



GREY ROCK ENTERTAINMENT CENTER






-
- ✓ Moving towards Economic...
 - ✓ Grey Rock Grand Opening...
 - ✓ Grey Rock Entertainment Centre...
 - ✓ Grey Rock by Mark Taylor...
 - ✓ Grey Rock Power Center Video
 - ✓ A bit of history ...



ATTRACTING NEW BUSINESSES TO THE EDMUNDSTON REGION

By Rajitha Sivakumaran



Canada's Aboriginal population is the fastest growing ethnic group in the country. The last five years have resulted in a growth of 22 per cent, and half of the population is under the age of 25! But the population isn't the only thing that's growing. Involvement in entrepreneurship has been soaring as well, thanks to encouragement and support from First Nations and Canadian governance.

In New Brunswick, one First Nations group is vigorously approaching economic development via a unique route. The Madawaska Maliseet First Nation, based out of Edmundston, New Brunswick, has a chief and council like every other Indigenous group, but there is a separate body that deals with bringing business to the area. That task is the sole responsibility of the Mada-





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waska Maliseet Economic Development Corporation (MMEDC). This organization has no political affiliations, being managed by a CEO and board of directors. There are advantages to that for businesses, says Joanna Bernard, CEO of MMEDC.

Typically, a First Nations governing body

operates on a two-year term before a new chief and council are selected. This has implications for the business world. Rules and policies can change alongside governance. The Madawaska Maliseet First Nation has now adopted a four-year term after being the first to opt into the First Nations Election Act, which came into effect



2013, Bernard has an insider's view on the political and financial aspects of running a territory. During her time as chief, band meetings often centred on the dominant opinion of separating politics from business.

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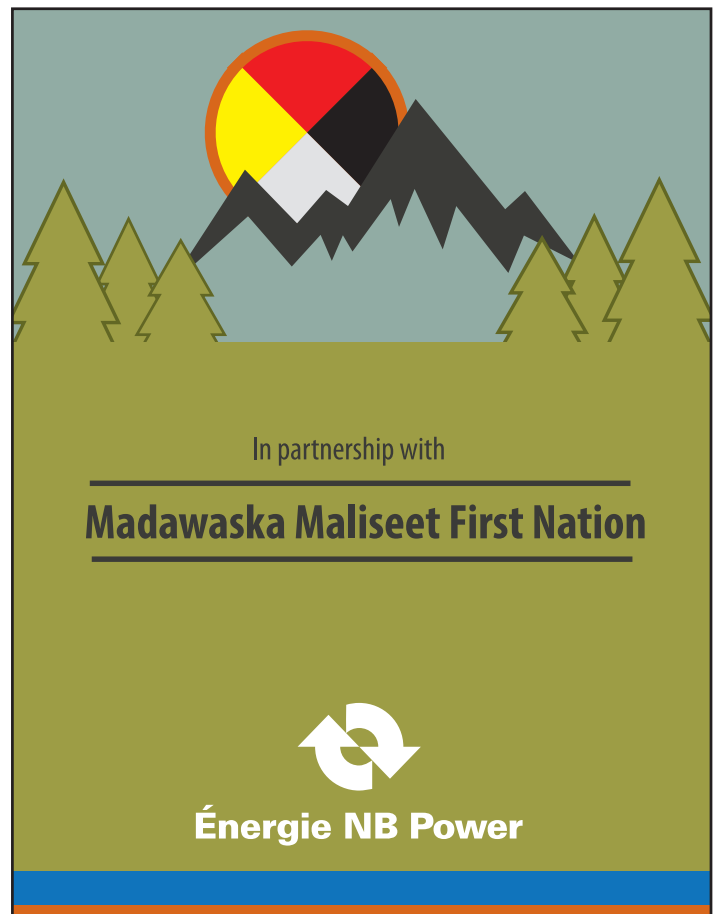
INVESTING IN THE GATEWAY TO THE ATLANTIC

Location is key in business and for new business owners and investors, Edmundston is that key. "Strategically, we

in 2015 to provide an improved framework for elections. But a longer term can still strain business relations.

"It is important that businesses have the stability of a board of directors," Bernard said. "This stability is what businesses want. They don't want to deal with a new chief and council every four years."

This was a change that was fuelled by the people. Before the inauguration of the MMEDC in 2013, the chief and council were responsible for economic prosperity. Having been chief herself from 2003 to





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are well located,” Bernard said, calling the city the gateway to the Atlantic provinces. “You’ve got Quebec City three hours one way and you’ve got Fredericton three hours the other way.”

The area is bustling with a growing population. What it now needs are more commercial ventures to serve residents and draw in visitors, which is why Bernard and the MMEDC are working to bring industry and retail services to the area. Routinely con-

sulting with the local municipality and provincial government, including the premier of New Brunswick, Bernard is focusing her efforts on attracting new businesses and securing investments.

When the CEDI (Community Economic Development Initiative) pilot project was launched in January 2013 by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities and Cando, an Aboriginal organization specializing in community economic development, the



Madawaska Maliseet First Nation was one of the seven First Nations that was selected out of 280 applicants. Through participation, the group has been working with the City of Edmundston to develop communications strategies and promote development.

The Grey Rock Power Centre is the pride and joy of the MMEDC. Sitting adjacent to Edmundston and next to the Trans-Canada Highway, the Centre is rapidly becoming a significant roadside attraction, serving not only locals, but tourists and passing motorists. Bernard is working tirelessly to bring new businesses to this spot so that locals and travellers alike will have a place to rest, eat, shop and fill up on gas. Already there is a casino, truck stops, strip mall, food court and car dealership. Nearby, some land is in the process of being developed for a hotel.



“We are going to be the business hub of the region,” Bernard said excitedly. She predicts a significant economic boost in the next two years due to business activity.

With 70 acres of prime property right off the Trans-Canada Highway, she can already



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foresee many commercial entities taking up residence and adding a renewed spirit to the area, especially due to the 99-year leases. Doing business here means investments have many long years to take root and blossom.

Aboriginal entrepreneurs are actively being encouraged to take advantage of the opportunities in Edmundston. The past 20 years have seen a heightened growth in

Aboriginal entrepreneurship — just the period between 2001 and 2006 saw an increase of 38 per cent in the number of self-employed Aboriginal people. The MMEDC wants some of that entrepreneurial spirit to come to Edmundston and is promoting this through tax incentives.

Despite her bright projections for the future, Bernard admits that development of any kind is a time-consuming process. Her



advice to emerging business owners, particularly Aboriginal entrepreneurs, is that financial stability, both at the individual and commercial level, is not something that happens overnight.

“What I did and what we have here, it's a great location and development is going well, but it took 10 years,” she said. Development was often hampered by endless hours of much-needed negotiations and referendums before decisions could be made.

“It is a long process, but if you do steps 1, 2, 3, then 4, 5, 6 come very easily and that is the important thing. Don't jump the



steps,” Bernard said, adding that, otherwise, success will take more time in the long run and lack stability.

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