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Chief Lawrence Paul heads Millbrook First Nation, which built an \$11-million building in Halifax where General Dynamics Corp. will employ 150 high-tech workers. PAUL DARROW FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Open for business

From high-tech factories to resorts and golf courses, the first nations of Canada are creating jobs and building financial partnerships

OLIVER MOORE

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HALIFAX -- Millbrook First Nation first dipped its toe into business waters in 1995 with a single service station, Treaty Gas.

In the years since, the site has mushroomed into a sprawling business park near Truro, N.S. On Highway 102, the artery running north through the province from Halifax, the band has leased out land for a motel, fast-food franchises, theatres, stores and a call centre.

The companies operating here employ more than 700 people, most of them non-natives, according to the Millbrook band.

The 1,300-member band also owns a 56-unit apartment building in the Cole Harbour area of Halifax. And it recently built an \$11-million facility in the same area and leased it to General Dynamics Corp., the defence industry conglomerate.

The new building - which will house 150 high-tech workers providing support for Canada's new ship-borne helicopter, the CH148 Cyclone - was lauded by Premier Rodney MacDonald as a sign of Nova Scotia's diversifying economy.

By the numbers

1.3 million

Number of aboriginal people in Canada, about 4 per cent of population.

34,000

Estimated number of native businesses in Canada, half of them in urban areas.

25

Number of Canadian first nations represented in recent trade mission to China.

\$11-million

Value of N.S. high-tech facility built by Millbrook First Nation and leased to General Dynamics.

\$76-million

Annual revenue of Memberfou First Nation in Nova Scotia.

1,200

Number of peak-season jobs created in nine businesses owned by B.C.'s 450-member Osoyoos Indian Band.

\$17-million

Annual revenue of Osoyoos band businesses, including a golf course, winery and four-star resort.

Half

Portion of native population who are under the age of 25.

30 per cent

Estimated portion of Canadian land mass owned or controlled by native people.

» Staff

"[General Dynamics] has demonstrated a great level of respect and understanding regarding first nations' culture and heritage," Millbrook Chief Lawrence Paul said as the building opened in September. "We take pride in welcoming them as a new member of our community." Although the band will not disclose what revenue comes in from its various business ventures, officials will say that they now get less than 30 per cent of their funding from government, compared with at least 95 per cent in the early 1990s.

'TRYING TO CREATE WEALTH'

Millbrook is just one example of a growing movement of aboriginal leaders and communities embracing economic development with enthusiastic determination.

But Chief Paul says the hardest step in the Millbrook success was getting the outside business community to take the band seriously.

"Negotiations [with Sobey's] dragged on for two years for the simple reason that it was unknown here in Nova Scotia for native land to be leased to non-natives," he recalls, referring to one of the companies interested in setting up shop at the business park.

"We had to convince them our lease is just as binding as downtown Toronto or Vancouver or Montreal," Mr. Paul says.

Along with business parks and well-known gambling casinos, native economic ventures include airlines, real estate developments, resorts and golf courses, and even a well-regarded winery in British Columbia, established by the small but entrepreneurial Osoyoos Indian Band.

Underlying them all is a common thread: The desire to meet business investors as partners - not supplicants.

"We didn't go in there saying we were a down-and-out aboriginal community in Cape Breton and you should do it because it's good," says Bernd Christmas, a lawyer who served more than a decade as CEO of Membertou First Nation in Sydney, N.S.

"We're not trying to give them a guilt trip. We're trying to create wealth the same way they are," says Mr. Christmas, who returned to law in 2006.

In many respects, Membertou, an urban first nation with about 1,050 members, is the role model for the new economic approach.

When Mr. Christmas took the reins in the mid-1990s the band was in rough shape, with rampant unemployment and a budget almost entirely funded by the federal government. And they knew they were facing entrenched cynicism in Canadian society as a whole.

"Unfortunately there's a perception that first nations communities aren't run very efficiently," Mr. Christmas says. "We said, 'How do we counter that?' and we decided to put it all out there."

THE MEMBERTOU BOOM

The band became as transparent as possible, posting online its financial information and the honoraria paid to the chief and council. A few years later, they took a much bigger step, receiving ISO certification. It was a turning point, Mr. Christmas says, because it proved to the business community the level at which the band was operating.

"Three days later, we got a call from Lockheed Martin. They said, 'Listen, we heard what you've done,' he recalls.

The business giant wanted the band as a partner, providing engineering and in-service support, while bidding on a federal helicopter contract. Although the contract didn't go through, the Membertou development boom had begun.

The band now has annual revenue of \$76-million, from business ventures that include fishing, gambling, retail, information technology and the hospitality industry. Membertou also has a consulting firm that counsels other native bands trying for ISO certification and has guided several through the process.

Membertou is now considered a major success story and their name regularly comes up when leaders of other first nations talk about their own economic plans. The Membertou experience proved that business could be comfortable dealing with natives.

"We kept saying to ourselves, 'We don't want to rely on government funding,' " Mr. Christmas says. "We're supposed to be proud Mi'kmaw people. A nation doesn't depend on another nation."

We kept saying to ourselves, 'We don't want to rely on government funding.'

Bernad Christmas,
former CEO of Membertou First Nation

We take pride in welcoming [General Dynamics] as a new member of our community.

Lawrence Paul
Chief of Millbrook First Nation

The sentiment is gaining increasing traction. At the 900-member Waycobah First Nation, also in Cape Breton, Chief Morley Googoo says that forward-looking native leaders know the consequences of inaction will be devastating.

"How we think today will determine how our kids will grow into adults," he explains. "They will either grow into poverty and be angry, or we can create an environment that can foster any kid's dream."

Chief Clarence Louie, of the Osoyoos Band, is an outspoken supporter of economic development and job creation by first nations through their own businesses. "The best social program is a job," he told a meeting of the Edmonton Economic Development Corp. last spring. "The biggest employer should not be the band office. It should be the economic development side of your first nation," Mr. Louie said.

"Today being a warrior means being self-supporting. Not living on welfare. Not continuously just hammering away at federal and provincial governments, but becoming employed," the Osoyoos chief insisted.

Another strong advocate of aboriginal self-sufficiency is Calvin Helin, chief executive officer of the Native Investment and Trade Association in Vancouver, who is deeply critical of what he calls "the Indian industry."

"If someone controls your purse strings, they control your life," argues the lawyer and member of B.C.'s Tsimshian Nation. "To me, that's like living in your mother's basement and asking for allowance. Self-government has to be taking care of yourself."

It's not always a popular message; Mr. Helin says he struggled to find a publisher for his 2006 book, *Dances with Dependency*, and expected a controversial reception "for pulling back the shower curtain on the naked Indian." Instead the book sold more than 20,000 copies, largely within native communities, he says.

COURTING CHINA

A recent trade mission to China by representatives of 25 first nations was co-sponsored by Mr. Helin's organization. The delegation spent nearly two weeks in China, meeting senior business executives and politicians and angling for a portion of China's cash reserves to help develop native-controlled natural resources.

Mr. Helin, who notes that natives own or control about one-third of Canada's landmass, says the trip was designed to show China that "aboriginal Canada was open for business."

One of the mission delegates was Waycobah's Chief Googoo. He says he couldn't have made the trip even a few years ago because the band faced too many pressing issues in their small community; there was strong pressure to focus on the here-and-now, rather than long-term objectives.

"Before, when we did economic development, people said we should be putting it into houses and the school," the chief says. So those issues were dealt with first.

"Now that we have the social infrastructure [in place], now we can tell community members we're ready to start investing in business opportunities."