

Transportation for Tomorrow: beyond roads, air and sea

Dr. Ted Moses, President, Secretariat to the Cree Nation Abitibi-Témiscamingue Economic Alliance
Address to Northern Lights Conference – Saturday, Feb. 4, 2012

For Cree communities, transportation is our specialty. It is a commitment we have made, a promise that insures our communities will no longer be left at the side of the road. Eeyou Istchee, the North of Quebec, is no longer a third world zone, not for transportation, not for communications. We are open for business. We can deliver food or passengers or data and we now have a delivery infrastructure that can match the performance of any community in Canada, north or south.

For Cree communities, we have invested in these services to better face today's reality. Yesterday, transport and communication were a liability; today they are an asset. We recognize that modern transportation systems are the engines of a dynamic economy and the basic tools required to deliver economic and social development.

As a youngster, my family would spend the winter season on our trapline near Lake Opinaca where we would gather furs and food; those were the early days of the bush plane. Back then, we learned from example that transport could help us be better hunters, better food gatherers, better at survival. Yesterday we were in the fur trade; today we are focussed on the resource industry and on business development.

This was a lesson that our first Grand Chief, the late Billy Diamond knew well. As a youngster, he watched the float planes that flew into the coastal villages that would one day be transformed into a company called Air Creebec. Today the Cree nation operates one of the largest independent regional air transit carriers in Canada. Thirty years ago, the Crees invested compensation funds from the James Bay Northern Quebec Agreement to start two companies – Cree Construction and Air Creebec. At its startup, the airline would be 51% Cree-owned and Austin Airways held the remaining 49%. In 1988, the Crees bought up all the airline assets in the largest commercial deal, up to that date, by any Native group in Canada. From that day on, it made Air Creebec wholly owned by the Cree.

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Air Creebec transports people on a daily basis in and out of our communities and Val d'Or, Chibougamau and Montreal; we bring Hydro-Quebec workers and industrial materials to the James Bay worksites and plants, workers and supplies to mines across our region on charters; we bring goods and services and people on a daily basis across northern Quebec and northern Ontario.

Not only planes; the Cree communities operate large regional truck transport companies. Our fleet of trucks, from Kepa Transport and Cree Express, roll out of the Abitibi region, providing daily services to-and-from all communities and worksites from Val d'Or and Amos to LG2 and to Chisasibi. Today, we also distribute and retail fuel for all vehicles and machinery at our Petronor gas stations and pumps across the north. And all along the coast, our Moosonee Transport boats deliver goods that are shipped by rail to northern Ontario making direct deliveries up the James Bay coast to the Quebec and Ontario James Bay region.

Our approach to creating business is simple. Joint ventures become community infrastructure; and joint ventures mean earning our share of the benefits and filling our share of the jobs. Our schools in the Cree School Board and our training centres are working to encourage our young people to face the future by developing the new skills that are needed in the workplace. The key to our approach has been, and will continue to be, infrastructure development and transportation.

Transport makes our region viable, a good place to invest and a secure environment. It provides collective benefits that meet our needs and the needs of industry. And as technology changes and emerges into new delivery systems, we have adapted with innovative systems. In Northern areas, transports services are critical; but those needs often go beyond roads, air and sea. Social and economic development in any region of the world now depends on efficient and 'instantaneous' transportation of large quantities of information. Electronic highways are the modern way to travel; ideally, those routes are made of fiber optic networks.

This is our newest form of transport, a major investment of over \$30 million. Today our 2,500 kilometre fibre optic broadband network stretches throughout the James Bay region and connects us to the world

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with Internet. It is called the Eeyou Communications Network, a high-capacity system, unique in Canada and independent of all telephone companies. It is a public regional fiber optic network that extends from the Lac-St-Jean area up to the border of the Inuit territory. It extends Eeyou Istchee to sites and communities across the Internet world.

Business, institutions, service providers, campus and work sites can now be efficiently connected to other networks and can also have full access across the Internet. The Eeyou network means secure voice, data and video. For business, this means the capability for complete integration of Information and Communications technologies that will support a full range of corporate, administrative and operational needs as well as the needs of regional and local staff. Also, this network can be the enabler of services so critical in remote areas, such as tele-medicine, public safety and security, wireless mobile services, to name just a few.

This telecom network is a key link to interconnect the North to the South. It adds the newest dimension to our transportation service: a virtual bridge that connects towns, worksites and travellers to all other major private and public networks, far beyond any service now offered in the region by traditional telephone operators. In short, whether you require just-in-time restocking, or transacting your business on a world-wide basis, or keeping your staff in touch, for safety and security, Eeyou Istchee, le Grand Nord du Québec, is a good place to do business.

It was not long ago that our communities were isolated with road access only in winter. With the James Bay Northern Quebec Agreement, a paved highway to the north became a reality. Graded and year-round maintained roads to all communities were opened, all the way up to the La Grande, and the Trans-Taiga road opened across the north to the east. Airports were built in the coastal communities with improved and well-maintained landing strips and some of our ports were rebuilt.

To support these new connections, we developed a construction work force and several companies to earn highway maintenance contracts. We built the buildings necessary for these operations and Cree

construction companies trained and operated a work force that today builds houses, roads and infrastructure across the North.

For the Cree communities, these developments produced jobs that last, and skills that have ongoing value. It reinforced our economy and employed our qualified labour force. It meant an investment from our own resources, and this investment has had lasting value. It earned us an economic role with a future.

Our ongoing challenge is to maximize our role in the construction and mining industries. The wages earned form the base of our community economy. All our local businesses, from construction to grocery to retail outlets, benefit when new business that comes to our region. And with the creation of viable jobs, our local businesses thrive and our young people are encouraged to remain and to continue the work we have started.

We want our hard-earned dollars to produce ongoing revenues. When we signed the 50-year Paix des Braves agreement with Quebec in 2002 and the 20-year New Relationship Agreement with Canada in 2008, the issue of economic development was first and foremost in our minds. After all, our young people need jobs, jobs that give our communities continuing viability. We know that we need to work with governments for a long-term plan that provides real benefits for our communities, and we know that government wants to work with industry. New agreements with guaranteed financial resources are a building block to the future. This is an opportunity. For us, the Plan Nord is an occasion to work with government and with business for long-term benefits.

With the ongoing support of the Quebec government, we are confident that the Crees can play an important role in business development and that business can play an equally important role in our economic development. Our approach to economic development is to support sustainable enterprise, long-term ventures and projects with a human dimension. We have programs for training, for entrepreneurship and for partnerships. Our goal is to enhance the economic environment, to create

viable enterprises and to work interdependently with the enterprises of the region. We want to be part of the greater community and, for this, we reach outward in partnership.

It was in June 2002, that a symposium, held in Val-d'Or, entitled "Gateway to Building Economic Channels" took place between the Cree Nation leaders and the business people of Abitibi-Témiscamingue. This symposium proved and revealed a high potential for building alliances between both populations with respect and in the spirit of the "Paix des Braves" Agreement and Cree empowerment.

The Secretariat to the Cree Nation – Abitibi-Témiscamingue Economic Alliance was therefore created as a non-profit organization to continue a well initiated dialogue to promote partnerships and strategic alliances between both regions.

The development that will take place in the North of Quebec is significant for the Cree Nation. Those investments, the growth of our companies, the development of our communities is really important for our present and future generation.

The Secretariat will continue to play a role; as we are very active in promoting joint ventures, partnerships and strategic alliances. We are always in the lookout for partners ready to work with us.

We feel the excitement for the Plan Nord. Last December we organized an event in Val d'Or, called the Business Exchange Day; a business matchmaking event which we made more than 700 business matchmaking appointments. This shows how companies are excited and eager to do business.

There are exciting projects on the horizon in Eeyou Istchee such as the Eleonore mine. Back in 2008, exploration began with new roads and test drilling. Eleonore is located on an island near the north shore of the Opinaca reservoir, not far from my family's trapline, and once the mine is built and in full operation, it will be the size of a major northern town and will require all of the same services and support.

And there are more mining projects, near Waswanipi and north of Mistissini, that require significant infrastructure and services. All of these projects will employ a large number of people, all requiring the vast array of services that accompany development. Despite all of these advancements, we haven't given up on our furs and our traditions but we recognize our future is within an integrated economy, and now we have the skilled and competent workforce to develop infrastructure and services.

We are committed to renewable and sustainable projects and we are committed to advancing all our transportation and communications capabilities. It is our past, our present and our future.

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