

Making it Work

DOTC proposes partnership to fill gaps in labour market

By Pat St. Germain
For the Free Press

This could be the start of a beautiful friendship. Dakota Ojibway Tribal Council has a plan to match aboriginal youth with employers who are struggling to fill jobs in the Portage area.

"We're fairly excited about it and I'm pretty certain that we will be able to fill those vacancies that exist now," DOTC CEO Robert Daniels says.

Sen. Vernon White, chair of the Senate Standing Committee on Aboriginal Peoples, will be the keynote speaker when DOTC and Portage la Prairie & District Chamber of Commerce roll out details of the plan at a luncheon on April 25 at Canad Inns Destination Centre.

DOTC initiated its Realization of Regionally Based Economic and Employment Opportunities project in response to a Central Plains Inc. report on a 2011 labour needs assessment. The report identified First Nations as a potential source of workers — and in particular, young workers — to fill gaps in the local job market.

"We approached the Chamber of Commerce and said, 'How can we work with you, your members — how can we make this work?'" Daniels says.

Together, Long Plain First Nation and Sandy Bay First Nation have some 800 youth ages 18 - 24. Pilot project coordinators Daniels and DOTC operations manager Anupam Sharma are working on the theory that most unemployed youth will require some level of support and investment in skills training to become job-ready, so the initial focus is on targeting 40 workers who are job-ready right now.

Sharma says they hope to gather resumes from youth and job descriptions from Portage businesses by the end of April.

"We have a scenario where there's a demand for workers in the larger economy, the Portage economy, and there's a supply of people who are willing to work, so how do you match the two? We need to coordinate our activities," Sharma says.

"We're hoping to roll it out next year as a larger project, but right now we need to get a sense of what works, what doesn't work, and then we can position it accordingly for next year."

Daniels says the project is part of a 10-year strategic plan that's built around three main priorities — education, employment and economic development, in that order.



Dakota Ojibway Tribal Council (L-R) Chief Ken Henry Jr. (Roseau River Anishinabe First Nation), Chief Mel Wabash (Waywayseecappo First Nation), Chief David Meeches (Long Plain First Nation), Chief Francine Meeches (Swan Lake First Nation), Chief Nelson Bunn (Birdtail Sioux First Nation) and Chief Russel Beaulieu (Sandy Bay Ojibway First Nation). Photo by Fred Greenslade

"It's not just a short-term thing we're looking at, it's long term," he says.

There's a tendency for programs to focus on social issues, but Daniels says preparing young people to enter the mainstream labour market is one way to address those issues.

"I guess what we're trying to convey to everybody else is that once our people get gainfully employed and have meaningful employment and decent paying jobs you eliminate 80% of the problems," he says.

"What we're envisioning to happen here is that the first 40 that gain employment, they'll be the role models for the next ones — and the next ones, and so on. They can look up to their peers and say, 'If he can do it, I can do it.'"

Sharma says the April 25 luncheon will support the belief that partnership and collaboration between business and First Nations are good for the community and the economy.

Sen. White is expected to touch on big-picture issues surrounding First Nations education reform, employment and economic development.

Long Plain First Nation Chief David Meeches and Chamber of Commerce president Mathew Henderson will also address the lunch crowd to offer local perspectives.

Employers across the country are concerned about impending labour shortages in all sectors as baby boomers retire in greater numbers. But Henderson says the problem is compounded in Portage since employers are already challenged to attract and retain workers.

"Because there is a current shortage, that threat is so much larger," he says.

The Central Plains Inc. report, which built on two earlier assessments,

found the greatest needs were in skilled professions and in entry-level jobs that tend to have high turnover rates.

Health and education are the only sectors that employ more than 500 people in the region and 27% of workers in those fields will be eligible for retirement over the next few years.

Assiniboine Community College and Southern Regional Health Authority are working to address local training needs for nurses, and the RHA has a human resource initiative to bring more aboriginal health care professionals and support workers into the fold.

The labour needs report cited a need to support aboriginal education and skills training and it called for increased engagement with area First Nations.

Henderson says it's a credit to the DOTC that the job-matching project is getting off the ground.

"They're the ones that reached out to us and presented this plan and it's a very comprehensive plan," he says.

"It's a step-by-step process to get things in place, try to get a couple of success stories and build on it.

"It's a very realistic plan and again it fits with what some of our members are needing, so we're more than willing to help out and hopefully we can make it a success."



Sen. Vernon White, Chair of the Senate Standing Committee on Aboriginal Peoples