

Lessons from CANDO Recognition Award Winners

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INTRODUCTION

The Best Practices section focuses on those practices in economic development within Aboriginal communities which are seen as excellent examples of 'best practices,' those activities which produce excellent or outstanding results or that simply make a difference. This section is intended to provide ideas for action. We will attempt to highlight economic development initiatives from across Canada. For this issue, the Best Practices were selected from the 1997 CANDO Recognition Award winners. We felt that as a group that they represent some of the best practices in economic development within the Aboriginal community.

1. Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en Economic Development Corporation (British Columbia)

The Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en Economic Development Corporation (GWEDC) of British Columbia is an economic development body that serves nine distinct communities within two nations of the Gitksan and the Wet'suwet'en. The corporation is driven by a board representative of these communities and the work is carried out by two staff who are members of two of the communities.

The GWEDC has been instrumental in contributing to educational development within the province by providing both long-term and short-term educational economic development. This has resulted in the start-up of 94 First Nation business partnerships with government, enterprises and other First Nations, as well as the introduction of business courses. More specifically, the corporation has initiated partnerships in the development of small business seminars, resources based workshops and other employment related initiatives. Moreover, it has successfully pulled together the School District, the Province, and other funding sources to institute a Youth in Business course offered in the local high school.

The GWEDC is seen as a vehicle which works for the Gitksan and the Wet'suwet'en membership to effectively increase First Nations participation in the local economy. They have also been the driving force behind the surge of self-employment in the two regions. The corporation has accommodated the forestry needs of the major forestry companies by providing for the start up of many contractors and sub-contractors through self-employment schemes. Furthermore, it has provided for the season start-up capital needs for its many commercial fishers.

The GWEDC is an organization that utilizes all of its resources and those within its grasp to the utmost potential to the benefit of its members and for the advancement of healthy communities. This corporation's strength lies in its respect for the land and the natural environment and its belief in the abilities of people. Moreover, the GWEDC adheres closely to its mission statement of meeting the economic needs of the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en people through an ongoing dialogue with its members and the ability to change and adapt to their demands.

Culturally, the GWEDC has combined both Traditional practices with Western economic methods. The Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en are a culturally strong people whose clan system is ingrained in their daily lives. Each clan is grouped into "house" groups. The Chief of the House Group has a very apparent role with the GWEDC's Loan Guarantee and the Micro-Grant Program. The process for each program requires that the entrepreneur obtain support from his/her Chief before the GWEDC will begin its assessment process. And thus, the house system serves as the eligibility standard for the GWEDC to apportion its funds.

2. Paskwayak Business Development Corporation (Manitoba)

The Paskwayak Business Development Corporation (PBDC) of Manitoba covers eight band-owned businesses and employs approximately 225 band members. The organization has worked diligently and consistently to further the role of economic development officers across Canada. The PBDC has, throughout its existence, been motivated by the two goals of the Opaskwayak Cree Nation(O.C.N): Independence and Progress. All the corporation's activities are grounded firmly in providing meaningful, productive employment, skill enhancement and training for community members as well as in raising the profile of Aboriginal people in general and of the Opaskwayak Cree Nation in particular as full participants in the Canadian economy.

In the field of education, the PBDC staff guest lecture classes at Keewatin Community College and has made themselves available as advisors. Furthermore, the corporation provides scholarships and bursaries to deserving students attending universities and colleges across North America.

Using primarily community members in its construction, the PBDC built the 60 room, \$8.5 million Kikiwak Inn. This facility is staffed by 50 band members that are provided with both pre-employment and ongoing training. In addition, the corporation renovated the Otineka Mall with the aim of revitalizing the area and providing services and employment opportunities for band members. To ensure the economic success of the wholly owned Otineka IGA, all the departmental managers enrolled in the Cornell University Retail Food Managers Program sponsored by the PBDC. With the new management systems,

an Aboriginal management team and an operational plan, the store has succeeded in securing considerable profit which has been reinvested into the business through the repayment of loans and mall renovations. The future of the Mall is considered very bright and continued growth is expected.

There are several other areas that the PBDC has become involved with as a way in which to diversify its interests. The corporation has been a major contributor to the acquisition of a junior hockey franchise which provides a positive, athletic option to Aboriginal youth in the region. Additionally, the team provides direct full-time employment for several arena employees. The PBDC was involved with a promotional video for the Opaskwayak Cree Nation and the Paskwayak Production Company has produced a number of health related documentaries that are both entertaining and educational. Through its small business loans program, the corporation has issued approximately 130 loans to a variety of community based entrepreneurial initiatives, most notably in the areas of Native art and craftwork. Furthermore, the PBDC is currently negotiating to diversify the resource extraction-based nature of developments and has become involved with the industrial service industry. A recently submitted proposal dealing with ecotourism at Clearwater Lake is intended to provide an environmentally friendly method for nature enthusiasts to enjoy the nearby provincial park.

3. Kitsaki Development Corporation (Saskatchewan)

The KDC has a twenty year history in the area of successful economic development with the Lac La Ronge First Nation of Saskatchewan. Its most significant development successes have been in a variety of industries with an emphasis on economic partnerships and capital alliances. Among its most notable contributions to the local economy are its continuous involvement and support for a number of northern trucking firms, a catering business, a food processing plant, La Ronge Motor Inn and Venture Kayaks

In the area of education, the KDC has focussed on programs that involve the direct transfer of skills. More specifically, it has provided its members with mentorship, internship and shadow programs as well as school to work transition programs.

4. Chief Louis John Stevenson, Peguis First Nation (Manitoba)

Appointed Chief of the Peguis First Nation community of Manitoba in 1981, Chief Louis Stevenson has overseen the dramatic changes within his community, including: an increase in the number of businesses on the reserve from 5 to 51 and a corresponding rise in employment levels by approximately 30 percent. Incorporated in 1984, the Peguis Development Corporation has designed a comprehensive development strategy that is based on community needs and aspirations and that reflects an emphasis on education and training and the creation of an economically viable community.

As part of this effort to create a strong and sustainable economic base in order to meet its own commercial demands as well as supplying external markets, the Peguis First Nation has developed the Peguis Supermarket and Mall, the focus of the local business centre. The Mall, which has become the major shopping centre for the surrounding area, also provides community services and is the home of the Peguis Band Office and Health Centre. Moreover, as part of the strategy of meeting community needs, Chief Stevenson has provided leadership in the development and creation of Peguis Custom Cabinets and Millwork business which has been essential to the construction of the new school as well as recent housing developments.

In the area of education, Chief Stevenson has been instrumental in providing appropriate instruction to the people of Peguis. His efforts include the initiation of the New School Feasibility Study which has resulted in its recent construction. Furthermore, he has had an important part in the development of the Peguis Adult Education Learning Centre, which has served as a model for the Aboriginal community in Canada and abroad.

Among his successes and achievements, Chief Stevenson has served as Interim Grand Chief of the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs (1987-89), received an eagle feather from the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs (1980), and received the Commemorative Medal for the 125th Anniversary of Confederation. In 1995, he received the prestigious National Aboriginal Achievement Award for outstanding community development. Furthermore, in 1996 Chief Stevenson was nominated for the National Royal Bank Award which honours those who have

made an important contribution to human welfare and the common good.

WHAT LESSONS CAN WE LEARN FROM THESE BEST PRACTICES?

Some common themes emerge from the four case studies, including:

1. The notion that economic development is intended to serve the entire community;
2. The need for sustainable economic strategies that contribute to political independence;
3. The importance of culturally relevant development that is driven by community needs and aspirations;

4. The importance of economic diversity as a way in which to ensure sustainability;
5. The need as part of economic initiatives for both initial and ongoing education and training;
6. The importance of economic development corporations as a both a technical and capital support organization for new businesses,
7. The need for a strategic, focussed, consistent, and long term approach to economic development. Economic Development did not occur overnight. It was the result of the collective effort of many individuals, businesses, organizations, and governments.