



Delegates discuss keys to reversing decline



By [Ron Grech](#), The Daily Press (Timmins)

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During the State Of The North conference hosted by the Northern Policy Institute at the Ramada Inn in Timmins Thursday, there was an extensive discussion about building economic opportunities through partnerships with First Nation or Indigenous-owned business. Some of the speakers on the panel included from left, David Abbott, vice-president of operations for the Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business, Dawn Madahbee Leach, general manager of Waubetek Business Development Corporation, and Charles Cirtwill, president and chief executive officer of the Northern Policy Institute.

TIMMINS - Revitalizing Northern Ontario's economy while reversing the trend of its declining population requires a two-pronged effort, says Charles Cirtwill, president and chief executive officer of the Northern Policy Institute.

One prong calls for the Indigenous population to be fully engaged in the local economy and the other is to attract newcomers to this region.

It is not a matter of choosing one or the other, said Cirtwill.

“We have to do both and we have to do them together, and that is the message of the overall conference.”

The conference was the State of the North summit hosted this week by the Northern Policy Institute at the Timmins Ramada Inn.

Thursday was the concluding day of the two-day conference which had 160 attendees from across the North.

It focused on the aging and declining population of Northern Ontario. The discussion was largely geared towards reversing the trend of out-migration.

David Abbott, vice-president of operations for the Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business, was one of the speakers at the conference on Thursday.

He told his audience that one of the challenges of building business partnerships with Indigenous communities is understanding how to consult and engage with First Nation people.

Laying out “binders and binders of information” at a community meeting “is not engagement. It’s meeting with the community before those binders are even made.”

Building partnerships with First Nation communities and Indigenous-owned businesses was presented as a way to strengthen the local economy and retain some of the existing population.

Abbott said these Indigenous businesses can help reverse the trend of out-migration if they are provided with the fundamental infrastructure that exists in non-Aboriginal communities.

“With better infrastructure, internet connectivity, you are going to provide more opportunities for these businesses to potentially reside on reserve or in their local region, as opposed to going somewhere else.”

Abbott said there are opportunities for First Nation businesses to become important contributors to the local economy.

“There is tremendous growth in Aboriginal businesses in this country,” he said, noting that not all of it is based in resource industries.

In fact, he said, based on a Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business membership survey, only about 10% of Indigenous-owned business are involved in resource industries while the vast majority, 62%, are in what he described as the “service industry”.

“We’ve got members who are management consultants, IT (information technology), marketing, doing catering-type businesses — so it’s really focused on servicing.”

Cirtwill, the Northern Policy Institute president, was pleased with the mix of people who attended and participated in the conference.

“We’ve had chiefs, we’ve had mayors, we’ve had provincial politicians, we’ve had public servants from the federal and the provincial governments — at least five different departments represented,” Cirtwill told The Daily Press during a break between presentations. “We’ve got municipal councillors, we’ve got municipal CAOs, we’ve got economic development officers from across the North — we’ve got people here from Kenora, people here from Thunder Bay, people here from Sault Ste. Marie.

“So that’s exciting. We also have five or six grassroots organizations — for example, folks pushing for or talking about passenger rail in the Algoma district are here. And it’s great because it allows you to see the opportunities for the North from the perspective of the people who live in those communities and the things they think they can do if they’re just given a little bit of help.”

This was the first State of the North conference hosted by the Northern Policy Institute since its inception.

Cirtwill said the NPI hopes to make the conference an annual event held every fall.

He said next year’s will be held in North Bay.