

TUNNEL ISLAND ELDERS GATHERING

Saturday, March 23, 2013

Minis Hall

ATTENDANCE:

Ida Skead, Wauzhushk Onigum
Florence Perrault, Dalles
Theresa Jourdain, Dalles
Deloraine McDonald, Dalles
Russell Bun, Wash Bay
Rosalie Petawanikweb, Wash Bay

Cuyler Cotton
Debbie Lipscombe
Teika Newton
Jennifer Findlay

OPENING INVOCATION

Opening Prayer conducted by Ida Skead.

INTRODUCTIONS

Introductions made around the room.

BACKGROUND & HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The elders were informed of the historical background of Tunnel Island. It had started off with the Bigsby book of Rat Portage. It was confirmed that it was within the Cameron Bay and into the Winnipeg River through the CPR and the City of Kenora property. Introduction of the confirmation was made to the Grand Chief of Treaty #3 territory. He said that he would support any initiative as long as it was led by the three communities surrounding the City of Kenora (Rat Portage, Dalles and Washagamis Bay). This paved the road to a meeting with Grand Council Treaty #3, Wauzhushk Onigum, Ochichagwebabigo`inning and Washagamis Bay and the City of Kenora. Officials of Abitibi asked to be observers to the meeting and they were provided permission by all parties.

The meeting was held and after talking about what the land means to different people, Abitibi offered to gift the Tunnel Island to be shared by the groups in the meeting; a 50/50 partnership between the City and the First Nations. A condition was placed that the First Nations would agree to it provided that it does not jeopardize their on-going land claims and they all agreed.

There were a number of ceremonies that took place to solidify the understanding: A sweat lodge ceremony to seek spiritual support for partnership; ceremony to get direction on how to proceed; Kenora only contingent to perform ceremony at the dam in Norman; and at least 1 feast to be held at Tunnel Island during the Spring season.

It was recommended by the elders who were involved in the beginning to have an elders gathering to seek further spiritual guidance on the planning of the shared land. One area that was agreed upon at the beginning was that there would be no development until there has been proper protocols followed to appease the spirits of the land.

CURRENT

All the elders agreed that this is a unique and worthwhile initiative. They had many questions about some of the steps made to engage First Nation communities and to ensure that the non-Native community has an understanding of the spiritual significance of the doorway of the spirits.

One of the changes that they have seen was that the feasts have now been in the open and they are being done by both cultures. It used to be that the people would sneak into the 'private' property to perform the feasts to respect and honour the spirits. This was a clash of cultures including the laws of Anishinaabeg and proprietary rights. This added to the tension between cultures.

Sharing of food and the common understanding of the beauty of the land in its pristine setting develops a bond between individuals and groups. The feeling of being grateful for the natural setting and feeling blessed with the beauty of life cements values and principles held by most people. This is the root that holds and nourishes life and relationships with one another.

There has been talk of developmental work on the shared land and island. Most people would like to see the preservation of the natural setting and have the land remain in its pristine environment. Before any major changes are made or considered, there has been much emphasis made on conversing with stakeholders and seeking spiritual advice through ceremonies. All partners would need to be part of the conversation, consideration and decision making process. Each community would have their internal processes respected and honoured. The elders would gather to provide advice to processes and considerations required in following spiritual protocols.

One piece of information that was discussed was the communication of information to the broader public, including the First Nations communities. Although this is a unique opportunity for all communities and its people, there is not much communication being brought forward to them all. The participants feel strongly about sharing the news to all communities and public in Kenora. Knowing and understanding what is going on and what is being planned is an opportunity to get more support from everyone. There needs to be more open information of the processes to capture everyone's interest and share their thoughts on this venture.

The participants were happy to see this type of initiative happening and would like to be involved in future processes. They feel that they cannot add to anything at this point but agree that elders be involved throughout process. Ceremonies will happen when elders feel the need to have them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The initiative on Common Ground continues and have it evolve on its own momentum.
2. Feasts continue to respect and honour the land continue on a regular basis.
3. Communication on Common Ground with same messaging go to communities and people
4. Have discussions on possibilities of development on shared land and island
5. Engage the Management Group
6. Utilize elders advice and considerations
7. Bring people together and share stories
8. Have more ceremonies

CONCLUSION

Although, this event was planned ahead of time and was a follow-up to what the elders and the visioning conference had asked for, the elders that originally sought this were unavailable to attend. What we had was new attendees who just heard for the first time what Common Ground was really about. They enjoyed the meeting and the information that was shared, including the historical background. They could not provide the advice that would be a continuum to the original request and advice that the elders had sought. However, this meeting was an re-iteration of the first group of elders who helped start the process in a good way.

I believe that having the original elders who set the motion and momentum of this initiative be brought back to advise all parties on the way to move forward. We have been gifted with the start of the process and to maintain it, now we need to forge ahead and that is what was advised by those elders and re-iterated by this group as well.