

# PLANNING IN LOWER POST

**The prospect of self-government causes a Kaska community to re-examine what it is & what it shall become**

FLO FRANK

**W**hen Debbie Groat was a little girl she spent much of her time with her grandfather, living on the land. She recalls that it was a natural way to live and that the forest was pristine, the water pure and that everything happened according to the season. In the fall people cut wood, collected plants for medicine and hunted moose. In the winter snowshoes were made and traplines looked after. In the spring and summer there were family camps, berries were picked, jam made, meat dried, and hides tanned.

It was a real way to live and at a pace that people could handle. If there was a plan in place, it was a natural one - one you just knew in your heart.

Debbie is now Deputy Chief of Lower Post First Nation, one of five Bands that make up the Kaska Nation. For generations, Kaska people have lived in the lands

now transected by the borders of Yukon, Northwest Territories, and British Columbia. Situated on the Liard River, Lower Post (population 193) is the most northern community in B.C.

Lower Post is a community in transition. Years ago it was a trading stop for the Hudson's Bay Company. The Kaska people were prosperous then. They were in harmony with their land and its resources and they were good traders. Now it is one of many First Nation communities that is preparing for self-government and to reclaim its land and resources.

life again - hopefully one that future generations will benefit from.

## **REINVENTING LOCAL ADMINISTRATION**

There's something different about the Lower Post First Nation administration office. When you walk in, you get a real sense of energy and purpose. It's a wel-



The Lower Post First Nation community relations team (Roma Tibbett, Pearl Lutz, and Annie Peters) in session near Watson Lake. (Photo credit: Lower Post First Nation)

It has been a long time since the Kaska people could make all their own decisions, manage their own land, and plan their own futures. And like most First Nation communities, there are mixed feelings about the land claim settlements and self-government. The changes occurring are sometimes daunting - other times exciting. They mean a different way of

coming environment, one that is both business-like and inviting. Community members come and go. Sometimes people sit and have coffee with the staff and leaders. They talk openly about what is going on with them and how they are feeling. There's pride and dignity in that office. There's also a plan to succeed.

Two years ago, Debbie and her council took charge of the process leading to self-government. She knew that it was going to be demanding and complicated, with a multitude of negotiations taking place on several levels and community members becoming increasingly concerned about what was being decided on their behalf. The day-to-day running of the community did not stop while leaders were called on to be in several places at the same time. "It's still like that," Debbie laments, "but now we are getting used to it, and we've got our priorities straight - and the community is behind us."

What has happened at Lower Post sounds simple: they made a plan and are following it. The plan, however, has involved re-inventing the whole administration. Converting it from the traditional DIA hierarchy model to a team approach was only one of the steps.

The most important part has been developing a Community Plan that outlines the goals and priorities the community itself has set. The consultation process was exhaustive. Says Debbie,

"When we did this plan in 1997, almost everyone participated. There were members from every family involved, and even people who were away from the community were contacted and listened to. Community involvement and ownership are critical to what we have accomplished."

For any community leader, having direction from the community is the most important thing. No matter how many changes take place, or how prepared you think you are, a plan is only a plan so long

as the people support it and will follow it. As the consultants who were hired to work with Lower Post First Nation on several of their plans, we were able to see a successful evolution occurring. It has happened on three levels: leadership, staff, and community members.

Instead of trying to be in two or three places at once, elected *leaders* now delegate more authority and responsibility to the administration. This allows the leaders to spend more time with community members and to continue with the external demands of the negotiations. *Staff* have accepted the additional responsibility and are working together as a team to make the goals of the Community Plan a reality. They had to rethink their jobs, reorganize their approach to work, and learn how to manage in groups rather than as individuals. They have also had to assume more responsibility for making decisions and solving problems. *Community members* have become more engaged in the process. Although they know that some of the changes will not be popular, they are preparing to help make the best use of limited resources and to be part of the solution.

### DETERMINING PRIORITIES

Over the past two years, several key decisions were made. The first was to let the community dictate the priorities. This was done by bringing people together to ask what, in their opinion, a positive future would look like. From the youngest children to the Elders, everyone had ideas about how it should or could be. They made pictures of it, shared concerns and talked about all the possibilities. Seven primary areas became the goals of the Lower Post First Nation Community Plan:

- The People "Dena"
- The Land
- Culture and Identity
- Community Management and Leadership

- Social Development
- Community Sustainability
- Education and Training

A second decision was to reorganize the administration to reflect these priorities. When the plan was first developed, people discovered that three key areas had no one responsible for them and no resources assigned! The leadership and staff changed that right away. As they said, "It's difficult to reach a goal if no one thinks it has anything to do with them."

Each goal required and received more input and planning in order to outline what had to be done to reach it. Some of the goals will take years to reach, but the important thing is that none of them will be ignored - all goals have something happening with them right now. The community can see that there has been a response to their direction, and as a result, they know that the administration has listened to them.

This is very important for the next phase of the work. As negotiations are settled, there will be an increased need for community participation and input, particularly on committees and boards. This community has a better chance of having good involvement, as there is now a history of being genuinely supportive and responsive to community input.

### LONG-RANGE HRD PLANNING

A third decision has helped to make Lower Post's community model worth replicating. People have always been at the center of everything that has been done in this community. Training has always been highly valued as well. However, it is difficult to be ready and able to meet the challenges with the skill limitations of local people. There is a need to build capacity, not just within the staff and leadership, but throughout the community.

Often communities provide training based only on what people say they need, or what industry in the area might require for employment. There's nothing wrong

with that. But what if those needs or interests do not connect (as is often the case) to the bigger picture (the community “vision”) or to any future initiatives that will strengthen community living?

At Lower Post, the decision was made to develop a long-range human resource strategy that would include a comprehensive training plan. This plan outlines information, knowledge, and skills that are required immediately in order to prepare for self-government and to get the community actively participating in the changes that are taking place. Training for leadership and staff is also outlined, based on the assessment of their roles, current skills, personal interests, and the relationship between staff roles and the community plan goals.

Special interest groups feature in the training plan. Any individuals with distinct training requirements are considered a special interest group. For example, people planning to set up businesses or school-leavers with no particular career plans are both groups with special training needs. People who are experiencing difficulties managing their own lives, or who need some extra help to care for their families are also special interest groups, as are those who are involved in the court system. Any training that was of interest to a group of people was considered. Priorities were then established on the basis of the community plan goals and the necessity to build capacity for self-government.

While the human resource plan has only just been completed, parts of it are already operational. The following list provides an overview of the main activities of the strategy:

- an assessment of the administration based on community priorities
- organizational redesign to reflect a team approach
- individual job assessments and redesign to reflect community plan goals
- establishment and training of teams

- the development of a senior management team
- an assessment of the office environment
- frameworks for policy development and communication strategies
- community input into the training plan
- the development of a comprehensive training plan

At this point, the administration is running smoothly after the transition to teams. With on-going skill development

*All of these efforts are about home....The residents of Lower Post consider home to be a community that has a well-managed budget, strong leadership, appropriate services & programs for those in need, & lots of social & recreational activities.*

they will become even more effective. The leaders are following the directions of the community, knowing that the future will not resemble the past in very many ways but will nonetheless be a future that Lower Post First Nation can be proud of. The community, although still concerned and feeling a bit apprehensive about the changes that are coming, are willing to help where they can and are pulling together toward common goals.

Lower Post has all the same problems and difficulties that any First Nation community is having with the negotiations and settlements. However, it is a community that has prepared itself and

will continue to prepare itself. “The most crucial things to remember,” say the people at Lower Post First Nation,

“are always keep the community involved, make decisions and carry them out and don’t be afraid to take big steps. This is not the time to just do a little bit here and there. Our community needed a vision, a plan, and the skills to make them work. People cared enough to make this happen. They gave their time, ideas and input, for which there is much gratitude. We know where we are headed and what it will take to get there - our next step is to find the resources to implement the training plan so that we can reach our goals.”

All of these efforts are about *home*. They are about creating a community that offers a safe and welcoming home for its people, one that has jobs and comfortable houses. The residents of Lower Post consider home to be a community that has a well-managed budget, strong leadership, appropriate services and programs for those in need, and lots of social and recreational activities. Lower Post is encouraging its residents to be proud of the past while making plans today for tomorrow. Through their efforts and plans, Lower Post First Nation is increasing its ability to manage a community that children and grandchildren will call home. ❧

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FLO FRANK (Common Ground Consulting) knows the real credit for this story must go to the community and its leadership for the work they are doing. For further information about the community planning process in Lower Post, please contact Flo in Meacham, Saskatchewan at (tel) 306-376-2220.