

Councils form trilateral alliance to pressure government to settle land claims



Members of the elected Councils of Brant, Brantford and Six Nations met at the Community Hall Thursday to discuss ways and means of working more closely together on mutually beneficial projects. (Photo by Jim Windle)

By Jim Windle
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At last Thursday's meeting of the joint elected councils of Brant, Brantford and Six Nations, hosted at the Six Nations Community Hall, a trilateral alliance was loosely forged that would see a united campaign directed towards Queens Park and Ottawa to bring the issue of the long outstanding Six Nations land grievances to the front burner.

Brantford Mayor Chris Friel said the ultimate goal of this alliance would be to get the attention of both Premier Dalton McGuinty and Prime Minister Stephen Harper. He also suggested a jointly prepared media campaign directed at bringing the Chambers of Commerce and other related organizations on board as well.

Building and development have been seriously curtailed, especially in Brant, Brantford and Haldimand, since the reclamation of the former Douglas Creek Estates in Caledonia in 2006. At that time, direct action came from a growing impatience among rank and file Six Nations residents over land under claim being sold and developed out from under them while Ottawa and Queens Park turns a blind eye.

In fact, it was Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty who unilaterally imposed the Places to Grow Act that directed development specifically to the Haldimand Tract lands along the Grand River in and around Brantford.

Despite several rulings of Canada's Supreme Court, no consultation or accommodation with Six Nations ever took place before the Act was implemented.

That left no recourse for Six Nations activists but to demonstrate and physically oppose the sale and development of land still under unresolved claim.

It was suggested by Brant Mayor Ron Eddy, that Haldimand Mayor Ken Hewitt and Norfolk's Mayor Dennis Travale be asked to join the coalition of Grand River municipalities as well, to widen their sphere of influence.

"We've got to sell the gospel of land claims settlement in our time," said Mayor Eddy.

Six Nations Elected Chief Bill Montour said Canada has to be reminded of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, which Canada has agreed to uphold.

Lisa VanEvery, a Six Nations woman now living on the Johnson Settlement Tract in east Brantford, brought the rubber to the road when she challenged the tri-councils to deal with the 7,000 acre elephant in the room that has been avoided for more than 150 years.

Although the Johnson Tract has been one of the largest and best documented land claims of the 28 claims currently registered with the federal government, and has been on record for decades, nothing has been done to bring finality to the issue. Meanwhile, Brantford and the County of Brant have been in a tug-of-war over this prime farmland they both have eyes on for residential development.

But VanEvery is looking for some answers sooner rather than later and has asked that the Johnson Settlement issue be placed on the next tri-council's agenda for discussion.

"The way that this issue affects me personally is that I have recently moved onto the land known as the Johnson Tract," she told the gathering of politicians. "It is well known and documented and has been under land claim for over 25 years."

References to the Johnson Settlement land dispute goes back to the mid 1800's. It is

specifically mentioned in several documents including the so-called 1841 "surrender" and other proposed land deals from that era.

According to Six Nations lands researchers, "By Order-in-Council of October 4, 1843, the Crown acknowledged that the lands which comprised the Johnson's Settlement tract, some 7,000 acres and other lands were reserved out of the lands purportedly to be surrendered for disposition to the Crown under the January 18, 1841 document. Six Nations had indicated their consent that these lands would be let on short leases. Nevertheless, the Crown subsequently sold these lands and all of the proceeds from the sales were not paid to Six Nations. Six Nations have never consented to an absolute surrender of these lands.

Six Nations has maintained that there is no lawful surrender from Six Nations to the Crown for the sale of any portion of the lands re-

served for Six Nations.

Six Nations was deprived of continual rental revenues by the Crown's sale of the lands in the Johnson Settlement and did not receive full and fair compensation for the lands sold.

"That piece of land is personal to me because my grandfather's grandfather was born on it," said VanEvery. "Now, generations later, I now live on that land."

She is looking for someone to answer her questions of why she is being ordered to pay municipal taxes on land that still belongs to Six Nations.

"When I moved there last fall, I began to receive municipal tax bills from the city of Brantford," she said. "When I called the City of Brantford tax department in December and spoke with a very nice man that works there, he assured me that he could only do his job, which was to continually send me these pieces of paper. That is all he knew how to do.

"I respected that, but I have been dealing with that issue since November of last year. I feel that I have gone through the right channels. I am trying to handle this issue politically and with goodwill, because I do not want to live in a zone like Caledonia was. I don't think anybody wants that to happen again or for it to get that far and that out of hand.

"I think the only way we can deal with this issue for our people who are living on our own land that we have never surrendered, is for people from such as you around this table to deal with it now with an open and fair mind and with a good mind. All I am asking for is for this issue to be dealt with and dealt with fairly. It's been going on for months now and the bills keep coming."

She asked that the taxation issue be on the next agenda of the tri-councils meeting.

"This is a great opportu-

nity I think for for you to tackle something that will probably change the way we deal with each other in the future," she challenged.

Six Nations Councillor Carl Hill agreed to put the issue forward of Six Nations people paying municipal taxes on un-ceded, Six Nations land not only along the Johnson tract, but in the County of Brant and other parts of the City of Brantford as well.

Ruby Montour then spoke and pleaded with the joint councils that this initiative not be only a charade with a lot of talk and a lot of good intentions but no action.

"We've had enough of that," she said.

There has not been a date or location set at this point for what will be the fourth joint council's meeting.

In the meantime, Lisa VanEvery will continue to put her tax bills in a basket until the issue of the Johnson Tract is dealt with.