

Indigenous Enterprise

In Nova Scotia, Membertou First Nation combines entrepreneurial investment with effective partnerships to help revitalize the local economy.

For residents of Cape Breton on Canada's east coast, the name Membertou evokes a proud Indigenous heritage dating back to the 16th century, when Grand Chief Membertou led one of the founding communities of the Mi'kmaw Nation. At the same time, it embodies a spirit of entrepreneurialism that is helping bring renewed prosperity to the harbour city of Sydney, Nova Scotia.

Membertou First Nation comprises four separate land reserves around greater Sydney, once a thriving centre of steel production in the heart of Cape Breton's coal mining country. As those legacy industries faded in recent decades, Sydney had to shift its economic focus – and Membertou has played a key role in stimulating new growth.

The Indigenous community has not only invested in infrastructure for its own members – including a health centre, school, daycare facilities and a youth centre – but has also built a convention centre, a business plaza and a data centre. Community-backed ventures range from an insurance brokerage and a commercial realtor to a geomatics engineering firm. And two-hectare Membertou Heritage Park attracts many visitors who want to learn more about the First Nation's rich history and culture.

INNOVATIVE SPIRIT

"About 20 years ago, Membertou Council came to a crossroads," says Mike McIntyre, the community's chief financial officer since 2001. "Continue down a path of economic decline, or create change for the future. Chief Terrance Paul and the Council chose change."

In 1995, Membertou had 37 direct employees, a \$4 million annual operating budget and a \$1 million deficit. Unemployment was high, and morale was low. Today the community has a \$59 million budget and employs 600 people (during peak season) within a total population of 1,700. Once entirely reliant on federal government funding, the First Nation now generates 71% of revenue from its own businesses.

Community members' pride in their collective accomplishments reflects a commitment to financial discipline, transparency and accountability. "Self-governance and self-sustaining financials are a big piece of our vision," Mike says. "We've overcome challenges by finding a strategic path to success, and our new position of strength will allow us to continue moving forward."

ALIGNED VALUES

"This is one of the most progressive, well-managed First Nations in Canada," says Mark Shadeed of BMO's Indigenous Banking unit, which since 1992 has led the industry in helping Indigenous customers gain new opportunities through better access to financial products, services and advice. "Membertou is improving the lives of its members and is a leading agent of economic activity for the broader region. We're incredibly proud to have them as customers."

The feeling is mutual. "Since aligning with BMO, we've seen the benefits of the corporate support and business development focus they provide," Mike says. "And we truly understand the community-driven organization that BMO has grown to be."

Membertou's example has inspired other First Nations across Canada in their pursuit of greater self-governance. The community's focus remains clear: continue to embrace economic innovation while upholding long-held principles of sustainability. Pursue further partnerships in engineering, renewable energy, construction and many other areas – including a new venture building vessels for the coastal fishery and commercial use. Above all, develop education and training programs to expand local employment opportunities.

"The well-being of community members is always at the core," says Mike. "They're our greatest stakeholders, and doing right by them remains our first priority."