



Pride of a Nation

For the Piikani Nation of southwest Alberta, economic transformation is the key to future well-being, while the deeply held values that drive it are firmly rooted in the past.



Responsible lending

“WE WERE CONSIDERED NIITSITAPI, the real people of the plains, ruling from time immemorial across the prairies,” says Chief Stanley Grier of the Piikani Nation. “We have a distinct world view, spiritual history, language and community. That’s what has made us strong. Through all the adversity we’ve experienced – smallpox, residential schools, intertribal wars – our Creator has promised that we will always be here. So it’s a sacred honour for me to serve my community. I’ll do the best I can to contribute to the betterment of my people.”

The Piikani Nation is part of the Blackfoot Confederacy, or Siksikaitaitapi, an alliance of four indigenous First Nations

whose communities are located in Alberta and Montana. Today most of the 3,700 Piikani people live on reserve lands around the small town of Brocket, within an expanse of prairie that ends at the foothills of the Rocky Mountains in the southwest corner of Alberta.

The reserve includes agricultural land for growing crops and raising cattle. The Piikani also earn revenue from natural gas development, and more recently their significant wind and water resources have opened up opportunities in green energy production.

The fact that so many Piikani people remain on the reserve helps to strengthen

Above: Lisa Brodtrick of BMO Financial Group, with Chief Stanley Grier of the Piikani Nation.

\$1.83 billion

Total value of business conducted by BMO's Aboriginal Banking unit in 2015.

the community. But it can place significant stress on housing infrastructure. This was one of the main challenges faced by the newly elected Chief Grier when he took office in January 2015.

Building for the future

In recent years, the Piikani Nation has wrestled with issues of consistent governance and financial accountability as the community worked to become more self-sustaining while continuing to respect traditional values. Chief Grier and his eight fellow council members have built on the efforts of their immediate predecessors to aggressively repay debts and introduce electoral reforms.

"I want to ensure we don't forget the accomplishments of past leaders," says the chief, who took on his current role after serving 34 years with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and the Tsuu T'ina Nation Police Service, where he served as Chief of Police. "With the education and skills past councils had, they did the best they could. Now we're building on our strengths and improving on our weaknesses."

The new council embarked immediately on a substantive change agenda, creating a long-term agricultural strategy, launching a housing program, building a state-of-the-art hockey arena and exercising an option to purchase 51% of a large electrical transmission line that crosses Piikani Nation lands. The council has also tightened its own governance practices, designating sectors of responsibility and establishing clear lines of accountability. The finance department has been similarly restructured, and new staff members have been hired with the necessary skills and education to manage the community's accounts.

"We're also holding more public meetings," Chief Grier explains, "so we can engage the community and tell them what's going on. We believe in strong communications."

During its first year in office, the council oversaw construction of 15 new housing units. Another 35 are slated for completion in 2016, advancing toward the target of 130 new homes set for the

council's four-year term – with more to follow. There are also plans for a new service centre on the highway nearby. And the council is exploring potential opportunities with representatives of the renewable energy and coking coal industries.

In all of these initiatives, Chief Grier notes, the community's efforts are supported by a key partnership: "This is only possible through our business relationship with BMO."

A respectful partnership

One of the first things the new council did was arrange meetings with representatives of Canada's major chartered banks. "All five institutions showed us interesting business arrangements," the chief recalls. "However, Lisa Brodtrick of BMO demonstrated a greater degree of commitment to us. We entered into an agreement with BMO solely due to her sincerity and integrity. Lisa has been very accommodating and supportive, walking us through everything on the business end with the time and interpretation that's needed. And she does it all in a very respectful manner."

That respect is mutual. "BMO was the first financial institution to recognize what

The new Multipurpose Centre on the Piikani lands in Brocket, Alberta.



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First Nations participating in the bank's On-Reserve Housing Loan Program.

the Piikani Nation has done to create and sustain sound governance, fiscal accountability and financial stability,” says Lisa, whose team works with First Nations across Alberta and the Northwest Territories. “Those are important factors that, when paired with the traditions and cultural identity of a Nation, empower self-determination – and support community health and economic prosperity.”

Between their many housing and construction projects, credit facilities extended to the community total \$25 million. That investment reflects the closeness of a relationship that frequently sees bank representatives joining council work groups and participating in public information sessions. They're supported by the expertise and resources of BMO's Aboriginal Banking unit – unique among Canadian financial institutions for having a national office to provide strategic direction, evaluate risk and nurture customer relationships.

“We have a special partnership with the Piikani Nation that transcends a purely transactional banking relationship,” Lisa says. “Personally, I'm in awe of all that Chief Grier and the councillors have accomplished. When leaders show the character necessary to follow through on what they said they were going to do, even in hard times, you know this is a partner you can count on – and invest in.”

Sustaining a legacy

Looking ahead, Chief Grier is encouraged by a new level of goodwill toward First Nations from the provincial and federal governments – against the broader backdrop of social change reflected in milestones such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. “This is a window of opportunity,” he says, “not just for the Piikani, but for all indigenous peoples. We're working on a number of major new initiatives to create wealth for our community.” Among the examples he cites are the renegotiation of oil, gas and mineral rights on Piikani lands, as well as a settlement for damages caused by the Oldman River dam in the early 1990s.

At the same time, the community continues to view education as vital to long-term prosperity. “The Piikani Nation leads all Canadian First Nations in our total number of postsecondary graduates on a per capita basis,” the chief says. “Because we've been neglected when it comes to wealth, we've had to create our own opportunities. We want our people to go out and be successful in anything they do. We also have a responsibility to be mentors to our youth, and to set strong examples in the way we live our lives.”

Following in the footsteps of his father – a decorated Korean War veteran who served as a councillor – and carrying on a legacy of leadership stretching back generations, Chief Grier sees his role as embodying the aspirations of his people: “Because we have such a strong history here, and such a love for our community, we want to contribute in a meaningful way to its long-term sustainability. We work hard to create opportunities and instill pride. We're trying to do better so that our nation can do better – which is an extension of our forefathers making a better life for us.” ☺

New housing being constructed on the Piikani lands in Brocket, Alberta.

