

Two cultures, one vision

Co-operative spirit of Serpent River First Nation and Elliot Lake may hold lessons for Brantford, Six Nations

Posted By [STORIES BY VINCENT BALL](#), [EXPOSITOR STAFF](#), August 23 2008

They come from different cultures and they represent different communities.

But Chief Isadore Day of the Serpent River First Nation and Mayor Rick Hamilton of the City of Elliot Lake have a few things in common. They share a huge neighbourhood in a picturesque part of Northern Ontario and they both want what's best for their communities.

Moreover, they're both willing to put in the time and effort necessary to ensure their communities thrive.

That common ground led to the development of a historic and significant agreement between the two communities. The agreement led to the establishment of a joint relations committee, a forum for them and other leaders to meet discuss and resolve issues that affect their respective communities.

Elliot Lake's experience may point the way for Brantford and Six Nations.

Hamilton and Day will be in Brantford on Thursday to talk about the agreement in more detail and why it is important to their communities. Both are looking forward to their visit but Hamilton cautions that he isn't coming here to offer a magic pill that will resolve all of the local issues.

'WORKS FOR US'

"I can't pretend to understand all the complexities of the issues down there," Hamilton said in an interview. "All I can tell you is what has happened here and why it works for us.

"If it helps the communities down there that's great."

Their presentations will be at the Best Western Brant Park Inn starting at 9 a. m.

The visit has been organized and is being paid for by the Haldimand Tract Good Neighbours Coalition, a local group that is seeking to resolve the current conflict between the Six Nations and the city of Brantford in a peaceful manner. The coalition includes representatives from both the local native and non-native communities.

"I think the reasons for doing this are self-evident," Steve Charest, president of King and Benton and a spokesman for the coalition said in a telephone interview. "There is a disconnection between the two communities (Brantford and Six Nations) and we've found a couple of communities that had a similar situation that have managed to find a way of working together.

"I think we're fortunate to have found such a good example and while some of the circumstances may be different, I think there's probably something we can all learn from them."

The Elliot Lake-Serpent River agreement has caught the attention of the provincial government, he said.

"It's a unique agreement in so many ways," Charest said. "What I think is interesting about it is that it's something that has been developed from the bottom up, not the top down. "When people in their own communities come up with something that works for them, I think the other levels of government will want to take notice."

The discussions that led to the agreement were initiated by Chief Day a couple of years ago.

"The area around Elliot Lake was a depressed region after the boom-bust cycle of the uranium mines ended," Day said in a telephone interview on Wednesday. "The city was changing. It was moving away from being a resource-based community to become a tourist destination and a retirement community."

Part of the city's overall economic plan involved the development of cottage lots on Crown land that the Anishabek, of Genaabajing, now known as the Serpent River First nation, have existed on since "time immemorial."

If that type of development was going to occur, Day and the people of his community wanted to make sure it was done properly and responsibly. Any developments that affected both communities should benefit both communities.

"We're not opposed to development," Day said. "But we don't like it when it's like a runaway train that takes off from the station too quickly and without us on board."

The agreement respects the rights of the people of his community and ensures they will benefit from any developments that take place. It also ensures concerns raised about any development are resolved before the work begins not after.

The main priorities of the joint relations committee include economic development, employment partnerships and procurement; heritage sharing and planning, mutually beneficial supported initiatives, programs and services; land use and acquisition and joint lobby efforts and communication with other governments. The agreement and its terms of reference took more than a year to develop. Signing ceremonies took place in both communities last September.

Day is pleased with the results of the agreement so far. "Right now, I think it is working more in our favour because it is being recognized by the province of Ontario," he said.

Still, the agreement is new, a fresh concept and a learning experience that takes some getting used to. An important part of the agreement is that it was developed through an honest effort by both sides to find common ground and is not driven by conflict.

"Conflict cannot be the fuel that drives this forward," Day said.

The conflict has to be set aside because sometimes, when faced with a problem, people dig in their heels. They start thinking about different agendas, different issues and all of that can get in the way of finding a solution, he said.

It's important to look at the big picture, he said. Looking at the big picture and towards the future is something that has become part of the culture of Elliot Lake.

Situated between Sudbury and Sault Ste. Marie, the city was created in the mid-1950s after uranium was discovered in the area. It became a boom-bust community with the mines employing between 4,000 and 5,000 people when in full production.

The area survived a scare in the early 1960s when United States companies announced they would no longer purchase uranium from the area. A federal government program gave the community new life but in the early 1990s uranium mining was on the decline and by the mid-1990s the final mine had closed.

"It was a huge hit," Hamilton said in a telephone interview. "We lost something like four or five thousand jobs over an 18-month period."

With the help of the provincial government, one mine was kept open at a reduced capacity for a while to keep about 500 people employed. It gave local leaders some time to figure out a way to survive and build a future for the community. They found it by reinventing Elliot Lake as a retirement community and tourist destination. The transformation continues to be a success.

"I always say if we can get you up here once, we can get you to come back," Hamilton said. "We have all of these wonderful, beautiful lakes around here and the ATV trails are really something else. When you step out in the morning the air is fresh and crisp."

The Elliot Lake-Serpent River First Nations agreement is important because it enables the city to move forward with its economic development plans in a way that is respectful to its Serpent River First Nation neighbours.

Issues that might otherwise cause conflict can be addressed and resolved ahead of time.

"It (the joint relations committee) gives us a way of getting together to discuss issues of concern and to see if there is a way of finding common ground," Hamilton said. "We can discuss a lot of different issues and look for ways of working together to our mutual benefit."

"It also gives us a chance to clarify and explain what it is that we can and can't do."

When all the mining jobs were lost it affected not only the people of Elliot Lake but the people of Serpent River First Nation as well. A lot of people from the Serpent River First Nation worked in the mines or mining industry, Hamilton said.

The economic development of the area creates jobs for people of both communities and efforts are being made to strengthen the ties between them. Elliot Lake now has an intern from the Serpent River First Nation who is working with those involved in the cottage lot development program. The people of Serpent River may want to develop a similar program of their own in the future, Hamilton said.

The agreement and working relationship also helps those from the Serpent River better understand how Elliot Lake, a municipality, fits in with the provincial and federal government.

"This agreement is an example of thinking creatively, thinking outside the box," Hamilton said. "That's something you learn how to do when you've had some of challenges we've had to face."

"We've learned that it's a lot easier to work together, without the conflict."

The joint relations committee has had some successes since it was formed. It was through the committee that a problem over a road allowance for one of the cottage lot development projects was resolved, Hamilton said.

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KEY STATEMENTS AND PRINCIPLES

Following are some of the key statements and guiding principles of the Serpent River First Nation-City of Elliot Lake joint relations committee: Vision statement-- "We see a time when our communities will flourish through economic and social benefits resulting from joint initiatives and the co-operation developed in a forum that conducts regular and organized discussion of matters of mutual interest." Mission statement-- "The Serpent River First Nation-City of Elliot Lake joint relations committee will meet regularly, in a spirit of friendship and co-operation to discuss matters of common interest to the communities: and will provide information, options, and/or recommendations to the respective councils for action or resolution.

The guiding principles of the committee are the Seven Grandfather teachings of the Anishinabek: Zaa-gi-wiin -- love; Gwe-ya-kwaad-zi-win -- honesty; Aak-de-he-win -- courage; Dbaadem- diz-win -- humility; Mi-naa-dendmo- win -- respect; De-bwe-win -- truth; Nbwaa-ka-win -- wisdom. Code of conduct-- The joint relations committee has its own code of conduct, decisions are made by consensus; the decisions of the committee must be unanimous. There must be at least four meetings each year and the venue for meetings alternates between the two communities.

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