

Group fights for sacred tobacco's future

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The significance of a late-winter's visit to the legislature lives on for its Indigenous participants, officially honoured for spreading their message about using tobacco in a good way.

Tears welled up for a Tobacco Warrior from Alexis Nakota Sioux Nation. And she wasn't the only one.

"I've never experienced anything like that before," says Vanessa Kyme-Gilbert of the Keep Tobacco Sacred Collaboration.

"Being there made me realize how important the work we are doing is. I just really appreciated that and to have the opportunity was very humbling," continues the University of Alberta student and employee of the Yellowhead Tribal Council.

"It felt good to see so many Indigenous people inside the legislature. You look around and we're crying. It was great."

Adds fellow Tobacco Warrior Dylan Campiou: "Now we feel the need to double down, to know the path we're on is a good path, and to play full out, not be afraid, not hold back. We know that the work we do can really benefit other people."

The warriors were among a group who met Speaker Nathan Cooper and rose for an official welcome in the legislative assembly.

Cooper also introduced two southern Alberta Tobacco Warriors from Treaty 7 territory — Raquel Healy of Kainai Nation and Ethan Yellow Old Woman of Siksika Nation — along with Siksika Nation bundle holder Treffrey Deerfoot and the collaboration's community engagement specialist Charlene Bruno from Samson Cree Nation.

Bruno called the visit important validation, especially while the group looks to replace federal funding that's just ended.

The unexpected invitation "really showed that people are noticing the work that's being done on this initiative, because everything's being done in a good way, in the right way, in the way it should be done," says Bruno.

"It's just been such a great experience, I think, for all of us," says the consultant from the Treaty 6 area south of Edmonton.

Projects include growing and harvesting

tobacco; sharing knowledge, messages and tools on social media and the collaboration's Web site; crewing booths at conventions; and strengthening the connection of elders and knowledge keepers to Indigenous communities.

One collaboration goal is to improve the health of its peoples by reducing the use of commercially produced tobacco and fighting addictions to smoking, chewing and vaping.

The health message is important, Bruno says, when you consider the death and sickness smoking continues to cause in Indigenous communities.

Commercial cigarettes are manufactured from about 600 ingredients, creating more than 7,000 chemicals when they burn. "Imagine what that's doing when you inhale that into your body," Bruno said.

Although Statistics Canada data on Indigenous smoking in Alberta is inconclusive, data from other jurisdictions suggests that the smoking rate for First Nations individuals is about 50 per cent on-reserve and more than 40 per cent off-reserve. Just 12 per cent of Canada's general population aged 15 or older smoke cigarettes, says Statistics Canada data from 2022.

The leading cause of cancer death among all people in Canada is lung cancer, says the Canadian Partnership Against Cancer. But First Nations individuals are 35 per cent less likely than others to survive five years after diagnosis, the Web site for the federally mandated organization says.

MyHealth Alberta, an information portal of Alberta Health Services, points to the prevalence of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. Commonly linked to smoking, COPD is twice as common among Indigenous individuals as it is the general population.

Trends suggest that more than one in four First Nations people could die early because of smoking.

But community health has further dimensions. The collaboration is also about re-entrenching cultural practices by passing them to younger generations. "The translation piece is very important to us. Unfortunately, a lot of our elders are leaving us, and they're taking a lot of that knowledge with them," Bruno says.

"So it's always been of utmost



Photo courtesy Alberta Indigenous Relations

Back row, from left: Angeline Webb of the Canadian Cancer Society; Les Hagen of Action on Smoking and Health; Tobacco Warriors Dillon Campiou, Treffrey Deerfoot, and Ethan Yellow Old Woman. Front row, from left: Andrew Boitchenko, parliamentary secretary for Indigenous relations, Charlene Bruno, community engagement specialist for the collaboration, Tobacco Warriors Vanessa Kyme-Gilbert and Raquel Healy; Speaker Nathan Cooper, Minister of Indigenous Relations Rick Wilson, and Scott Sinclair, parliamentary secretary for Indigenous policing.

importance that we have young people to work with."

Enter the warriors.

The young adult ambassadors joined the collaboration last fall, and an early order of business was coming up with the title Tobacco Warriors.

Alberta's three treaty areas are represented by Tobacco Warriors. Campiou is from Sucker Creek Nation in northern Alberta's Treaty 8 territory. Kyme-Gilbert's home nation is made up of reserves north and west of Edmonton in Treaty 6. Another warrior is from Treaty 6 and two are from Treaty 7 in southern Alberta.

The warriors encourage the use of non-commercial tobacco for prayer, smudging, gift protocol, connecting with elders, pipe ceremonies, sundances and more.

"It's very versatile. We use it in many different ways," said Campiou, a certified life coach. "And it always has a spiritual connection, like when we use it in our prayers."

Campiou looks at the Keep Tobacco Sacred Collaboration as an important chapter in his story.

"My journey has been a lot about self discovery, growing and learning so that I can help other people," Campiou said.

The invitation from Keep Tobacco Sacred Collaboration "aligned perfectly to where I was headed, so I'm really happy to be a part of it."

Says Kyme-Gilbert: "I'm just going where I feel like Creator is leading me. And I believe that the Keep Tobacco Sacred Collaboration is somewhere he brought me. "I want to do good work and help people."

Granum school families vote for four-day week

FRANK MCTIGHE
GAZETTE EDITOR

Granum school families have voted overwhelmingly in favour of a four-day school week starting in 2024-'25.

The move to a four-day school week was supported by 94 per cent of those people who voted.

"Granum is such a special community and a very special place that we want to see the school thrive and grow," Livingstone Range School Board vice-chair Lacey Poytress said.

Trustee Kathy Charchun brought that news to Livingstone Range School Board during its March 25 meeting at the G.R.

Davis Administration Building in Fort Macleod.

Livingstone Range will work with other schools and communities to explore the potential implementation of a four-day school week.

Trustees will discuss a four-day school week stakeholder engagement plan at their April meeting.

Discussions about the future of Granum school began late in 2022 following a report of declining school enrollment.

That led to community engagement sessions and discussions involving school division officials and school and community members.

The process began with a community engagement session in late February, followed by surveys and a vote involving stakeholders.

Eighteen ballots were returned by the March 18 deadline.

Nine votes supported a four-day school week at Granum school, with another eight votes in support provided child care is available.

Only one vote opposed the four-day school week.

A child care survey that went out to Granum School families in early March showed interest.

The survey showed the following:

- 66.7 per cent would access care for children aged five years and under.
- 69.2 per cent would access before-school child care for children aged five to 12 years.
- 92.3 per cent would access after-school child care for children aged five to 12 years.
- 77.8 per cent would access Friday child care for children aged five to 12 years.

A report on child care to reflect a four-day week is to be prepared for Granum school council by mid-April.

Charchun told trustees people attending the last Granum school council meeting expressed deep appreciation for the school board's collaboration.

Trustees welcome funding for Nanton schools project

FRANK MCTIGHE
GAZETTE EDITOR

Livingstone Range School Board last month reflected on the news the province will fund school construction in Nanton.

The plan is to build a new school in Nanton to house elementary students.

J.T. Foster school will be demolished and junior and senior high students will move into a modernized A.B. Daley school, which at present is the elementary school.

"We are thrilled about the recent announcement," trustee Brad Toone said.

"It's been a long time coming and a huge amount of work went into that."

The province announced the funding as part of Budget 2024 at the beginning of March.

Toone commended Livingstone Range central office staff, including associate superintendent of business services Jeff Perry, for their tireless work with the provincial government.

Toone also acknowledged former Livingstone-Macleod MLA Roger Reid and present MLA Chelsae Petrovic

for their support of the project.

Toone also referenced the project committee, which includes representatives from the Town of Nanton and MD of Willow Creek, and the school enhancement committee for their work.

The enhancement committee is fundraising for a learning commons and extended shop space in the new school.

"Kudos for them for their amazing work," Toone said. "They really hit the ground running."

Trustees were also praised for their

advocacy on behalf of the Nanton project, which was a Livingstone Range priority for more than a decade.

Toone said the design stage will be completed around the end of 2024.

Toone said students will remain in their locations for the 2024-'25 school year.

Perry suggested the school board write the education minister to express thanks for the announcement.

Toone made that motion, and included letters of thanks to the past and present Livingstone-Macleod MLAs.

Piikani Nation RCMP charge man with firearms offences

Piikani Nation RCMP charged a 37-year-old man with weapons and property offences last month.

While following up on a theft of a motorcycle March 18, Piikani RCMP located a blue GMC pickup at a residence near Brocket

that had been involved in a flight from police in Fort Macleod on March 12. A search warrant was executed at the residence that resulted in the seizure of seven rifles, ammunition and miscellaneous firearms parts.

RCMP charged Jessie Flett with 23

criminal offences, including seven counts of unlawful possession of a firearm; seven counts of unsafe storage of a firearm; eight counts of possession of a firearm contrary to prohibition order; and one count of possession of stolen property under \$5,000.

Flett was also charged under the Traffic Safety Act with being the registered owner of a vehicle involved in dangerous driving and failure to stop for police, as well as entering land without permission under the Petty Trespass Act.