

RENEWABLE ENERGY AND TOURISM SPUR ENTHUSIASM AT WEST SIDE CONFERENCE

Communities on the west side are ready for action. And they showed it on May 23 and 24 when they held the first-ever Westside Economic Development and Investment Attraction Conference in Green Lake. About 50 key people registered for the event.

Rather than take a scattered approach, this first annual conference focused on two areas: renewable energy and tourism.

This was the first-ever such conference for Green Lake, the third-oldest community in Saskatchewan, chosen partly because Green Lake is the first municipality in the north to install solar panels on a public building to reduce energy costs.

Organizer Nap Gardiner of Northwest Communities Management Corp. summed up the expectations by saying "This is the first day of the rest of our innovation".

Renewable energy

The first day was spent on the potential for renewable energy on the west side.

First Nations Power Authority

Guy Lonechild, CEO of the non-profit First Nations Power Authority, said FNPA's mandate is to support development of Aboriginal-led business opportunities in the Canadian power sector.

"Our role is to create lower-cost electricity, help build green infrastructure and sustainable communities, and create wealth opportunities in flare gas, solar, biomass, geothermal, wind and hydro". FNPA currently operates a 10 mW solar project, is considering a second one, and is developing flare gas opportunities with the Flying Dust First Nation.

There are grants available to get into renewable energy; one disadvantage is SaskPower's current limit of 100 kW for net metering, eliminating community-wide projects. "There's a misalignment between the funding and the regulatory frameworks," Lonechild said.

Personal experiences

Lindsay Alliban from Hazlet, SK, described her community's wind turbine project, which powers their rink. She said the turbine saves the community \$3,000 per month in rink season. "In five years we have saved \$70,000," she said.

Beauval's **Kevin Buffin** shared his



Entertainer "Ernestine", alias Maureen Belanger, provided a light touch during lunch, along with musicians Nap Gardiner (above) of Ile a la Crosse, Frank ??? of Green Lake and Kevin Shewchuk of La Loche.

experience converting his Dore Lake cabin to off-grid operation. He is now very knowledgeable and holds some certification in solar energy. He talked about the details of his operation and the equipment for building an off-grid operation.

Ric Richardson told the story of how Green Lake, population 500, came to use solar panels on its community hall. "We have the best solar potential in the country (1,269 sun hours a year), and our hall has a south-facing roof," he says. The cost to the community was \$131,000, with the federal government contributing \$55,500 and the province offering a 20% rebate on the first 100 kW generated. Bullfrog Power, a Toronto power broker also kicked in \$20,000. "In total we got \$98,000 in grants," says Richardson.

The 96 panels took a few days to install. Each can generate 325 watts of power.

The result: The \$856.33 bill in September 2016 dropped to \$41.13 a year later. The October 2016 bill of \$772.22 dropped to \$48.25. There's also a hookup fee of \$30/month, plus taxes on power generated. But overall, the solar installation pays 90% of the costs of running the facility and offsets 25 tonnes of greenhouse gases annually, says Richardson.

The system has paid for itself already, and

generated pride in the community through economic and social benefits.

But they want to do more. "The village has the space to develop a 10 mW solar farm, and we hope to do that in the future" Richardson says.

Lionel Sparvier said his Cowessess reserve in the Qu'Appelle Valley installed a German 800 kW turbine and 400 kW storage battery system on land 4 km east of Regina. The battery storage evens out the variable wind power. More battery capacity along with solar panels will be added; the solar panels will be commissioned this fall.

Installers speak; action follows

Then, the installing companies made their presentations. **Mark Ruest** and **Frank Schweiger** of CarbonBite explained how a solar system works, and offered to work with communities to build and install capacity.

Some communities got right on it; following the first day of the conference, Ruest and Schweiger visited La Loche and Buffalo Narrows at the invitation of leadership to advise on potential in those communities.

Creighton mayor **Bruce Fidler** talked of the need to find new employment opportunities in the communities to keep kids from leaving. "I'm awed by what Green Lake has done," he said.

Tourism

"The rest of the world thinks we're not smart enough or articulate enough to take on tourism," said **Nap Gardiner** at the beginning of tourism day at the conference. "We lost control of our land once during the fur trade, and we don't want to lose it again. We are on the land, and we want to do tourism right and sustainably".

MC **Joe Daigneault** of Beauval noted that traditional economies, while not necessarily economically viable, form a lifestyle which the tourism industry could use to inform and educate.

Kirk Westgard, assistant deputy minister with Saskatchewan Trade and Export Development, said the province supports efforts to develop tourism.

What's being done

Beauval resident **Wehkwas Durocher** explained her training as a northern economic development intern, and her work in community asset mapping. She has documented data for Beauval, Ile a la Crosse, Jans Bay and Buffalo Narrows using GIS mapping, and is developing an inventory of regional values and human resources.

Photographer **Yvan LeBel** outlined the role of drone technology in building a community database. A six-day course to certify drone pilots is scheduled for this summer in Beauval and may be offered later in other communities.

Tourism Saskatchewan's take.

Northwest Saskatchewan has a good tourism product in the "experiential travel" category, which engages emotions and senses, said **Kwane Neba** of Tourism Saskatchewan. "The best vehicle is story-telling - turn your stories into memorable experiences that are globally unique, interactive, authentically local and visitor-inspired," he said. "You can help visitors experience the boreal forest differently". This might include an elders-in-residence program - bringing elders to hotels to tell stories. "But visitors can sense pretense, so make sure it's authentic".

Neba outlined support programs offered by Tourism Saskatchewan, including workshops to build capacity to develop awe-inspiring experiences; online reputation management; an event hosting program; Service Best and Service First; and an Emerit Certification program.

He spoke on promotion and marketing,

product development strategy and stakeholder input.

Nap Gardiner cautioned that "what we want to do is fresh and new and may not fit into your strategy".

Programs available

Verona Thibeault of the Saskatchewan Economic Development Association (SEDA) noted that she has education and training programs available for communities.

Destination marketing

Terry Dow of the Waskesiu and Area Wilderness Region explained how his organization works and how to form, fund and run a destination marketing organization (DMO).

MC Joe Daigneault noted that an interpretive centre is needed for the northwest side, to highlight heritage sites and buildings.

How to do indigenous tourism

Teresa Ryder of the Indigenous Tourism Association of Canada (ITAC) said indigenous tourism particularly attracts visitors from France, China, India, Germany, South Korea and Mexico.

"Germans like multi-day immersive experiences. China prefers a higher-end, immersive, exclusive experience," she said.

"You have a great opportunity to connect to your elders, revitalize your stories, showcase your beliefs and customs, and enhance cultural awareness".

She suggested a week-long bus tour of the west side, including experiences like trapping, kayaking, re-enactments of fur trade arrivals, Grey Nuns stories, and use of the Michif language. Each community could hand off to the next. The experience could include slides and talk shows of the area, a craft expo, a lake or sled tour, fishing, camping overnight to see the northern lights, skiing, and community performances.

Barriers to tourism include lack of key components: a coordinated approach, market readiness, a quality workforce, infrastructure (buildings and management), community support, and limited access to

capital and financial support.

"You must be available 24-hours, you must be credit card ready, and you must meet international standards" she said.

"Your culture must be protected, the community must support you, and you must tell your own stories, not second-hand ones. There's a balance between wide tourism appeal and being true to your past and present".

Ryder defined "authentic" as majority indigenous-operated and controlled, with significant and measurable community benefits; indigenous control of content; protection of sacred sites and traditional activities; and offering a real connection to the community, land and culture.

Jesse Morin of Flying Dust First Nation said there are too few aboriginal tourism destinations in Saskatchewan. "People want authentic and truthful interactive experiences to create an emotional experience", he said. "They need to know what they are doing each day of the week, and how to get there".

"If we're ever going to succeed, now is the time," he said. "Tourism Saskatchewan is a great marketing company, but they're not promoting northwest Saskatchewan, and it's our fault - we're not mobilized to meet their requirements. We already have quality destinations".

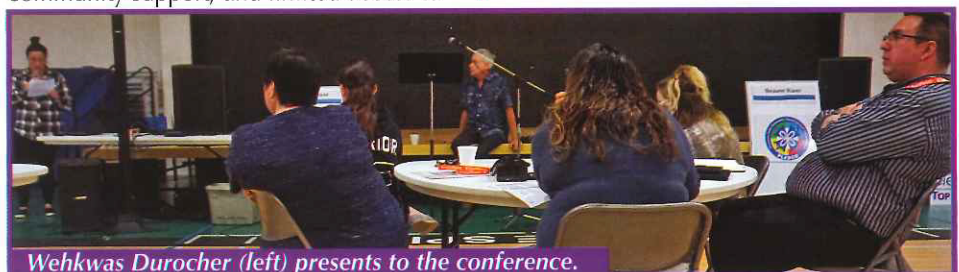
Potential funding

Representatives of several aboriginal funding agencies detailed potential loans and grants for tourism entrepreneurs.

In their wrapup comments, community leaders were enthusiastic about the potential for collaborative tourism development on the west side.

Sampling the experience

Participants got to experience a couple of Green Lake's attractions by visiting the Keewatin Junction Station Restaurant (the former Meadow Lake train station) for a hamburger, and enjoying the history displayed there. They also got the chance to paddle a voyageur canoe on the river.



Wehkwas Durocher (left) presents to the conference.