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# **Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development**

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**EVIDENCE**

**Tuesday, December 12, 2006**

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**Chair**

**Mr. Colin Mayes**

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## Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development

Tuesday, December 12, 2006

•(0910)

[English]

**The Chair (Mr. Colin Mayes (Okanagan—Shuswap, CPC)):** We'll begin the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development meeting of Tuesday, December 12, 2006.

Committee members, you have the orders of the day before you. The first hour will be a consideration of circumstances faced by the Pikangikum First Nation.

I want to advise committee members that due to weather conditions, Chief Charlie Pascal of the Pikangikum First Nation was not able to attend. He wasn't able to fly from Pikangikum.

Professor Joseph Magnet is here. He and Charlene Desrochers had an opportunity to speak to Chief Pascal. Charlene was briefed on the issues by the chief and has been given authority to make a presentation to this committee.

I'm only looking for direction from the committee to make sure everyone is in agreement with Ms. Desrochers making this submission to the committee. I don't hear any nays, so that's what we'll do.

Mr. Lévesque.

[Translation]

**Mr. Yvon Lévesque (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, BQ):** I would like to know what is the role of Charlene Desrochers? What position does she hold? What is her job?

[English]

**The Chair:** The question that was asked is what capacity does Mrs. Desrochers have with the Pikangikum First Nation or what is her title.

**Ms. Charlene Desrochers (Member, Constance Lake First Nation, Pikangikum First Nation):** I was given permission last night by Chief Charles Pascal, the elders, and the councillors to speak on their behalf. They felt it was important to have their message relayed to you, and they requested that I speak on their behalf.

**The Chair:** I guess Mr. Lévesque is looking for the connection you have to the Pikangikum First Nation. Are you a member of that first nation?

**Mrs. Charlene Desrochers:** I'm not a member of the Pikangikum First Nation, but I am a first nations woman. I'm a member of the Constance Lake First Nation.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

I'd like to proceed by having up to 45 minutes for presentations and questions, and we'll then go in camera for 15 minutes. I'll look for some direction from the committee in regard to this issue, and we'll then move on to our PSE report.

**Hon. Anita Neville (Winnipeg South Centre, Lib.):** Mr. Chair, why would you need direction?

**The Chair:** I only wanted to make sure that committee members don't have a problem with the presentation.

**Hon. Anita Neville:** We don't have a problem with it.

**Mrs. Charlene Desrochers:** Thank you.

Good morning, everyone. I would like to thank you for your time and attention to the critical situation in Pikangikum. I am bringing greetings from Chief Charles Pascal and the councillors, elders, and community of Pikangikum.

Chief Pascal booked a flight to Ottawa and was very much looking forward to discussing the issues with you, but typical of Canadian weather, he was unable to fly out of the community due to freezing rain. It was very important to the people of Pikangikum that you receive their message. As such, the councillors and elders deputized me to speak to you on their behalf.

My name is Charlene Desrochers. I'm a first nations woman and I'm a member of Constance Lake First Nation in northern Ontario. The message I'm bringing to you today is that Pikangikum is a strong, traditional community. The people are Ojibway-speaking and their culture is very strong. In fact, Pikangikum is one of the few communities where the majority of the people retain their Ojibway language. There are 2,200 people living there, including 600 babies.

Officials from the Province of Ontario regard Pikangikum as one of the most capable of first nations in the area. They have made amazing economic progress developing the Whitefeather Forest in partnership with the provincial government. While Pikangikum is extremely capable, with many innovative accomplishments behind it, it is being held back by its infrastructure. This infrastructure is, quite frankly, a scandal that should not be occurring in our rich, capable country.

Pikangikum was visited by an independent public health unit with four highly respected doctors on two occasions. These doctors reported that the conditions in Pikangikum are shocking and pose a serious public health risk to the community. A public health crisis is unfolding at Pikangikum. These independent doctors reported a high incidence of disease caused by the neglect of the community's infrastructure. The homes have no running water or toilets. Sixteen people crowd into one small room without any water or bathroom facilities. Mothers have to walk two miles to get water to wash their babies, and walk two miles back with the bucket of water. This happens in the winter, as well.

There are 2,200 people being made sick; 600 babies are being made sick. That's 2,200 Pikangikum first nations people who are being made sick by the neglect of their infrastructure. This is what the independent report stated, which has now been brought to your attention by the Minister of Indian Affairs.

The Minister of Indian Affairs has asked you to visit Pikangikum so that you can see first-hand what the living conditions are like. This problem has been put in your hands. The health and safety of 2,200 Canadians—that's 2,200 first nations people—is in your hands. The health and safety of 600 babies is in your hands.

On behalf of the chief and council, elders, and people of Pikangikum, I'm asking you to go to their community. Just as the minister has asked you, I'm asking you to visit Pikangikum to see what the problems are and make recommendations. You have an important responsibility. Pikangikum's people will welcome you and assist you in carrying out your responsibilities. The people are anxious for you to come. The people look forward to treating you with Pikangikum hospitality and providing you with every resource to ensure that your observations are accurate and that you produce a quality report.

Pikangikum is accessible by air. You would fly into Winnipeg and then into Pikangikum by Wasaya Airways. It's a safe and stable community, with that stability provided by their strong culture and traditions.

Again, thank you for inviting me to appear before this committee on behalf of the Pikangikum First Nation.

With me is Professor Joseph Magnet. Chief Pascal has already written to you that he is a trusted, long-term adviser to Pikangikum First Nation, and he is pleased to answer any questions you may have.

Thank you.

• (0915)

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Magnet, would you like to say anything further?

**Mr. Joseph Magnet (Law Professor, University of Ottawa):** I'd be very happy to answer your questions, but if I might just remind everybody why this committee is assembled on this topic, it's because the minister wrote a letter to the committee marked "urgent" and asked the committee to carry out an immediate investigation into the circumstances at Pikangikum. The minister also asked the committee to meet in the community with representatives of Pikangikum as soon as possible and report back to him.

The occasion of the minister's letter was that a report had been prepared by the Northwestern Health Unit. I think the report is being translated and should be before you soon, if it's not already.

This is an independent report by doctors and public health professionals who travelled to Pikangikum on different occasions. They reported back as to the conditions they found, and in the report you will see that there was a high incidence of gastrointestinal, skin, urinary tract, eye, and ear infections, and lice infestations. The doctors reported that these were caused by neglect of the community's infrastructure—its water and sewer systems.

The doctors reported back—these are very experienced people who have been to reserves throughout northern Ontario, including Kashechewan—that the conditions witnessed at Pikangikum were the worst they had seen in the region, that health damage had already occurred, and that there was a high risk of more damage.

That's why we're here, because the minister asked you to look into this. With great interest, I read the public session of this committee in which officials from the Department of Indian Affairs appeared before you. I also read Mr. Howsam's remarks with great interest, where he said that things are very difficult, that it's very complicated, and that there are many reasons.

Mr. Valley asked him when the water would be fixed, and Mr. Howsam provided you no answer, no date—not 2010, 2012.... It's all very complicated; it's a big problem.

I think the committee has to ask itself if this is a satisfactory answer. This community faced some challenges 12 years ago, in 1995, and it was placed in co-management. It then made fantastic progress. It had a deficit of some million dollars. It cut all of the salaries—these are not people of great means—and it paid back the million dollars. It made terrific progress over that period.

The community had plans for a school, which it had worked up. The community had contracted for a road, and with its own funds built a road to the community—without the department's help. It worked up the big bureaucratic structure to produce the appropriate water and sewer plant by itself—without the department's help. This was bid, and the bids came in under what was in the capital plan.

Then the community was placed in third-party management in 2001, in circumstances the Federal Court called “patently unreasonable”, and which the Auditor General criticized. During the period it was in third-party management—some four years—all of these projects stopped. The department had complete control of the projects, but no progress was made. When the first nation had control, all of the projects were worked. When the department had control, nothing happened. Things stopped, and the result of it was this public health crisis, which is now before you.

I think you have to ask yourselves if it is true that it's just all very complicated and difficult, and everybody at Pikangikum is to blame, as Mr. Howsam is telling you, or is there something else going on? And is this something else perhaps typical of the responsibilities that engage this community day to day?

The minister has asked you to go to Pikangikum to carry out an immediate investigation, to go as soon as possible, and his letter is marked “urgent”.

• (0920)

Mr. Roger is bringing you an invitation from the chief, the council, and the elders asking you to come. The Pikangikum First Nation people, the 2,200 people, support what the minister has done. They think it's a good idea. They think you should travel there and see first-hand, with your own eyes.

The minister has asked you to hold hearings and investigations. The people of Pikangikum think that's a good idea. They support what the minister has done. They think that's a good way to deal with it, so that you can see with your own eyes what is going on there in this unfolding public health crisis that is putting the lives of babies and 2,200 people at risk.

**The Chair:** I just want to make sure you understand that the role of this committee is not necessarily to set policy and to study these issues, and it's not to interfere with the service delivery of the department. Even so, we're concerned about it and recognize the need. You have to recognize that if this committee were to start doing that, we would be at every community in Canada that has a need, and that is something that is concerning me as the chair, because there are a lot of needs out there. Where do we stop, and is that the mandate of our committee?

We are responding to a letter written by the minister because of his concern and he was looking for counsel. I'm leaving it to the committee to make the decision on whether they want to get involved, because there is the risk that if we open this door because we are very compassionate people and really want to see some changes and help the Pikangikum First Nation, then you have remember that we open the door for everyone. I'm not directing the committee, but that is the challenge that is before us.

I'm going to start with Mr. Lemay, please.

• (0925)

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Marc Lemay (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, BQ):** I rise on a point of order, Mr. Chair.

I see that the witnesses mention a report. I would like that report to be tabled before the committee so that we can look at it. We have

been hearing about a report for at least three meetings, and I would like to have it so that we can at least examine it.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** First of all, Mr. Lemay, you are correct. I just heard of that report from Mr. Magnet late last week. I have asked the department whether they have that report and I haven't had any word back from the department. I think it's important—

**Mr. Roger Valley (Kenora, Lib.):** Mr. Chair, I tabled it last week. That was the document I tabled with the clerk on Wednesday.

**The Chair:** Sorry, Mr. Valley. I can't recall it.

Does anybody else...?

**A voice:** Yes, I have it.

**The Chair:** Mr. Bruinooge.

**Mr. Rod Bruinooge (Winnipeg South, CPC):** We might have one too many Liberals at the microphone.

**Mr. Harold Albrecht (Kitchener—Conestoga, CPC):** Mr. Chair, in fairness, the report may have been tabled, but if my recollection is correct, it was indicated that it was a provincial report. I thought you questioned whether it would be valuable for this committee to have it or not.

I'd love to have it. I agree with Mr. Lemay. We need to have that in front of us.

**The Chair:** Is it the consensus that we get this report out?

I instruct the clerk to please have it translated and to make it available to each committee member.

Thank you, Mr. Lemay.

Mr. Merasty.

**Mr. Gary Merasty (Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River, Lib.):** Thanks, Mr. Chair.

I welcome our guests who are here this morning to talk about this issue.

From my past life as a chief, dealing in my tribal council with communities in similar situations, I know that these are tough to deal with. The dire situation the community finds itself in is great, as is the willingness to act to resolve this. I think the driving force here is to act quickly.

The report we just spoke about highlights the circumstances of the community. You went through a whole bunch of health issues—for example, having to walk four miles for water, the children being sick, the community members being sick—that I know are factual. I believe it 110%. I can see that in this community and I've seen it in other communities as well.

The outcome of the report, the recommendation, is to act immediately, to deal with this now. That's what I'm hearing now and that's what I've heard for the last little while. That action requires infrastructure to be built so that we can finish the water and sewer, finish the hydro line, and finish all the different things that need to get done. On top of that, we need to improve the social service package, the safety net provisions within that community for all community members.

The community wants action, as I mentioned, and I think this committee wants to see action as well. This was represented to the minister. His attention was brought to this issue by the community, to please act now. I keep stressing that point because that's the key: please act now.

The minister then wrote us a letter asking us to go. But from my experience dealing with committees—as a member of a committee and then as a chief, being on the receiving end of a committee visit—my concern is that we can go there but we can't do anything. We can't force the minister to act. We can tell him to act, but he may not. And we need action. If we go up there and they wait for us to do a report....

My concern is that winter roads are tough to build nowadays, with global warming occurring. In some of my northern communities, we're lucky to have winter roads for two weeks. As a committee we'd be glad to go, if the community wants us there and is inviting us there, but I'm worried that we may not cause action. Only the minister can initiate action. He can initiate that yesterday, if you know what I mean. We need the minister to say that we have to get ready for the winter roads so that we can haul the construction material in, so let's tender it and do all these things; the construction season is short.

My concern, then, speaking not as a committee member but as a person who has lived on a reserve for virtually all of my life and who knows the situations faced by a remote community, is that if the minister doesn't make the decision tomorrow to move forward with the infrastructure, to move forward with the social safety net improvements that need to happen, then they may not happen in time. They may not happen quickly enough.

I don't want this committee to be used as an excuse to tie up more time. I can feel the dire situation of the community members. The minister has the executive authority to make the decision to act. This committee doesn't, and that's my concern.

I think you'll find that the committee is interested in going as long as the community is inviting them—that will be debated among the community—but we cannot compel the minister to act. The minister has this report and the minister knows the situation. Everybody's talking around the chief and council and around the community, but nobody's talking directly to the community, and that's what needs to happen. In my humble opinion, the minister has to make that direct contact and make that direct commitment to act to begin to resolve these issues.

• (0930)

I'd hate for the community to have to depend on this committee, which can't compel the minister to act. We can write a report, make observations, but there is no guarantee he'll act. I think they want to.

I think the biggest thing is that we need the minister to commit to addressing these. So I'm wondering if you understand my perspective and whether you agree with maybe getting the minister to act immediately in addressing these.

**Mr. Joe Magnet:** Mr. Merasty, those are very thoughtful comments, which are appreciated.

It's very interesting living in a democracy. Power is spread all over the place and we each have our roles in the democracy. The committee has a role and you quite properly point out that its role here is investigatory and advisory, and it's an extremely important function to write a report. Especially when the committee travels, everybody is interested in what it does and what it has to say, so the committee's report does gather a certain amount of strength all by itself.

The minister works through the department and the minister can't himself pick up the knife and make the incision. He works through the department. And the department came forward and said before you that it's very complicated. There are “issues of maintenance”, Mr. Howsam said. He said, “There's nothing straightforward here. It's all very complex and very challenging.”

So that's what the minister is hearing from his officials.

**Mr. Gary Merasty:** If I can just interject there for a second, I understand exactly what you're saying. We don't really have an advisory role as a committee. It's not our role, and that's why I don't want to have the wrong expectations raised, number one.

Number two, the minister can pick up the scalpel. I've seen this minister and other ministers in the past pick up the scalpel and act without the department's blessing, for lack of a better term. If they think it's a dire enough situation they have the authority to pick up the scalpel and act immediately, regardless of what reports or what the department has been saying.

That's my concern, because I would really love to see action tomorrow.

• (0935)

**The Chair:** We're running out of time, unfortunately.

Mr. Lemay, do you have something?

Mr. Lévesque, please.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Yvon Lévesque:** Good morning, Mr. Magnet and Mrs. Desrochers. I don't know if you came all the way from Constance Lake to be here today or if you were already in Ottawa. Nonetheless, if you travelled, it is quite a stretch.

We received some people in committee, namely the elected representatives of the riding. According to the information we obtained in this committee, your community would own a reservoir and a person would be trained to watch this reservoir. You would also have a hydro line which would go up to the community and a stretch of road would be built where a bridge would be missing.

What I regret most about the whole approach about your community is that the committee was considered as an inquiry committee. I'm disappointed because I regarded this committee as a case-study committee which can make recommendations to the department and to the government. In this sense, I don't understand, unless after having heard people, there was a misunderstanding of the situation.

I would understand that we should travel to go and see first-hand how things are. However, we generally are pretty well able, through the testimonies of the people who come before us, to understand the problems and to make the needed recommendations. According to the information, we would have some difficulty to reach the community or to agree with it. I would like to have your opinion on this.

I know that in my riding there are communities where there are no access roads. In my area, the people we cannot reach by road aren't chiefs but Inuit mayors. When I call them they pick me up at the plane. Sometimes I wait for two or three minutes, but I can visit.

The problem in Pikangikum seems to be linked to the access to the community once you are there, if sometimes appointments are made.

I would like to hear your explanations on this.

**Mr. Joe Magnet:** I'll answer in English because I think my remarks will be more accurate this way.

[English]

First of all, as you mentioned, this is a fly-in community. There's easy access from Ottawa to Winnipeg and Winnipeg to Pikangikum, and you are there. That's the first thing.

I think the second thing is that it is a very interesting place to go. You have heard some testimony before you that it is a very traditional community where the elders are extremely important. It is Ojibway-speaking, with traditional values and very wonderful people. It is something of an eye-opener to see what people have accomplished in the circumstances they're in, where they are trying to go, and what challenges they are facing.

Of course, the committee normally hears witnesses and makes reports, but it has been asked to do a different function, and it's in the committee's hands whether it wants to accept that function. I think the opportunity to see first-hand the opportunities....

I thought Mr. Albrecht had a very important interchange with the officials when there was a reference to the Whitefeather Forest and the potential for 300 jobs, which would have a dramatic impact on the economy of this region. In other words, the community itself has worked this up without any help from the department and sometimes over the department's resistance. This offers an economic future that not all first nations have. Yet that opportunity is being obstructed by people needing water, toilets, and infrastructure, and the community is being held back. I think what you're being asked to do is a very important task: see this opportunity and report on these challenges and see if you have some suggestions to make that would be creative and helpful.

The community, of course, wants you to come, and they welcome you. They think that your role is very important, notwithstanding the important comments that have been made.

I hope these remarks are responsive to your question.

● (0940)

**The Chair:** You have less than a minute, Mr. Lévesque.

[Translation]

**Mr. Yvon Lévesque:** The question that remains is whether the community is open to a visit of department officials who could assess the situation and act.

We received some Ontario government officials who talked to us about hydro, for example, of which your community should benefit. Thus, it seems that there is a little snag about the delivery of this system. Why? I don't have to judge all by myself.

However, is the community open to cooperation with the rest of nations surrounding it?

[English]

**Mr. Joe Magnet:** I'll reply, but Ms. Desrochers has some remarks to make.

My understanding is that the officials are going to the community tomorrow. They, of course, are welcome. Mr. Howsam has been there once before, and the new regional director general and her officials are welcome and will be given all hospitality.

There is the usual process, which is a work-up of these projects through a big bureaucratic process, getting them into the capital plan, getting bids, starting construction. The department, of course, explained to you that it is going to go through that process, that things are challenging and difficult, and sooner or later it will get around to getting all these projects built. That's what it said—over a ten year period, or perhaps later.

You're asked to do something else. You're not asked to substitute for the department, but here is a public health crisis. It's not down the road; it's now. How did it happen? How can it happen in Canada? Yes, Mr. Merasty is absolutely right that other communities face challenges and people sometimes expect miracles, but this one has been brought to your attention, and independently, by an independent health unit.

Here's the challenge. Is the committee satisfied to allow the bureaucratic process to work itself out, and the officials to come here and testify, and that will be it? We'll make our remarks, and that will be it? Or does the committee want to accept the challenge the minister posed to it and look for itself to see whether it's satisfied or whether it has any creative input to add to this process that has produced a serious public health crisis?

I think Ms. Desrochers wants to make some remarks.

**The Chair:** Could you be concise? We're actually out of time.

**Mrs. Charlene Desrochers:** Yes, I'll be a few minutes.

There is in fact an invite from the people of Pikangikum to the standing committee to visit. I just want to make that clear. It was in my speaking notes.

I realize you can't force the minister to act, but your report will increase public awareness of the problem, which hopefully will put pressure on the minister to act. I realize you can't visit every community, because it will open the floodgates, but there are parameters that you can put on the process.

I believe part of your role as a standing committee, and I'm not meaning any disrespect to the committee, is to learn to be sensitive to the needs of aboriginal people. I don't know how many people here have visited an aboriginal community, but this would be a good opportunity. You can hear from witnesses in front of a committee, but if you haven't been to the community and don't see the environment, it's hard to assess the whole situation. Pikangikum does welcome the committee.

● (0945)

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Madam Crowder.

**Ms. Jean Crowder (Nanaimo—Cowichan, NDP):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank both of you for coming to appear before us today. I also want to pass on thanks to the chief, council, and elders for passing their message on. It's an important message.

I have read the health unit report, and it's very troubling. From the testimony we heard from the department, it's also very troubling that the department has been well aware of the challenges facing the community. Mr. Howsam talked about being in the community in 2004. It's now late 2006 and we're continuing to have a conversation about infrastructure problems that have been longstanding.

I have a couple of other comments. I would argue that the way to deal with a public health crisis is not by committee. Committees have a life of their own, whether or not it's a standing committee. I don't care what it is, when we have a public health crisis we jump into action with some framework that's already been laid out on how to deal with it. We only have to look at Walkerton, for example, where there was a crisis around water, people quickly moved to deal with the crisis, and then took a step back and looked at how that happened. We have a public health crisis right now in this community that requires some immediate action, and it would not be by committee.

As Mr. Merasty clearly pointed out, it is within the purview of the minister to move in and deal with the situation. We have other examples where that has happened. Patuanak is a good example of a community that faced a devastating crisis and was rebuilt within one year. So the minister can allocate resources and funding to quickly deal with a problem that is deemed a crisis. The minister can take action today with the department.

To re-emphasize, we have no authority as a committee to direct a department. I wish it were true that by raising public awareness we could actually have things change. You just need to point at Kashechewan as an example of a community that still hasn't seen the changes that need to happen, despite the reports, studies, and all the kinds of things that have happened. In Garden Hill there is a serious outbreak of tuberculosis. Port Alberni has just reported an outbreak of tuberculosis. If that isn't a public health crisis I don't know what is. It often leads to infrastructure problems, resourcing issues, funding issues, lack of adequate health care, and the list goes on and on.

Just to let you know, I have visited many first nations communities, and I think most of the committee members have either lived on reserve or spent substantial time on reserves. So many

of us have had a bird's-eye view of the very unfortunate conditions many people are living in.

If one of your expectations is to raise public awareness through a visit by the committee, there are other mechanisms to do that. I wonder if you could specifically respond to what you see happening, if the committee were to travel to the community, that would not happen in any other way.

**Mr. Joe Magnet:** That's an excellent question. The committee is asked to report, and the committee would bring to this process a pair of fresh eyes to look at the problem. The community thinks that fresh eyes are necessary to look at it, and that the process the department has described to you is not adequate.

● (0950)

**Ms. Jean Crowder:** But does the community understand that we have no ability to allocate funding and resources? I've sat on a number of standing committees now and we've done some very good work, but unfortunately those reports have gathered dust.

**Mr. Joe Magnet:** As I said in my response to the first question, it's very interesting to be in a democracy. We all wish we had the power to wave the magic wand and make things happen. We all think the minister, the committee, the community, and the bureaucrats should do something. What we can do is our roles.

**Ms. Jean Crowder:** That's not normally a role the committee plays. That's my point.

**Mr. Joe Magnet:** This is not a normal situation in Pikangikum. The interesting suggestion from the minister, viewed with curiosity, frankly, by the community, is now seen as a thoughtful and welcome way to make a fresh intervention into what is, as you've very eloquently pointed out, a very difficult problem. It's a problem that's not unique to this community but is very severe in this community at the moment.

So yes, what you say is true, the public health crisis is not something solved by committee, but in a democracy there are other authorities that are meant to respond. The fact that the committee assumes a role, takes an interest, and looks with fresh eyes doesn't relieve other people of their responsibility. It doesn't relieve the minister of responsibility, doesn't relieve the department of responsibility, and doesn't relieve the public health authorities of responsibility.

The committee has a role. That role has been given to the committee. The committee can say that others should do their job and that you don't have any input to make that's useful. That judgment is open to the committee. But the community thinks that the committee has great expertise and great wisdom, and that it can make a useful intervention.

For those reasons the community is inviting the committee and hopes that the committee will accept its invitation.

**Ms. Jean Crowder:** Am I out of time?

**The Chair:** Yes, thank you.

To that, I just want to say that I think that was the spirit of the letter that was written.

Mr. Bruinooge.

**Mr. Rod Bruinooge:** Thank you.

I want to thank you for coming in today. I appreciate your commentary.

I appreciate as well the invitation to come to Pikangikum. It sounds like a community that obviously has issues that need to be dealt with. At the same time, there are a lot of good things happening there that I'd be very interested in seeing.

Personally, I would be very supportive of coming to the community. I'm not sure how the committee is going to vote on this matter, but I'm hopeful that we as a committee could have the opportunity to visit your community. The kind invitation is appreciated.

I'd like to ask a few questions in relation to some of the infrastructure issues. It sounds like they've been outstanding for many years, even though we've had an Indian Affairs minister residing in that riding. There's a bridge, though, and it seems the bridge, an object that's often referred to, is a bit of a stumbling block. Could you perhaps give us more background on this infamous bridge that seems always to be about to be built, and is not?

**Mr. Joe Magnet:** First of all, Mr. Bruinooge, thank you for those comments. They are welcome and they will be conveyed to the community. I know they'll be appreciated.

I did read about the bridge issue from the December 7 transcripts. What you're referring to is a road going north and a bridge to be built somewhere across the Berens River. I did read the interesting interchange that you had with officials about the bridge.

I will confess immediately that you know much more about this issue than do I or Ms. Desrochers. It may be that when you're in the community you will have an interesting discussion with chief and council and portfolio holders about that. We're certainly aware of the road. We're certainly aware of the bridge issue. We know that location is an issue. I just don't think I can add to the balance of considerations that are before chief and council, bureaucrats, or government.

• (0955)

**Mr. Rod Bruinooge:** My interest, though, in this one piece of the infrastructure puzzle is that it seems so many other elements—housing, for example, or the sewer and water construction that's required—are likely dramatically impacted by the fact that all of this material needs to be shipped either by air, goodness forbid, or of course the ice roads. There must be a massive bottleneck in terms of being able to implement so many of these things.

My biggest interest, I guess, in coming and meeting with the community would be to identify what outstanding issues there are in order to get this key project done so that things like water and sewer could quickly flow after that.

**Mr. Joe Magnet:** I know the community would certainly look forward to working with you on that. I'm personally very pleased to learn of your interest. I would undertake to liaise with you to find out more and to perhaps satisfy you on exactly what is going on, but I don't know very much now.

On the challenges posed by moving material for infrastructure work, I mentioned that the community used its own funds to build a

road. It's called Nungesser Road or the Nungesser Road extension. It goes almost to the community or almost to the shores of the lake opposite the community, where material could be moved by barge.

To my understanding, I have never heard that the northern road and the bridge are tied to infrastructure challenges. In other words, I will correct myself if I'm subsequently wrong, but I've never heard that this poses any difficulty in dealing with the infrastructure problems. It is quite a separate issue.

I have heard and the committee has heard that electricity is a problem. But I again believe there are many ways this can be overcome, perhaps through the temporary use of a second diesel that could then go to some other community. I think these are things the committee could usefully look into.

If I could sum up what could become a complicated technical discussion, my understanding is there is no obstacle to solving these infrastructure problems, whether it's by transport or not. What is really wanted is the will and determination to do it.

**Mr. Rod Bruinooge:** What about the traditional lifestyle? Do you believe we'd have some advocates for the maintenance of that? It seems to be that the way they have continued to live, despite the modern lifestyle that surrounds them in Canada, is a very proud element of the community

Perhaps Ms. Desrochers has a comment on that.

**Mr. Joe Magnet:** She may well have a comment. It's very interesting.

Everybody needs a bit of modesty about it. It's a very fascinating thing, but I think a degree of modesty is needed. You have heard testimony that it's a traditional community. Having been there many times, I can tell you it is.

Having said that, this is the only community I know of that has managed to do the work and invest millions of dollars of its own money, without INAC support, to bring it to a state where it can have a sustainable forestry licence. Some people say a sustainable forestry licence is like a licence to print money.

All of the big companies, Capital Home and those kinds of places, have a green movement behind them that requires them to buy sustainable forestry products. This is the coming thing.

This community is built into that. It is a very difficult thing to do. If you were to come to the community, you would hear from Ontario officials who said these are great people to work with and they have made fantastic progress.

Yes, it is very traditional, but it also has an ability to do things that many others, including non-traditional communities, cannot do.

I don't know if you have comments about that.

•(1000)

**The Chair:** We're out of time, and we have some comments to make on our post-secondary education report. I'm going to have to end the questioning and thank the witnesses for being here today.

I'm going to ask for a quick in-camera meeting with the committee members to give direction to the clerk on how we want to proceed. We'll then move on to post-secondary education.

Thank you very much to the witnesses for being here on short notice.

**Mr. Joe Magnet:** Thank you, Mr. Mayes.

On behalf of the chief, council, and elders, thank you very much to all committee members for hearing us out.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

*[Proceedings continue in camera]*

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