

Municipal associations' door open to First Nations

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TIMMINS - Kathleen Baker wonders: Are FONOM and NEOMA missing out on an opportunity to work with Indigenous communities?

The Northern Policy Institute research analyst, in a column posted on that group's website, recalled a statement made by Mushkegowuk Tribal Council Grand Chief Jonathan Solomon: "I see no reason why Mushkegowuk doesn't have a seat at the Northeastern Ontario Municipal Association."

Baker argued that Indigenous people make up a growing percentage of Northern Ontario's population. She said there's precedent for Indigenous participation in regional affairs, like the intergovernmental Arctic Council.

Alan Spacek, president of FONOM (Federation of Northern Ontario Municipalities), said he would "wholeheartedly" welcome tribal council participation.

"I have personally reached out many times in the past to certain organizations, and I understand that they have other priorities, but I can't help but think that it would be mutually beneficial if we were to be at the same table, because we are often discussing the same issues," said Spacek.

"FONOM and NOMA (Northwestern Ontario Municipalities Association) have been working very closely together to the point where we have developed common positions for most of our issues. When one of us — or both of us, often — are going to the lawmakers and the policy makers, we have the same common position and same information. That has proved to be very productive and effective. I can't help but think that, if we (did) expand that collaboration and partnership to the Indigenous communities, everyone would benefit."

FONOM represents 110 municipalities, NOMA has 37.

Within the region covered by both FONOM and NOMA, Spacek said there are 105 First Nation communities who are not members of municipal associations.

Spacek said both municipal organizations and tribal councils have similar mandates — to enhance their communities.

Baker, in her opinion piece, wrote, "It is not unrealistic to say that through the inclusion of these tribal councils, the quality of representative voices across Northwest and Northeast Ontario could be strengthened."

Martin Bayer agrees with this, arguing that Indigenous groups and municipal organizations share many common issues. Bayer is an Indigenous lawyer and former chair of the Northern Policy Institute board. He has previously lobbied to have FONOM and NOMA partner with tribal councils.

He said the having tribal councils work alongside FONOM and NOMA would allow for one unified voice speaking to provincial and federal governments.

"There's the whole power associated with speaking with one voice, particularly during election time, where we could collectively say, we're not satisfied with the quality of snowplowing in the north. We all use these roads, and we all are of the united view that we want better roads services and better snowplowing services."

There may be differences — municipalities lobby the provincial government, while tribal councils work with the federal government — but Bayer said working together would mean focusing on common issues.

"If we focus on just the things that divide us, or things that we don't understand about one another, then we'll never make it to a table where we can talk," he said.

Nishnawbe Aski Nation, which represents 49 Indigenous communities in Northern Ontario, declined to speak to The Daily Press for this story.

Mushkegowuk Council, which represents seven communities, did not respond to a request for comment.

Bayer said Indigenous groups will need time.

"It's nothing we've tried before ... and there will always be some level of distrust, because we haven't had that kind of dialogue before, and we haven't had any of those partnerships," he said.

Bayer pointed to specific resolutions passed by FONOM that would apply to Indigenous communities, too.

"I'm seeing things like the concerns raised by municipalities about rising energy costs, for example," Bayer said. "That's an issue that concerns us, too, as First Nations. We have the same sorts of First Nation infrastructure, the equipment of a municipal infrastructure, band facilities."

He argued that the organizations could even look at purchasing infrastructure as a group to save money.

"I don't think it would be a stretch to have an annual meeting of every First Nation in the North, and municipalities. I think there's a lot of potential power there," he said.

Wendy Landry, president of NOMA, said she would love to see an Indigenous working group or taskforce attached to her organization. She pointed to the Association of Municipalities Ontario, which recently created an Indigenous Relations Task Force.

Bayer said the opportunity for Northern Ontario to speak with one voice ahead of the 2018 provincial budget, which dropped on Wednesday, and the provincial election coming up in June, has been missed. But he's hopeful for more cooperative relationships in the future.