

Q&A with the ełıdłı kué Partner

IT'S TIME:

TALKING ABOUT RECONCILIATION IN WOOD BUFFALO

Elder Robert Cree from Fort McMurray 468 First Nation, Mayor Sandy Bowman, and Indigenous and Rural Relations (IRR) Director Dennis Fraser sat down with Nicole Bourque-Bouchier, member of Mikisew Cree First Nation and CEO and owner of Bouchier. The four talked about changes in relationships between the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo (RMWB) and Indigenous communities, reconciliation, and the path forward.

This is their conversation, edited for clarity and length. Stay tuned for the full conversation in video and audio.

NICOLE BOURQUE-BOUCHIER: We're all long-term residents of Fort McMurray, and from a Municipality and a rural community point of view, we've all seen changes throughout the years with the relationship between the Municipality and the rural communities and its Indigenous people. I wanted to start with you, Mayor Bowman, and get your perspective of the history that you've seen in our region during that time and what are your thoughts around the relationships.

MAYOR SANDY BOWMAN: No matter where you start from, we can always improve to make it better. I've always had a close relationship with Fort Chipewyan. I started travelling there in the late 90s to teach children and I spoke with Elders at that time about what they wanted to see, and I think what we're seeing now is the fruition of what the Indigenous communities want to see – that working together in this is the common goal, and to recognize the history of our region.

DENNIS FRASER: I have the perspective of being here for a long time. When I was a young fella, I came up here in 1975 to work with industry. I have family here, it's like home to me. I thought I was ready for retirement, whatever that is, and that lasted about three weeks. At that time, quite frankly, the relationship wasn't all that good between the Municipality, our rural areas, with Indigenous leadership (and) communities. I was asked if I would think of coming back up here and in this role. That was coming on seven years ago and there's been ebbs and flows... but these times are different. We're in a different era and sometimes you've got to look back to see how far we've come. I'm really excited where we're headed now and where we're at, what we've got on the go.

ELDER ROBERT CREE: I have a long history myself living in Fort McMurray. Back in the day, there was only two sections of Fort McMurray. It was Fort McMurray



downtown and the area around Keyano College, where they used to call the Prairie. We used to live in Waterways. I used to run from Waterways across the trestle, railroad tracks, and up to where Keyano College is today and from there all the way to Fort McMurray.

NICOLE BOURQUE-BOUCHIER: You've seen the most changes out of all of us in Fort McMurray for sure.

ELDER ROBERT CREE: I think there was 3,000 people at the time. In 1973, I heard about the Great Canadian Oil Sands (GCOS). There was a lot of people moving north. My first job was with Amoco...I think I worked several years with them and then elections came in the community. I threw my hat in for councillor, got in. I worked with the chief at the time, late Albert Cheecham. That's when I started learning about the governments, about industries. I helped out not only regionally, but I helped out provincially and nationally. I sat on different boards. I was a chief of my band. I did a lot for the region. Then I started, of course, work in the Municipality.

NICOLE BOURQUE-BOUCHIER: They're very lucky to have you because you have such a rich history and so much knowledge and have seen so many changes from all different angles. What we're here to talk about today is the initiative the RMWB has called It's Time. I understand that it's a recognition to the RMWB's commitment to truth and reconciliation. Dennis, I wanted to ask you, why It's Time, why now, and what does it mean?

DENNIS FRASER: Because –It's Time. The (Truth and Reconciliation Commission) report came out in December 2015. When it first came out, there was a total lack of awareness (and) understanding with the governments, be it federal, provincial, municipal, and even Indigenous governments. What is this? How do we deal with it? We were no different. In 2016, I was given a copy of this report. Do you want to respond to it? I'm thinking, well, there's 94 Calls to Action here. How do I respond to that? That is when the shift started on how we needed to do

things differently. Because myself or my department couldn't just do a response to this. It was much, much broader than that so we started on a process – a road to reconciliation – which included drawing in all partners, the First Nations, Elders, internally, externally. There was a lot of ups and downs and how do we do this? We were supposed to bring the report back to Council in 2018 and we didn't. It still wasn't right. In 2021,

we brought a report to Council that looked a lot different than it would have two years earlier. A lot of times, if you want to learn, if you want to respond to something as critical as a TRC report, you need that Indigenous way of knowing. That is what we really focused on.

NICOLE BOURQUE-BOUCHIER: Mayor Bowman, what does It's Time mean to you, amongst everything else that you're having to take care of right now?

MAYOR SANDY BOWMAN: It's a slow progression but every day we're learning something. Even the artwork we have in Council Chambers from Elder Frederick (McDonald)... When he was giving his speech the other night and his poetry, it hit home to everybody in the room. It was a huge learning experience. It was a lot to take in coming into the role, but I think slowly speaking with the leaders, speaking with the chiefs, speaking with the presidents, sitting with the Elders, listening to the stories, and listening to concerns, I think we're moving forward and that's how we have to do it. It's not through letters and back and forth... but sitting down together over coffee, sitting down, listening to the stories, and listening to what the history of our region is. Our history isn't oilsands. Our history here is way before that. When you say, "It's Time", it's time to move on and take those actions.

NICOLE BOURQUE-BOUCHIER: I appreciate those words – that our history is more than the oilsands – because so many people come up here for the oilsands without having an understanding or knowledge of the richness of the First Peoples of this land. What is the RMWB going to do, or what are its plans to make sure the entire organization is understanding it and embracing it and actioning it, as you say?

"It took a long time to get to this stage in over 200 some odd years, but it's never too late to do anything."
— Elder Robert Cree



“I’ll go back to a speech Elder Frederick MacDonald gave last week. He said it’s going back to the very first agreements that were made, the two-row wampum belt, that you’re working together in the same direction, not one leading the other, not one in front of the other, not one following, but going the same direction together. I think this is what we’re doing here now. We’re not one group telling the other group what to do. We’re sitting down talking, sharing experiences, and working the same direction.”

— Mayor Sandy Bowman

MAYOR SANDY BOWMAN: Myself and my Council team are following the Calls to Action, but also advocating our federal government to do what they’ve committed to doing. All of this goes back to Dennis. When I have a question, he’s the person I call. I will always talk to (IRR), so I know what the history is, I know what’s lacking, and what we need to work on.

ELDER ROBERT CREE: I think the Mayor and Dennis are going about this the right way. I think we’re going to have a lot of fun times doing it and I’m glad. It’s about time, of course. It took a long time to get to this stage in over 200 some odd years, but it’s never too late to do anything. I’m glad this is happening and I’m really, really happy to help out in any way I can.

NICOLE BOURQUE-BOUCHIER: That’s well said and encouraging to hear from your perspective, especially. What are the specific Calls to Action that the RMWB is really pointing out and actioning?

DENNIS FRASER: Initially, we selected 14. Eventually, as we moved forward, we expanded to include not only ones that

pertain to the Municipality but what we can influence with the federal government (and) provincial government. We’re up to 29 Calls to Action and, (from) the benchmarking we’ve done, the most of any municipality in Alberta and probably even the country.

NICOLE BOURQUE-BOUCHIER: Can you give a couple of specific examples?

DENNIS FRASER: If you look around to the languages over the wall (in the lobby of Jubilee), we’ve got the words for reception, cashier, that type of thing, in Cree and Dene. There’s signage up in Fort Chip – the stop signs, they’re in Cree and Dene. Language is huge. There are a lot of times we look at the big-ticket items like strategic planning and reports and that type of thing. A lot of the stuff that really has an impact is the smaller stuff.

MAYOR SANDY BOWMAN: Everything we do, we look through that lens of truth and reconciliation and who we’re here to serve and what the outcome is going to be for the residents, which includes all rural communities. I think that’s the bigger picture. Something that may seem small, like language, goes a long way. Even meeting with Chief Adam (from Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation), I took him by surprise one day greeting him in Dene. I think that goes a long way.

NICOLE BOURQUE-BOUCHIER: Especially coming from yourself and your leadership team. I’m getting a real sense of a complete change in mindset within the organization and that’s definitely where it begins.

MAYOR SANDY BOWMAN: I’m not looking for a pat on the back from our federal government. But when the Elders say we’re doing something right, then I know we’re doing something right.

NICOLE BOURQUE-BOUCHIER: And (Elder Cree) is saying you are. What are some of the barriers you think are going to be faced in working within the rural communities?

ELDER ROBERT CREE: Asides from politics, I don’t see any barriers as long as there’s good communication happening

between the Municipality and leadership in the rural areas.

NICOLE BOURQUE-BOUCHIER: What does success look like to you, say, in 10 years from now?

DENNIS FRASER: If we continue down the path of our relationships, we’ll be well-positioned to move some tough items forward. We went up to Fort Chipewyan and met with the Elders. Sometimes you can’t read things, you got to feel them. That’s the Indigenous way. I was impacted by going to Fort Chip for the three days to see the Elders there. A lot of the Elders were in residential schools, and we were right on the site of the Holy Angels Residential School, where some of them have gone, some of the leadership has gone. When they can ask the Municipality, IRR, to be a part of that, that’s huge. There’s truth scanning as soon as the weather warms up somewhat, with the ground-penetrating radar. We’re going to be a partner at this because we were asked to be. It’s building on that so in 10 years, the people that are in leadership, people that are there become Elders, they remember, how they asked for help from a government, in this case, the Municipality, and they were there.

MAYOR SANDY BOWMAN: I was there with Elder Rita Marten for that same weekend. When I walked in, she grabbed me right away and wanted me to speak. I felt like I didn’t belong, I shouldn’t be speaking in this group, I’m not adequate... but to be invited and wanted to be a part of it... it was a great experience. When I talk about where we’re going, where I want to see us going, I’ll go back to a speech Elder Frederick MacDonald gave last week. He said it’s going back to the very first agreements that were made, the two-row wampum belt, that you’re working together in the same direction, not one leading the other, not one in front of the other, not one following, but going the same direction together. I think this is what we’re doing here now. We’re not one group telling the other group what to do. We’re sitting down talking, sharing experiences, and working the same direction. ■