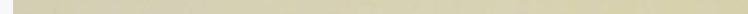


Hiawatha, Curve Lake and five other First Nations accept \$1.1B Williams Treaties settlement, will consult communities on how to spend money

Hiawatha First Nation will receive more than \$150 million which will go to projects identified by the community

The settlement comes from historic agreements with the government which took away land and removed rights to hunt and fish.

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Hiawatha First Nation Chief Laurie Carr goes over a map of the region and explains the different treaties apply to the area. – Taylor Clysdale/Metroland

PETERBOROUGH This Week. By Taylor Clysdale Peterborough This Week

In a historic settlement signalling the end of a decades-long court case against the federal government, seven First Nations communities are receiving a total of \$1.1 billion, with [Hiawatha First Nation](#) being awarded \$153.9 million.

And both Hiawatha and [Curve Lake First Nation](#) will start a community consultation process to decide how that money is spent.

On Thursday, Sept. 14, the federal government announced it had reached an agreement with seven First Nations that initially sought to hold the government accountable for disputes over the 1923 Williams Treaties.

According to [the Canadian Encyclopedia by Historica Canada](#), the treaties were created without negotiations and the government dictated the terms to the First Nations.

The treaties saw the Chippewa and Mississauga peoples surrender their land for a lump sum of money and give up their hunting, fishing and harvesting rights outside of their reserves.

Indigenous leaders, including Hiawatha's Chief Laurie Carr, have since argued the treaties were not signed in good faith, as the First Nations were not allowed a lawyer and did not understand what they were agreeing to due to a limited understanding of English.

Carr says the treaties were signed under the impression the Crown and settlers were trustworthy and First Nations would be taken care of, which was not the case.

In 1992 the seven First Nations took the government of Canada to court to seek justice for the agreement which cost them their land and rights.

Carr says the news is astounding, as many believed they would never see the end of the case.

"It's really overwhelming and exciting and unbelievable," she says.

Carr's father, Frank Cowie, was the chief 30 years ago when the process to seek justice against the federal government started, so she's glad she could continue his legacy.

"It feels like it's come full circle, I'm honoured to be here at this moment and see this be resolved," she says.

As well as the \$1.1-billion settlement, being paid out in part by both the governments of Canada and Ontario, each of the seven First Nations will be allowed to expand by 11,000 acres of land and the hunting, fishing and harvesting rights of those communities will be recognized and respected.

The Canadian and Ontario governments are also promising to apologize for the unfair terms of the treaties.

Chief Phyllis Williams of Curve Lake says the apology is significant because it gives comfort and relief to the people of these communities who have been fighting for decades to prove they were treated poorly.

"It just confirmed there has been some wrongdoing," she says.

Williams says she's now able to express relief since the confidentiality agreement around the settlement has been lifted, being unable to talk about it until this point.

She says she's overwhelmed with emotion and she feels "lighter" now with this issue resolved.

She adds there are many people who should receive credit for this victory as the court case has been fought for decades by previous chiefs and band councils, as well as others in her community who helped further the case.

"Even the elders and our ancestors who provided witness statements and their reflections of the times when the treaties were developed," she says.

Carr says since the Williams Treaties were signed, men in the Hiawatha community as well as the six others have been wrongfully jailed for hunting and fishing in their territories.

One of the more notable cases was the one of George Howard, a Hiawatha member who was charged in 1985 for fishing on the Otonabee River out of season, which he said was his protected right.

His case went to the Supreme Court where in 1994 the court ruled against him, using the Williams Treaties as evidence to say his people previously surrendered their fishing rights.

The recognition of hunting, fishing and harvesting rights is a big win for Curve Lake and other communities, says Williams. Being able to expand her community's land base will also help as [Curve Lake is on a peninsula](#) where there's a limited amount of land to work with.

As for the financial element, both First Nations will reach out to their members to find out how best to spend the money.

While the exact amount Curve Lake will receive has not yet been made public, Williams says her community will hold a vote in October to prioritize how to use it.

"We've allowed our members to contribute their thoughts and comments in terms of where they would like to see what will happen with these dollars," she says.

Some of those priorities include clean water, road repairs, replacing the senior's centre, building a new school and the upcoming construction of a new subdivision.

"There's quite a list that we're developing and putting some cost estimates toward," she says.

Carr says Hiawatha is working on a comprehensive community plan which, with consultation from members, will decide where the money will go.

"We haven't made decisions, we want the community to make those decisions," she says.

Until those decisions are made the money will be invested to ensure it's secure, she adds.

The seven First Nations have also agreed to each set \$10 million aside "to be used directly toward projects identified jointly by the seven First Nations," says Carr.

For Curve Lake, that money will go toward building a museum to collect Indigenous archeological finds and burial items.

Carr says while her community has a cultural centre, there is a need for proper museum conditions to better maintain those artifacts.

"We need a place to house our history," she adds.

What the settlement, from the money to the restoration of land and rights, represents is that future generations will have a brighter future, both chiefs say.

"I have it a little better than my ancestors did, and our children will have it a little better than we did," says Carr.

Williams says there's a pow wow this weekend in Curve Lake and she expects to be celebrating this historic victory there with her community.

But she adds while this is a momentous occasion, there's still a lot of work that needs to be done.



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