

Senators tour First Nations housing conditions, stops here

By Donna Duric
Writer

Elected Chief Ava Hill hopes a senators' tour of Six Nations housing conditions last Friday results in more funding for the community's housing needs.

Dennis Patterson, a Conservative senator and chair of the aboriginal people's committee, said at Six Nations, the committee found the community's biggest housing challenge is the huge waiting list.

Inadequate infrastructure is also an issue on Six Nations, he said.

"Even though it's a very advanced community, even here, there's an infrastructure deficiency," said Patterson. "We're going to be focusing on the infrastructure piece in the final part of our study in the new year." Band members want to come home to Six Nations, he learned during last week's tour, and there is not enough land for them to

build on, he said.

Housing and unresolved land claims are linked, he said.

"That will spill over into the issue of land claims," he said, adding the government needs to address the land base issue in order to tackle the housing issue. "It is linked to infrastructure and housing and the adequacy of funds. We understand the linkages even if that's not the direct mandate of our committee. We were also very clearly told about the funding shortfalls the Six Nations government is experiencing in a variety of areas, including infrastructure, waste management and water treatment."

Patterson toured Six Nations' housing and infrastructure with the elected Chief, Councillor Terry General, Senior Administrative Officer Dayle Bomberry, and Economic Development Director Matt Jamieson.

"The tour was very good,"

said Hill. "We had the opportunity to show them the housing on the reserve along with other infrastructure. We hope that this will lead to more funding for our community for housing."

Patterson said there is no guarantee of funding once the committee presents its report on First Nations housing conditions to the Senate.

"We get asked that in a very pressing and sometimes very angry way," said Patterson. "There's understandable anger on the part of First Nation communities. They're saying, 'is this going to be another study that's going to lie on the shelves? What guarantees can you provide that things are going to change?' and on that I have to be clear: we are not the government. We are a committee that counts on making change by the quality of our reports. All we can tell people and all we have

been telling people is, 'we are committed to presenting the facts and telling the truth.'"

The interim report will be presented to Bernard Valcourt, minister of aboriginal affairs, sometime in December.

"The government is required to respond (to the report)," said Patterson.

He said the Senate's Aboriginal People's Committee has a "good track record" of enacting change with their recommendations.

"This (housing) is an area that needs attention and we are shocked at the challenges and frustrations we saw that First Nations had, especially in the more remote communities," said Patterson.

He said poor housing conditions result from funding formulas that are either outdated or don't take into account the variation of the cost of living in remote communities.



Six Nations Band Councillor Terry General and Senators. (Photo by Donna Duric)

"This was dramatically presented to us in the fly-in communities we visited," said Patterson.

The purpose of the tour was to conduct an on-the-ground major study of housing and infrastructure in First Nations communities across Canada. Six Nations was the last stop on the Ontario leg of a three-region tour that includes First Nations communities in the Atlantic and the west coast.

"We found that we have certainly chosen an issue that is of major importance

and is a source of major frustration to the fn leaders we met," said Patterson. "We have concluded this area is in urgent need of attention. We're amazed it (First Nations housing) hasn't been comprehensively studied."

Inadequate housing arises from First Nations' explosive population growth, leading to overcrowding and severe housing shortages, said Patterson.

He said it will be "a challenge" to do something about housing before next year's federal election.