.thompsoncitizen.net/news/nickel-belt/mystery-lake-hotel-property-receives-urban-reserve-status-1.2258785>

^{vi} ATEC is housed in a new and state-of-the-art building in NCN (built as a training centre by Hydro when work was being done on the Wuskwatim Dam).