

Governance Pilot Project: Sliammon First Nation

The Sliammon First Nation governance project is part of an ongoing project also rooted in the British Columbia treaty process and community aspirations. Following the failed ratification of their Agreement-in-Principle in 2001, and a study concluding that a more inclusive system of governance was required, Sliammon First Nation began to think through how traditional forms of governance might be adapted to fit contemporary needs. After a period of research and internal reflection, the community developed the concept of 'Sijitus' - a concept that combines traditional family representation with the process of 'open space technology'. It is hoped that Sijitus will increase family involvement in government, create new accountability practices, and ground current and future structures of Sliammon government in the culture.

In brief, the Sijitus is a gathering of family spokespeople who represent the families of all people in the community (not just band members). Each family is responsible for putting forth one spokesperson and an alternate to represent their family at monthly meetings of the Sijitus. It is up to each family, working through a consensus-based process, to ensure that their representatives are meeting their needs and to replace them where necessary.

The mandate (*non peh gahn ehm*) of the Sijitus is to "develop strategies and action plans that advocate and support the improvement of service delivery within the Sliammon community in a proactive manner on behalf of their family". To this end, the Sijitus is a bi-directional information conduit between families (the community) and the Chief and Council. Following each meeting, a report is submitted to the chief consisting of recommendations for both Chief and Council and boards. In a complementary fashion, Chief and Council and boards regularly provide all public minutes and, on a quarterly basis, report on what actions have been taken regarding the recommendations put forward by the Sijitus.

The Sijitus provides an opportunity for community members/families to have their concerns addressed in a community forum. It establishes a setting that facilitates community discussion and results in recommendations being forwarded to council based on community discussions. It allows for the dissemination of council plans, strategies and decisions to the families.

Though the Sijitus does not mark a departure from the *Indian Act* system of government, it is an attempt to return to and renew traditional governance. In a report appendix that presents the Sijitus to the community, the message is given that this is not a new concept; family spokespeople and headmen were how the people governed themselves 'pre-contact'. It is suggested that by taking away the traditional system of leadership as a family responsibility and replacing it with an elected leadership that is responsible to the entire community, the *Indian Act* created conflict and rifts within the community. It is anticipated the Sijitus will act as a positive force in resolving the division, mistrust and misguided ideas that are seen as products of the *Indian Act* system of government, by bringing back traditional values in both governance as well as community and personal interactions.

The First Nation views the Sijitus as having transformative potential both in terms of governance and overall community renewal. Aided by consultants and non-community facilitators (chosen for their expertise and knowledge of 'open space technology') and the infusion of First Nation governance pilot project funding, the Sijitus has taken root. People are enthusiastically participating. With each family representing, on average, 40

people, eleven families have been represented and eight additional families are planning participation. Also of note, both men and women ranging in age from their early 20s to their early 70s have been chosen as Sijitus spokespeople, and are attending monthly meetings of four hours in duration. There is evidence already of tangible results. Successes identified in the Sliammon report include:

- increased involvement of families in a safe and constructive community forum in which dissent can be expressed,
- engagement of people from different ‘factions’ in the focused development of constructive recommendations for Chief and Council,
- improved accountability,
- development of trust between council and Sijitus, and understanding that this innovative system of governance can be constructive, non-threatening and effective in dealing with issues of substance, and
- creation of capacity building opportunities as a wide range of people become familiar with the issues, find solutions and assume leadership responsibilities.

Other tangible changes have been noted in respect of the responsiveness, transparency and accountability of Council. For example, Council minutes are delivered to each household and excerpts are posted in a newsletter. Council responses to Sijitus recommendations also are posted in the newsletter.

Many First Nations, Aboriginal organizations and academics have shown an interest in knowing more about the Sliammon experience and Sijitus. As a result, the Sliammon First Nation is in the process of creating a guide, based on its experiences, about the incorporation of traditional processes into contemporary band governance. The guide is intended to tell the story of Sijitus and the Sliammon plan for design and implementation. It will contain a number of transferable lessons learned by the Sliammon First Nation.

Excerpted from *First Nations Governance Pilot Projects: Challenge and Innovation*. A Final Report Prepared for the National Centre for First Nations Governance by Carleton University Centre for Community Innovation. February 2005.