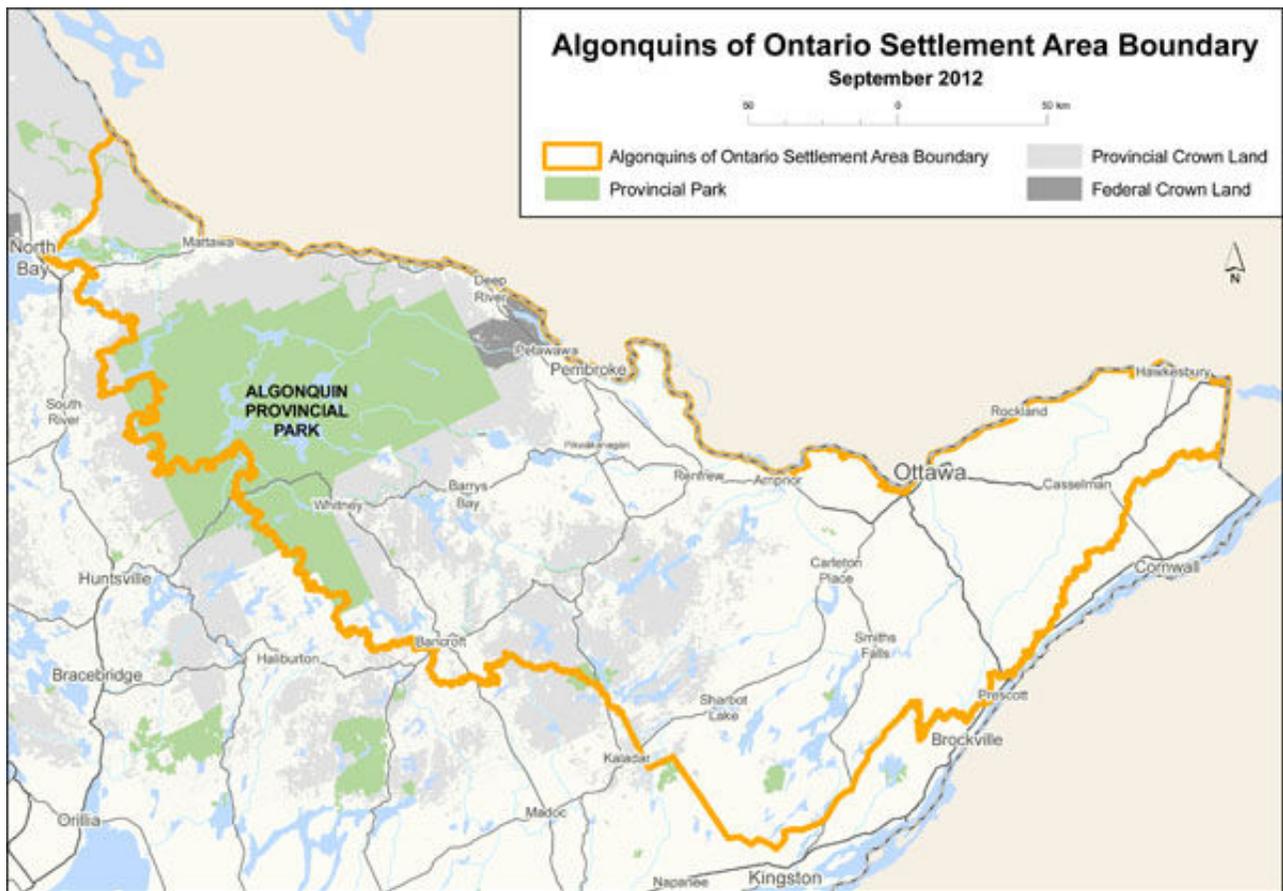


NEWS LOCAL

Algonquins to vote on agreement

By Stephen Uhler, OBSERVER MULTIMEDIA JOURNALIST
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The Algonquins of Pikwakanagan are gearing up for a historic vote next week which will help determine their future.

Starting Monday, Feb. 29 and running to March 7, eligible voters registered to cast ballots on an agreement-in-principle (AIP) on t Algonquin land claim which, if approved, will form the starting point for the last round of negotiations between the governments of Canada and Ontario and the Algonquins who are part of 10 communities within the land claim area.

These include the Algonquins of Pikwakanagan First Nation, Antoine, Kijicho Manito Madaouskarini (Bancroft), Bonnechere, Greater Golden Lake, Mattawa/North Bay, Ottawa, Shabot Obaadjiwan (Sharbot Lake), Snimikobi (Ardoch) and Whitney and Area These 10 communities have been working together as the Algonquins of Ontario (AOO) under a protocol signed in 2004, to reach settlement of the Algonquin land claim.

This AIP sets out proposed key elements to settle the Algonquin land claim, including a \$300 million transfer to the Algonquins of Ontario, a transfer of 475 square kilometres of Crown land to Algonquin ownership, and recommended approaches to address such things as harvesting rights for hunting and fishing, forestry, provincial parks and protected areas, Algonquin heritage and culture and eligibility and enrolment.

The provincial Crown land up for consideration includes more than 200 parcels ranging in size from a less than a square kilometre to just approximately 120 square kilometres.

The proposed AIP will be considered to be ratified if a majority of the Algonquin voters who cast their ballots vote in favour of the document. Once a vote is completed, the results will be assessed and the next steps related to the negotiations will be determined by the three parties involved in them, the province, the Canadian government and the AOO.

Pikwakanagan Chief Kirby Whiteduck, who has been directly involved in the negotiations on behalf of his community, said it has been a long time coming to get to this point in the process, which has lasted more than 30 years for himself alone. He said a "yes" vote on the AIP will allow them to continue the process of negotiating, ironing out any hitches and issues as they work their way to final treaty.

"We'll be looking to improve it and its wording," the chief said, "and we can't continue to negotiate that if the AIP doesn't pass."

The upcoming vote hasn't been without controversy, and opposition to both the AIP and the process itself has been gaining momentum over the past couple of months.

Greg Sarazin, who served as chief from 1987 to 1989, and as chief negotiator of the land claim from 1991 to 2001, has been asked by residents concerned and/or opposed to the AIP to speak on their behalf.

On Feb. 17, 68 members of the Pikwakanagan First Nation gathered at a community meeting held at the Makwa Community Centre expressing their opposition to the AIP, demanding in writing the chief and council suspend Pikwakanagan's involvement in the ratification process and immediately begin discussions with the membership/community to discuss the details of an acceptable AIP.

"We've only been made aware of the wording of this agreement-in-principle just before Christmas," he Sarazin said, stressing this massive document was placed before them, and they were told they had to make a decision in a matter of weeks.

"We don't have the benefit of time or legal advice to wade through this," he said, noting the danger here is the AIP could be approved to the detriment of Pikwakanagan.

Sarazin said the main areas of concern is the potential to lose the community's reserve status, and how the AIP is being voted on.

"Reference to Chapter 11 and Chapter 12.4.1 of the proposed AIP, the AIP makes it clear that final agreement could only be achieved on provision that a self government agreement is achieved, with Pikwakanagan losing its reserve status in the process, and that section 87 of the Indian Act regarding tax exemptions for band members would no longer apply," he said.

Sarazin said under the voting system set up by the AOO, these provisions in the AIP apply to Pikwakanagan alone, and yet 80 to 90 per cent of people within the AOO voting on it are not status Pikwakanagan members.

"Yet they get to vote to approve the document that contains those statements, thereby making a commitment to that end," he said.

"The vast majority voting on it aren't people of Pikwakanagan and don't have those rights. If the AIP is approved with that wording it, they are giving up our rights for us or at the very least making a commitment on our behalf that those rights of ours will be given up."

"They have no right to make a commitment to give up our rights for us," Sarazin continued. "To me, that is a violation of my human rights, and is a form of oppression."

He said many members of Pikwakanagan, who already have their status cards and are already registered as status band members did not register to vote for the AIP as a matter of principle. Voting procedures on this required then to do so.

"Why do I need to apply to be a voter when I am already a registered band member and the AIP deals with my rights," Sarazin said. "The suspicion of some is the registration would be used to show that people are buying into the process."

He added he did register, just so he would have a chance to vote on the AIP, although he understands why others did not.

Whiteduck said he hopes voters will keep an open mind about the AIP, stressing it remains non-binding as it serves as another step in the ongoing process to get to a permanent treaty, which is at least another five years down the road. He said a "yes" vote will not affect any Algonquin rights in any way, and it is his hope people won't get sidetracked by concerns to the contrary.

"People are getting told they will lose status and lose the reserve if they vote for the AIP, which is one view," he said, "but people are getting scared by this."

Whiteduck said while the Canadian government feels that an Algonquin treaty is dependent upon a self government agreement with Pikwakanagan, which would then take the community out of the Indian Act, he stressed the council hasn't negotiated anything yet of that nature. A self-governing Pikwakanagan First Nation also wouldn't be the end of them as an entity.

"One could negotiate the land to be Pikwakanagan land," he said, and being self-governing has advantages to it such as addition governance powers and funding opportunities. However, the final say of taking that path remains in the hands of the people of Pikwakanagan.

"This would lead to more permanence to the community," Whiteduck said. "People will also get the final say on the draft treaty."

He said to answer to community concerns about voting eligibility, council has authorized a side vote, where all who are eligible to vote in band elections will get a chance to vote on the AIP as well. These people can mail-in ballots or cast their votes in person at the Makwa Community Centre March 5, with the ballots being counted alongside the official vote.

Sarazin considers that an imperfect solution.

"That side vote is open to members of Pikwakanagan who are not registered to formally vote in the AOO ratification process," he said. "That process is confusing and many members may not get to vote because of that."

Whiteduck said once the votes are in and counted, the council will need time to assess and interpret the results. He said they hope to have a final tally ready to be released March 17. If it is a close result, or a close "no," council will have to determine their next steps. If it is an overwhelming "no," they will have to reevaluate the whole thing.

"A strong "no" would seem the chances of getting a treaty would be too slim," he said, and council will have to consider how to proceed from there.

On Sunday, Feb. 28, Algonquins opposed to the AIP, led by the Pikwakanagan Grandmothers, will be marching from the intersection of Kokomis Road and Mishomis Inamo Road to the Pikwakanagan council building to protest the vote taking place on Monday. Those taking part in the march will be gathering starting at 10:30 a.m.

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