

First Nations elders gather at Tyendinaga

Posted 10 hours ago

W. BRICE MCVICAR

The Intelligencer

TYENDINAGA · An "untapped resource" is being mined for ideas and information during a three-day conference aimed at addressing issues faced by First Nations communities.

Those communities have a wealth of information in the form of elders, said Deputy Grand Chief Denise Stonefish of the Association of Iroquois and Allied Indians (AIAI). The association, which consists of eight First Nations communities in Ontario, is holding its annual Elders Gathering this week with approximately 160 attendees from those communities.

"I think involving our elders is important and we feel that they have wisdom and knowledge they can share with us · the political leadership · and our communities so we can move forward toward independence," Stonefish said.

The three-day conference involves discussions on an array of issues facing First Nations communities including safe drinking water, prescription drug abuse and treaties. These issues and the way to approach them, Stonefish said, require attention from all members of a community but also the knowledge and experience elders have and can share.

One such elder, Garry Sault of the Mississaugas of the New Credit, said the conference is useful as it allows members of the community who may not always be involved in discussions and decision making to hear about matters and offer their views. Sometimes, he said, elders feel their voices aren't heard.

"It gives us a chance to voice our opinions on where the leadership should be going," he said. "If they don't have any direction how are they supposed to look after our needs?"

One issue that needs to be addressed, he said, is the loss of culture. From stories to language, Sault said, First Nations people are losing their history. Too many communities are being pressured by colonial influences and education which are slowly erasing customs and traditions, he said.

Chief R. Don Maracle of the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte explained the annual conference travels from community to community each year and has been in Tyendinaga in the past. Regardless, he said, it is a welcome event and is important in providing elders with a forum.

"It's important to engage the elders on current issues and glean their combined wisdom and knowledge in areas of social services, health education and culture," he said. "To a large extent the elders have played a very important role in our society."

Stonefish explained the knowledge gathered during the three days will be used to assist the AIAI in developing strategies for the association.

bmcvicar@intelligencer.ca

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