

First Nation leaders speak at Think North Summit
by: Rick Garrick - Wawatay News



Aboriginal lawyer Calvin Helin spoke about how First Nations people need to develop different strategies in order to succeed during the Think North Summit, instead of "fighting over crumbs."
-Rick Garrick - Wawatay News

First Nation leaders discussed northern Ontario's long range economic concerns with leaders from across Canada and the world at the Think North Summit.

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Grand Chief Stan Loutitt of the Mushkegowuk Council, Calvin Helin, an Aboriginal lawyer and businessman from B.C. who wrote the best selling book, *Dances with Dependency*, and Ontario Regional Chief Angus Toulouse spoke about their ideas and concerns during the day-long conference, held Feb. 3 in Thunder Bay.

Former Winnipeg mayor Glen Murray and Peter Kenyon, a leading international expert on business, town and regional development from Australia, were among the other speakers.

Loutitt was concerned about the lack of recognition of First Nations status during the discussions, specifically treaty rights and the need for consultation.

"That was missing and not a part of the discussions," Loutitt said after the summit. "There is an assumption that there is going to be economic development in the north. I stressed that (First Nations) need to have input. Consultation needs to be part of the equation."

Although Loutitt was disappointed about the lack of recognition, he said it was worthwhile attending the summit because he was able to express his opinion, noting some of the other First Nations people in attendance agreed with his comments.

Loutitt also spoke about how First Nations "have been living in an economic crisis in our communities for generations," during the Northern Leaders Roundtable portion of the summit.

"You might have something to learn from us," Loutitt said.

More than 300 people from all levels of government, northern communities, First Nations, Aboriginal groups, business, industry and the health, education and research sectors were invited to participate in the summit, which was hosted by George Smitherman, deputy premier and minister of Energy and Infrastructure, and Michael Gravelle, minister of Northern Development and Mines at the Valhalla Inn in Thunder Bay. Delegates discussed best practices in international jurisdictions, future global trends and how to transform the north by growing emerging sectors and developing a sustainable regional economy.

The summit was designed to build upon input received through a number of previous regional sessions and technical tables to shape the Ontario government's draft Growth Plan for Northern Ontario, which will be released for public consultation this spring.

"This is a plan for all of northern Ontario," Gravelle said. "The final Growth Plan for northern Ontario will be in place by the end of this year or early next year."

Suggestions generated so far for the Growth Plan include: build an educated, skilled workforce in the north; identify the north's true competitive edge and build government policies and actions around it; enhance connectivity and access throughout the north to attract more businesses and people; engage Aboriginal peoples and build stronger partnerships with First Nation and Metis communities; ensure reliable, affordable energy that can provide a base for economic growth; ensure northern Ontario is ready for investment to maintain locally sustainable communities; support made-in-the-north solutions and greater input and decision making to policy in the north; and increase government cooperation and coordination.

Helin spoke about the problems Aboriginal people have across the country, such as high numbers of children in the care of child care agencies and low education levels, and asked why this has only occurred since contact.

"We have lived continuously in the same area for 10,000 years," Helin said. "Why is it that we have only had these problems since contact?"

Helin said the system currently in place has First Nations people "fighting over crumbs."

In order to succeed, First Nations people need to develop different strategies, he said.

"If you don't have a strategy, you become the object of somebody else's strategy," Helin said, explaining it is important for First Nations people to have their own revenue sources. "We have to have a private sector. We did prior to this, but we just didn't think about it that way."

"Our focus is entirely on the federal government. But at the end of the day, the federal government can't do much more than just give us a bit of money once in a while."