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Is prosperity 'blowing in the wind'?

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LISTUGUJ • Troy Jerome was in a cab, racing through the streets of Toronto. He was looking for Claude Jeannotte, because an important call was on the way.

Jerome is the chair of the Mi'gmawei Mawiomi Secretariat, and Jeannotte is the president. Jeannotte is also the chief of Gespeg First Nation. He was actually hidden away, trying to find relief from the scorching summer day.

"It was like an oven outside," said Jeff Basque, member of the Wind Team, and the senior advisor and negotiator with the Listuguj Mi'gmaq government.

All three were in Toronto for the Assembly of First Nations elections. All three had been working on getting a wind farm for nearly the last four years.

On March 24, a power purchase agreement with Hydro-Québec for a 149.65-megawatt wind farm was announced – the first major project for the secretariat, which formed in 2001. Aside from jobs and experience, some of the profits of this project are planned as the first steps in funding the governments of three Mi'gmaq communities.

The farm

The \$365-million project is part of the Quebec government's announcement in 2013 to develop 800 new megawatts of wind power. Wind farms can now be seen all along the Gaspé coast.

This farm, called the Mesgi'g Ugiu's'n Wind Farm, will be built in partnership with Innergex Renewable Energy Inc. Construction in the municipality of Avignon is set to start next year, and it is expected to connect to the grid by Dec. 1, 2016.

The project is estimated to bring in approximately \$150 million in profits over 20 years to Mi'gmaq people. The three Mi'gmaq communities of the secretariat – Listuguj, Gespeg, and Gesgapegiag – will hold 50 per cent of the issued voting shares until the end of the supply contract in 2036.

The secretariat already has 56 people trained and ready for when construction starts. Linemen, heavy equipment operators, millwrights, and electricians are all needed. Up to 300 jobs are expected for the construction phase. The goal is to fill 100 of those positions with Mi'gmaq workers, so some training had to be done.

"We accessed a little over a million dollars through Human Resources Development Canada," said Terri Lynn Morrison, the associate director of intergovernmental relations with the secretariat.

It worked with school boards to bring specialized programs close to home specifically for this project. Some people were already experienced and capable, but to work in Quebec, they had to be certified in Quebec. Many people in those communities work all around North America, but have never worked in Quebec because of this. The secretariat worked to get these people certified.



Jeff Basque, Troy Jerome, and Claude Jeannotte in Jerome's office on April 1. PHOTO: ADAM HODNETT/TRIBUNE.

"My dad is an ironworker, and he's never even thought about working in Quebec," said Morrison.

Helping people work close to home is only one of the possibilities opened up by this project. It'll hopefully introduce others to fields they may have never considered.

"Right now, when young people are growing up, they become an ironworker because their dad was one," said Jerome. "No one was ever a lineman before ... so when (the kids) grow up they're like, 'hey, I can be a lineman, too.'" "It changes the landscape," said Morrison.

This is part of how the secretariat is thinking about the project. It is not only going to add to the financial situation of their governments and communities, but, hopefully, it'll change some perspectives – maybe even across the country.

Secretariat

The secretariat is a council consisting of the three Mi'gmaq communities along the Gaspé, "creating an independent Mi'gmaq government based on a constitution that promotes and protects the rights, freedoms and well being of the Mi'gmaq."

It formed in 2001, and while the wind farm is the first major project, Jerome believes the first major accomplishment was in 2007, when a land claim was submitted to the Canadian and

Quebec governments, in the secretariat's document, Nm'tginen.

"This was the road map, or the foundation," said Jerome. "If you're not secure in your own mind to say, 'OK, that's our land, 100 per cent,' then maybe you wouldn't push so hard to get this project."

From there the secretariat identified natural resources as a priority, particularly wind power. The Quebec government had been building lots of wind farms, but no First Nations communities had been involved yet.

It set out to learn as much as it could. It knew it had to create a plan that no one could deny. A plan that was win-win.

"We set out with the objective of a (mutual agreement), because we basically held to the principle that we will not bid on our own resources," said Basque. "We just want a buyer for our resources."

Part of proving the plan was the best was being available for negotiations, even on short notice.

Unexpected meeting

Jerome, Jeannotte, and Basque, with Dean Vicaire, chief of Listuguj, and Clement Bernard, a councillor and wind team member from Gesgapegiag, had their flights rescheduled. They flew back from Toronto because they had been told that Jean Charest – the premier of Quebec at the time – wanted to meet with them in Gaspé, at a wind energy training facility.

On Thursday, a crowd waited for Charest. When he arrived, the first thing he did – even before speaking – was meet with the chiefs of the secretariat. They walked upstairs, with the whole room watching. He didn't say anything definite about the project in the end, but the in-the-open nature of the meeting told them everything they needed.

"That day, for me, I was knew we had the project," said Jeannotte.

But then, the government changed, and they had to start all over again – meeting with everyone, and making presentations.

Finally, on May 18, last year, they were told they would be getting the wind farm by the Marois government.

The goal

The secretariat divides 30 to 35 per cent of any profits among the member communities.

"The Mi'gmawei Mawiomi has no business in terms of how they share that," said Jerome. "As soon as that dollar lands at Gesgapegiag – for example – it's for them."

The other 65 to 70 per cent will be used collectively for shared projects.

True to Jerome's tendency to use visual aids – whether moving around items on his desk, or jumping up to grab documents – the secretariat will hold public meetings and distribute coins to those who attend. They will be asked to divide the money among the areas they

deem most important.

"The communities always know the needs better than anyone else," Jerome said.

These findings will be brought back to the leadership, and ways to address the needs will be developed. Mechanisms will also be put in place to address changes that arise in the future, and the ways the public will continue to be informed and consulted.

"When we're talking about money – own source revenue – we need to make sure that it's hyper transparent, and hyper accountable," Jerome said. "We need to get to that point where we're able to speak with communities directly and have a very good communication route that goes both ways."

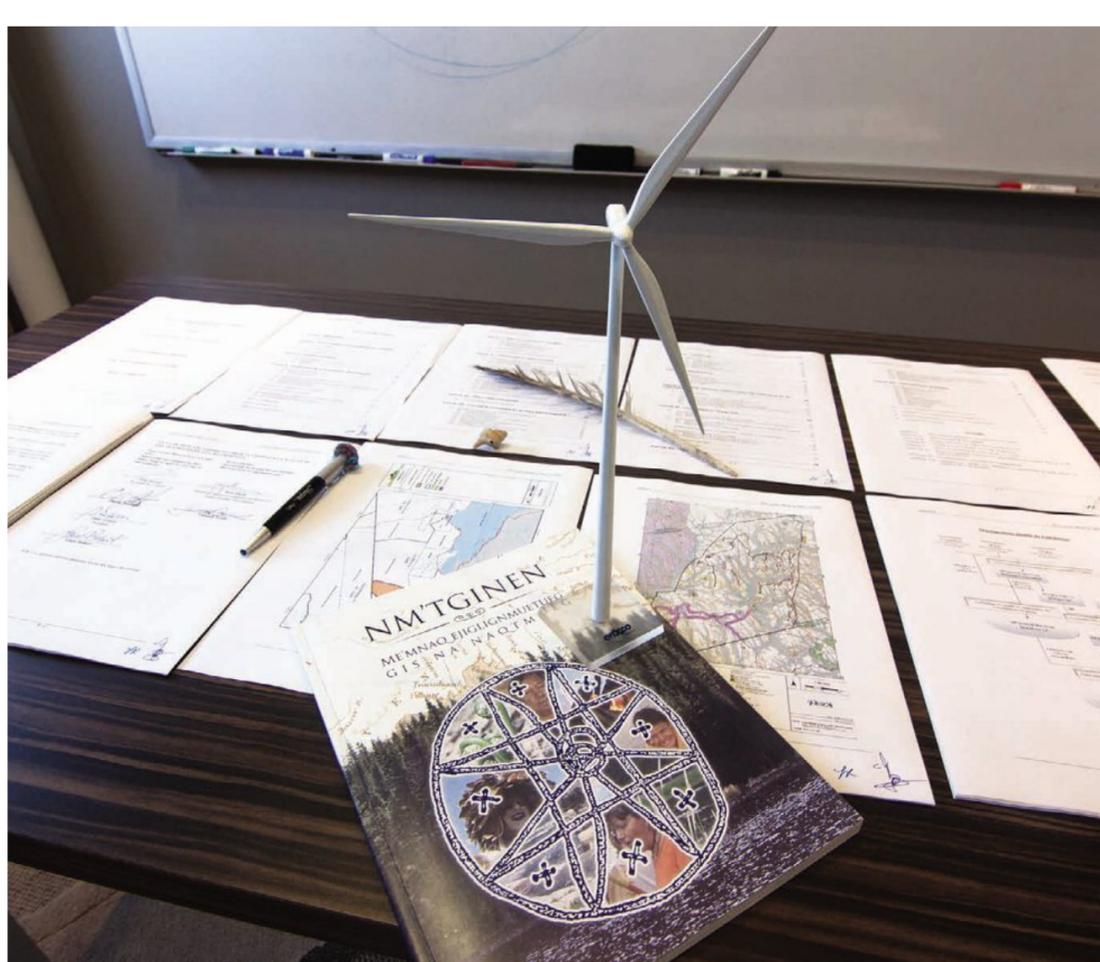
People from First Nations communities across the country have been congratulating Jeannotte, and he's already offering to send Jerome to share the experience and information they've picked up.

"It's going to be the first project that's going to lead to all First Nations (being) able to say, 'hey, we can do it, they did it, we can all do it,'" Jeannotte said.

"I heard a year ago, 10 years ago – 'well, we cannot run our own affairs,' " Jerome said. "We can. It's just that we don't have the proper tools and the proper mechanisms in place right now. So we need to put those in place. With additional revenue – such as this – we can do that."



Troy Jerome in his office in front of details for the wind farm Power Purchase Agreement with Hydro-Québec. PHOTO: ADAM HODNETT/TRIBUNE



A model wind turbine on top of the Nm'tginen in Troy Jerome's office at the Mi'gmawei Mawiomi Secretariat offices. The Nm'tginen contains the land claim Jerome believes made the wind farm possible. PHOTO: ADAM HODNETT/TRIBUNE