

## Shocked and Disappointed

### City council rejects development proposal by Mi'kmaq Confederacy of PEI

As the leaders of the two Mi'kmaq Governments on Prince Edward Island - the Abegweit and Lennox Island First Nations - we want to set the record straight about a proposed new building on the Charlottetown waterfront. The Band Councils of Lennox Island and Abegweit are the duly elected representatives of their respective members. Contrary to a mistaken view set out in an opinion letter in the Guardian last week, the Band Councils represent all their members, both on and off reserve. This has been confirmed by the Supreme Court of Canada. The two Band Councils are the formal representatives of the Mi'kmaq citizens of Prince Edward Island, they are the leaders of the Mi'kmaq Nation in this territory. The Band Councils, collectively, also form the Board of Directors of the Mi'kmaq Confederacy of PEI. The Confederacy is a multi-functioning not for profit organization that serves as the common voice of the two First Nations, and strives to improve outcomes for the indigenous Mi'kmaq population. It also offers services to benefit the Aboriginal community as a whole.

The proposed building on the Charlottetown waterfront is a concept at this point. A draft design was created to allow for a rezoning application to the City of Charlottetown, but it is still a concept with many decisions yet to be made. The elected Band Councils have always intended to engage community members for input and feedback prior to making the decision to proceed. Community engagement was premature prior to ascertaining if the project could move from concept to actuality.

The concept has tremendous potential on many levels, and the Band councils are excited about the possibilities. Firstly, the building would be owned by the First Nations. The office rent paid by the Confederacy would flow directly to the First Nation Governments, not private sector land owners, as would the rent from commercial tenants. The revenue would provide additional funding for the First Nations to enhance the programs and services that they offer. There will be absolutely no diversion of current program funding into the waterfront project.

Secondly, the waterfront project will provide for the creation of Aboriginal employment and mentoring opportunities, both of which are greatly needed.

Thirdly, the project will entail an Aboriginal Friendship Centre. A press release from the Native Council, which contained numerous factual and legal errors, references existing programming and infrastructure; but quite frankly the services being offered to the off reserve community need to be better. Needs are not currently being met. The First Nations Governments plan to step up and do what is necessary to properly enhance current programming and offer new programs that are desperately required. This would be for the benefit of the Mi'kmaq and all off reserve Aboriginal people.

Fourthly, a building on the waterfront will provide for a showcase of Mi'kmaq arts, crafts and culture. Tens of thousands of cruise ship passengers will pass by the site every season. The potential benefits to Mi'kmaq craftspeople and artisans are self evident.

On Monday night, Charlottetown City Council denied the Confederacy's re-zoning application. The most notable consequence of this decision is that City Council will not permit a friendship centre at the waterfront location. We are shocked and disappointed with this decision. The idea that in this day and age a municipal government would deliberately deny the First Nations an opportunity to provide much needed services to the off reserve Aboriginal community is inexplicable.

The elected Band Councils have directed the Confederacy to examine the possibilities for this wonderful project. Any one of the benefits would make the project worth considering. The combination of the four foundational benefits would have made this one of the best projects the First Nations have considered undertaking. It would be a win on every front. City Council's narrow minded decision will result in the Mi'kmaq leadership undertaking its due diligence and examining next steps. It also highlights the wisdom of commencing the community engagement process once the pertinent facts are known.

There has been media commentary recently that has been truly unfortunate. Through a lack of understanding, a misportrayal of facts and what seems to be an element of turf protection, a small minority has attempted to cast this forward thinking project in a negative light and generate unfair criticism. It is regrettable that some people or groups prefer to ignore the multiple significant benefits and try to manufacture reasons to stand in the way of progress and long overdue initiatives. Fortunately, the Mi'kmaq Governments are focused on moving their communities forward and advancing possibilities and outcomes. We will re-evaluate after City Council's demonstrated intolerance of services being provided to the Aboriginal community in that location. The First Nations then look forward to community engagement sessions with a goal of pursuing a tremendous initiative. We also look forward to working with those who truly want to pursue success and opportunity for our communities and community members."

Yours in Spirit,

Chief Brian Francis & Chief Matilda Ramjattan