

Bill Elliot's speaking notes for interview panel on 'Municipal Leadership in Inclusion'

**Come Together Alberta Conference
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I would like to acknowledge the wisdom, culture, and traditions of the Cree First Nations, on whose traditional, Treaty 6 land we gather.

When I say "we", I am referring to the City of Wetaskiwin, as it's hard let go after many years on Council.

A. Motivation to be an Inclusion Champion

I was raised to cheer for the underdog and help people, regardless of race or ability. My Dad always cheered for the visiting team when we went to hockey games. I asked why and he said, "Because they have fewer fans."

I was principal in a school that had 30% Indigenous students and we had pow wows and feasts, at school. I saw discrimination first-hand, from students, parents, and staff. (That was 20 years ago).

Wetaskiwin has red-neck people, as do other municipalities, and we need to challenge their prejudices.

As City leaders, we were responsible to set the tone.

Because we are geographically close to Maskwacis, our community benefits economically and culturally. 20 000 people spend about

\$60 million annually. Our health facilities and social support systems are much better than municipalities of similar size because of our neighboring community.

However, there is an historical divide between our communities so we have a weird dynamic where we rely on Maskwacis and they rely on us. There has been racial tension for decades and it was something Council decided to address.

2011 - City of Wetaskiwin joined the Coalition of Municipalities Against Racism and Discrimination to illustrate our commitment to being a more inclusive and welcoming community. We had educational sessions with the WIC staff and also did cultural training with administration and Council.

2013 was proclaimed year of Truth and Reconciliation and we made our community aware of the upcoming TRC hearings in Edmonton.

Schools and churches really got involved in learning about residential schools and participating in TRC learning sessions.

Prior to the TRC hearings, a committee of people from Maskwacis & Wetaskiwin planned a Building Bridges workshop, in Wetaskiwin, to gain a better understanding of what the TRC was about.

I had lived in Wetaskiwin for 41 years and knew nothing about residential schools.

The workshop took place in May 2013 and speakers included residential school survivors, social workers, health service providers and Elders.

As co-chair of this workshop we were pleased to have 150 grade 10 students from schools at Maskwacis and Wetaskiwin, during the daytime sessions and 250 adults for the evening session.

A red - neck doing round dance with Indigenous lady on either side of him, was a highlight.

Prior to the TRC hearings in Edmonton, hearings were held at Ermineskin Cree Nation and I attended. I was very moved, found out that some of my friends and parents of my students, were residential school survivors. I asked the Commissioners if I might speak, if there was time. I was allowed to speak and was overwhelmed by how much my words were appreciated and how quickly the word spread that I had spoken.

Then, TRC Commissioner, Marie Wilson, phoned and asked if I would be an Honorary Witness at the TRC hearings in Edmonton.

She explained that I would attend the four days of hearings and share my reflections with the audience and the Commission, on the last day.

I would also commit to being a lifelong advocate for residential schools survivors.

Eventually, I said yes.

Hearing the horror stories about cultural genocide and how the residential schools tried to "killing the Indian in the child" moved me to tears, many times.

Since that time, I have done my best to meet my obligations as an Honorary Witness and lead Council toward fulfilling some of the Calls to Action from the TRC, as well as speaking at local service clubs and churches.

I want to state that:

I feel that inclusion includes people of different race, language, religion, ethnicity, color, ability, age, sexual orientation, gender, beliefs, health, economic status, and history (ex-convicts)

B. Unique Factor that aids/hinders inclusion.

After attending the “History Timeline” session, it makes sense that knowing what exclusion is will aid in our understanding of inclusion.

Fake news, mistruths, prejudice, pre-conceived notions and rumors hinder inclusion.

Allowing these to perpetuate is the worst thing we can do.

A positive local newspaper editor who attends cultural functions, puts pictures on front page, and writes positive articles about the functions, will be a great way to enhance inclusion. The municipal communication department should be promoting events and posting pictures on social media, as well.

Wetaskiwin is fortunate to have an MLA, Bruce Hinkley, who spends quality time with our Indigenous community. Premier Notley was the first Premier to ever visit Maskwacis, at the MLA’s request. Indigenous Minister Feehan has been to Maskwacis numerous times, as have other Ministers.

These visits are accompanied by pictures being posted on social media and news articles being written.

All of us need to establish relationships with, and develop an understanding of, others. We need to get out of our “comfort zone”.

C. As public figure, how to deal with those who are resistant to policies/programs intended to support inclusion.

Lead with your heart!

Do you listen to the vocal minority or the silent majority?

Although there may be dissenters, keep moving in a positive direction and don’t be deterred by negativity.

E.g. business cards with Cree syllabics on the back - some didn’t want it; we went ahead and ordered cards for those who wanted them. Then staff wanted their business cards with Cree syllabics;

Didn’t want entry signs - went ahead - 4-3 vote

Lobby council and staff, regarding the positive aspects of inclusion and invite the “nay sayers” to events.

Better yet, invite the “nay sayers” to sit on committees!

Having staff support is important if inclusion is to progress.

- plant seeds; water them; let them take time to bloom;

D. Steps to re-think programming/planning are done to become more inclusive;

Seek first to Understand

- talk to people; engage them

- more importantly, listen to them!

So often we figure out how we want to be inclusive, without ever asking those we want to include, how they want to be engaged or what is important to them

- Take baby steps - City of Wetaskiwin Council & employees' business cards have the Cree language on the back;
- City of Wetaskiwin entry signs say "welcome" in Cree;
- Have meetings involving food. People are more willing to meet over a meal and it's much more relaxing;
- Find advocates - they tell one person and so on;
- Promote events in a variety of ways and post pictures;

E. Most defining outcome as an effort to become more inclusive

Inclusion provides opportunities and access to many more ideas and resources.

The Treaty 6 flag was raised, in perpetuity, in front of City Hall, on the exact day of the 140th Anniversary of Chief Bobtail's signing Treaty 6, with all four Cree First Nations Chiefs attending; first time we had all four chiefs and all of our Council together.

That event, including all of the ceremonies - protocol with tobacco, smudging, prayer by an Elder, and the presenting of blankets to all dignitaries, was reflective of 7 years of work, internally and externally, to become more inclusive, build trust, and take steps toward reconciliation.

Canadian Tire Store raised Treaty 6 flag, last month, with appropriate ceremony & protocols as has one of our schools; 6 more stores have expressed an interest, as have other schools.

Additionally:

- Council members were given ribbon shirts from Samson Cree Nation Council;
- City signed a Joint Fire/Disaster Agreement with 4, Cree First Nations, County

F. Suggestions to motivate citizens/organizations to become more inclusive:

Begin events/meetings by acknowledging that we are on Treaty land.

Have Council and staff take Cultural Awareness training, share in a Blanket Exercise, and do the Walk of Privilege.

- i. Workshops - "Building Bridges" - get people together for a reason
- ii. Understand other's cultures and attend their functions - pow wows, ceremonies, fundraisers, golf tournaments, dances, dinners, anniversaries, grand openings; they're fun!

(Tri - Muni golf with County and Town of Millet - Council and staff from Millet, County, & City of Wetaskiwin have an annual golf tournament)

Get people involved & try new things:

Our area is hosting the Lieutenant Governor's Arts Awards Gala next year; first time outside "big City; going to involve all cultural groups for month of September with a "Celebration of the Arts" throughout the Battle River region.

Council and staff wear pink shirts on Pink Shirt Day (anti bullying) and Orange Shirts on Orange Shirt Day in the spirit of reconciliation and hope for generations of children to come.

I spoke to Mid -Sized City Mayors about the TRC and two municipalities Proclaimed a Year of Truth and Reconciliation.

Sign up for newsletters - I receive the Samson and Ermineskin Cree Nations' newsletters and forward to everyone on my email list. This shares the many wonderful things happening at Maskwacis with many people.

Befriend people/organizations from other cultures, on Facebook, and share their posts.

Delete emails with ethnic jokes and tell sender that you don't appreciate them.

Some examples of what is being done in Wetaskiwin:

- Hospital an Indigenous Culture Room;
- Health Foundation has an Indigenous Board member;
- All schools have Indigenous Liaison workers and school board has an appointed Indigenous trustee;
- Some schools have a smudge room
- Library has Indigenous Community worker who delivers books to Maskwacis and Pe Sakastew Healing Centre;
- Residents of Maskwacis have free access to City library and its services.
- Library hosts dancers/ storytellers;
- City has Indigenous person taking lead on Cultural Friendship Centre;

- Heritage Museum has Indigenous Arts & Craft sale, quarterly;
- Pioneer of the Year was Bruce Cutknife, storyteller from Maskwacis;
- Keynote speaker at this year's 26th Annual Mayor's Prayer Breakfast was Chief Randy Ermineskin of the Ermineskin First Nation;
- Mayor's Prayer Breakfast committee consisted of myself and members of the Wetaskiwin Ministerial Association - have become friends with them and have attended many church services in Wetaskiwin.
- The City publically welcome Syrian families, at a Council meeting, and presented them with gifts from various local businesses.
- City has been twinned with the Town of Ashoro, Japan for 25 years. Last year 60 Japanese high schools students were billeted in private homes, in Wetaskiwin.
- Hosted Filipino Independence Day celebration for AB & SK last year on City land and our staff assisted with the set-up & take down. This is happening, again, this year.
- City initiated a Liaison Committee, now called the Collaboration Committee, consisting of Council members from each Cree First Nation, the County of Wetaskiwin, and the City of Wetaskiwin. They meet regularly to share information and discuss issues.
- City and Ermineskin Cree Nation developed a joint, economic development proposal.

iii) personally invite/encourage people from other cultures to sit on committees, Boards;

iv) Celebrate successes with food and media coverage; take lots of pictures and post them;

Participate in Blanket Ceremony as a Council and staff;

Have a Council sweat with your Indigenous neighbors.

Lead by example. Walk the Talk.

G. Municipal governments should be investing their time/resources

Municipalities have limited resources and it's difficult deciding where to place tax dollars.

I think we can start with:

- cultural awareness training for staff/Council;
- Have them participate in a blanket exercise;

- Invite other elected officials & administrators for a social gathering with a limited agenda include Councils, schools Boards

Enjoy and care for each other.

(Be aware of culture - wine & cheese functions don't work with Indigenous persons)

Plan events together.

Invite other cultural groups to events in your community and attend events in their community)

- we budgeted money for pow wows

H. One call-to-action

What to think about/do when they return home? Encourage them to think about:

As an educator and elected official, I attended many professional development sessions.

It's a great learning experience to go to a workshop/conference and become excited about something you heard..

Don't let your enthusiasm and commitment wane, once you get home; make a plan and follow up, rather than procrastinating.

If it's a priority, make it a priority.

Walk the Talk. Get involved. Be visible.

Cold - stop conversations that are harmful to our neighbors.