

North West Territories Good Governance conference

Gord Hume - February 28, 2013

Stepping out of my hotel lobby at 4:45am heading to the airport, the crisp Arctic air is certainly a refreshing eye-opener, but I am still warmed by the hospitality and friendships that have developed quickly during my two days at the North West Territories' "Good Governance" biannual conference in Yellowknife.

I was invited as the opening keynote speaker for the conference, and came away tremendously impressed by the municipal delegates and by the territorial Municipal and Community Affairs (MACA) ministry officials that organized and ran the conference.

MACA runs what I believe to be the only ministry-operated School of Community Government program that has taught and graduated many municipal officials in a variety of disciplines and skill sets. The pride of the recipients as they were awarded their diplomas was evident. MACA officials then honoured each of the 33 NWT municipalities for their accomplishments during the past year, presenting them with a lovely plaque and—he said immodestly—an autographed copy of "10 Trends for Smarter Communities". It was a very touching ceremony.

Yellowknife as the capital is a thriving city of about 25,000. Natural resource development is a key economic driver for the entire region, and there was a lot of discussion with delegates about municipal involvement with large corporations wanting to explore and develop natural resources, land claims, addressing social and community problems, and building strong communities. The discussions were thoughtful and for a southerner like me, often revealing.

For example, when we were discussing local food issues, one local councillor of a remote community told me that a can of pop costs over five dollars in his village! Imagine what a head of lettuce, a dozen eggs and a bag of oranges are worth.

As more and more of Canada's economic strength, population, jobs and political influence swing to the west and north of our nation, local communities will only grow in importance. The municipalities in the North West Territories are facing similar challenges to many other small, rural communities—how to retain and attract bright young people, how to develop the local community with limited revenue sources, how to pay for and when to invest in infrastructure projects, developing sustainable and appealing places to live, handling heart-breaking social problems.

The cost of housing is high—a nice condo in Yellowknife in a new development was \$500K+ and a double wide was \$300K. Salaries are attractive in many businesses, but the cost of living is also high. Outdoor recreation opportunities are wonderful, and the lifestyle is very appealing to adventurous people. I found there was a strong sense of community, and a real interest in learning about new ideas and local government strategies.

There were nearly 200 delegates at the conference, and it seemed as if almost every one of them came up to me to shake my hand, thank me for coming, and talk about my presentations. I was genuinely touched.

This was my first visit to NWT, and it won't be my last. How can you not love a city that has a street named "Ragged Ass Road"? (The city has stopped putting up the street sign—too many tourists were stealing them!) [[For the uninitiated, *Ragged Ass* is colloquial term meaning 'dirt poor', and was the name of an abandoned gold mine]].

Tourism is also going to be a greater part of the local economies. Busloads of tourists from Asia (primarily Japan and Korea) were visiting, as the Aurora Borealis has a special meaning to their cultures.

Driving on an ice road is a unique experience, and seeing the Ice Castle built every year is just part of the fun in Yellowknife. I also visited two aboriginal communities in the area, and was impressed with the modern schools, community buildings and housing at both locations.

I sincerely hope that the delegates learned something from me, but I know that I learned from them. Southern Canada needs to do a much better job of reaching out to northern communities; perhaps a program of 'twinning' similar towns and villages in other parts of our country would be an interesting concept. Many of the social and community problems and opportunities that I've met in northern Ontario communities, for example, are very similar to those facing towns in the territories. We can learn from one another.

Northern Canada is a marvelous part of our nation, and we are fortunate to have the people, resources and opportunities that live there. We need to celebrate, understand and support our northern neighbours.