

Olympic torch becoming a hot item

By Jim Windle
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If the wishes of the majority of people who attended last week's community meeting are honoured by Band Council, there will be no Olympic torch run through Six Nations of the Grand River Territory in advance of the 2010 Winter Olympic Games to be held in British Columbia next winter.

Representative members from the four Nations whose unceded land the games are to be held on

stopped into Six Nations for the community meeting to discuss the games and Six Nations' part in the traditional Olympic torch run.

It was very informative as both sides of the contentious issue had a chance to present, from their vantage points, the pros and the cons of accepting the invitation to allow the torch to be run through this territory.

Tewanee Joseph, of the Squamish Nation, and CEO of the Four Host First Nations Committee, told the estimated 60 people

on hand that, despite what is being said in the east, the four Nations directly involved with the 2010 Olympic planning have the popular support of the people.

"You are right," he said. "It is taking place on our unceded land, but that will not push aside our land claims. In fact, since the announcement that the games will be here, a large land settlement has given back a huge piece of one of our Nations' traditional territories. We were here before these

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Show to the world the diversity of our First Nations

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games and will still be here long after."

He insists that their involvement in the 2010 Games was much more than window dressing. According to him, the host Nations have been and continue to be fully involved with the planning and execution of the world's biggest sporting event.

Joseph says that the building of venues and residences as well as the participation on the planning for the games has not been a negative thing. Rather than diminish their culture he says that there has been a resurgence of many young people rediscovering their traditional songs and dances, many of which have laid dormant for years. In fact, these traditional elements will be a big part of not only the opening and closing ceremonies, but throughout the two weeks of the 2010 Olympic games.

"This is a perfect opportunity to show to the world the diversity of our First Nations across Canada," said Joseph.

It is his and his delegation's belief that the experience will bring about better international and national recognition of the vast diversity in Onkwehon:weh cultures.

"People still think we are all just one culture," he says. "But there are more than 600 different peoples across Canada."

It is his hope that when people leave after the games are done, the world will have a much better understanding of that than when they came.

"We are looking at it as hosting the world's biggest Potlatch," said Joseph. "During Potlatch, we show out wealth and strength not by what we take from others but by what we give. Aboriginal people from across this coun-

try will be everywhere."

He says that for the first time in Olympic history it won't be the host city's mayor welcoming the teams of athletes, but rather, it will be Aboriginal Chiefs welcoming them to the territories.

But there is another side of that coin as well, as presented by community members as well as through a letter 19-year-old Missy Elliott was asked to read to the community which was written by a member of one of the BC host Nations.

This letter gave the down side of hosting the games, which some other BC Nations are already being impacted by. It listed issues including the belief that once these once isolated regions are opened up it won't be long before developers, and mining and logging companies begin to sweep in.

"There are thousands of acres of land that remains untouched only because men, women, children and elders have protected them," says the letter. "Yet we are criminalized for standing in the way of corporate money or are arrested for resisting the expansion of already existing ski resorts and mining and logging companies."

Given the history of such things, this is a real and very present danger.

"They have made a playground for the rich of our sacred mountain," the letter continues. "They have clear-cut huge areas and demolished our medicine plant gathering lands. They have diverted or drained waterways and destroyed natural migration trails for animals like moose and deer."

Beyond that, it was pointed out that there is the perception being presented that Canada is respecting Aboriginal relations with short term jobs



Members of the elected Band Council, Six Nations youth and visiting representatives from the Four Host Nations for the 2010 Olympic Games to be held in British Columbia met with members of the community last week at the Community Hall. There was much good discussion both ways on the question of whether to allow the Olympic torch to be run through Six Nations Territory. (Photo by Jim Windle)

and massive development. But a much better show of respect would be to sign the United Nations Declaration on Aboriginal Rights. Canada is now one of only three countries which has refused to do so. New Zealand and the United States are the other two, Australia just recently signed on after a change in government.

The writer is concerned that allowing the torch run through Six Nations Territory would be "putting on a big smile for the cameras while displacing the original people from indigenous lands."

That was also a concern for others in attendance.

"My concern in bringing the torch here is this," said Bev Crawford, of the Haudenosaunee Men's Fire. "Over the past couple of years we have battled. Many of our men have been on the front-line in getting recognition for our land rights. I resent Canada wanting to put a light on us for the world when they won't recognize our rights, but at the same time want to shine us up and show the world how well they are treating 'our Native people.'"

He then made a very clear and direct declaration.

"If that torch comes here, I will be on the road in protest," he said to the applause of most present.

One by one people lined up to be counted among those who did not want to play what they consider to be Canada's public relations game.

Community and Men's Fire member Wes Elliott brought up a point concerning whose jurisdiction it was to make the decision in the first place.

"One of the eight points of jurisdiction regards international relations," he told the visiting delegation. "The Olympics is an international thing and that decision belongs to the Confederacy Council and not the Band Council. You need approval from them and not the Indian Act Band Council. We have discussed this and as far as the Men's Fire is concerned, there will be no torch here."

But not everyone agrees with that stand.

Former Elected Council Chief Dave General voiced his approval of participating in the world's biggest sporting event and considers it a good thing for the community at large. So did former Band Councillor Syd Hen-

hawk who said, "This would be good for Six Nations. It's sports, and we all know how much good sports does our young people. I hope it (the torch) comes to Six Nations. It will give us a moment to take a break from all the politics."

At one point, a young woman asked for a show of consensus by asking those who were opposed to the torch run to stand. At least 80 per cent of the audience did so.

When Chief Bill Montour was asked what he will do with the results of the meeting, he indicated that the small turnout could not be construed as the voice of

the community and promised there would be more meetings planned soon.

Councillors Ray Maracle and Melba Thomas explained that Band Council had in fact not made its decision on the matter.

"Right now, we are on the list of possible locations and we have a list of around 20 community members to be torch bearers," Maracle said. "But the decision has not been made."

None of the representatives of either Band Council or the Four Host Nations knew when the deadline was for Six Nations' decision on participation in the torch run.