

Creating a Self-administered Indigenous Police Service for PAGC communities will be a huge Challenge

By Ron Merasty

On October 15 and 16 at the Saskatoon Inn, the Prince Albert Grand Council (PAGC) held a policing and community safety gathering to further discuss its goal of establishing a PAGC-wide self-administered Indigenous police service (SAIPS).

The PAGC executive, FSIN executive, and several PAGC Chiefs and Councillors, PAGC staff, and representatives from the federal and provincial government attended the gathering.

PAGC Grand Chief Brian Hardlotte, in his introductory remarks said that funding will be the biggest challenge in the creation of SAIPS. "We all know what the challenges are," he said for all PAGC First Nation communities. "Most court charges are for alcohol and drugs."

PAGC Vice-Chief Joseph Tsannie said that in 2017 the Grand Council received a mandate from its 12 First Nations to pursue the feasibility of a self-administered police service. "We had to do something. We had to change the story in our communities."

He spoke to the community engagement initiative that PAGC initiated two years ago. David Sanderson, a former career RCMP officer, originally from the Swampy Cree community of Moose Lake, Manitoba, was tasked with this responsibility. Sanderson visited all PAGC First Nations to speak to leadership and inform the public about the issue.

He held community information meetings and had people fill out a questionnaire to gather data. That consultation ended at the end of summer 2025 and following that is in the process of writing a final report. That report will not be released to the public until it has been vetted by the Chiefs.

"Today we have the findings," Vice-Chief Tsannie said. "We tried to engage the communities. We wanted to make sure everyone has a say into the process."

Tsannie said that support from



Ron Merasty Photo

Policing and Community Safety Gathering. In the photo from left: Senator Noland Henderson; Corey Zaharuk, Assistant Deputy Minister, Policing and Community Safety Services, Ministry of Corrections, Policing and Public Safety; Wendy Desir, Public Safety Canada; PAGC Grand Chief Brian Hardlotte; David Sanderson, PAGC Consultant.

the communities will be needed for the initiative to move it forward. "If communities say 'yes,' then we will be able to start negotiations."

Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations Chief Bobby Cameron said that the initiative is "about healing in our communities and saving lives."

"Community safety and policing is a positive action," he said, thanking PAGC leadership for their work.

Eric Schmalz, the provincial minister responsible for First Nations, Metis and Northern Affairs, and former RCMP member, spoke of the October 17, 2022, tripartite agreement between the federal government, province and Grand Council which provided the resources to explore the feasibility of creating such a police service. His attendance at the

opening of the gathering spoke to the importance of the initiative.

Following the signing of the tripartite agreement a public safety implementation team (PSIT) was created in late 2022 into early 2023. Some of the team members include Vice-Chief Tsannie; Senator Noland Henderson, Montreal Lake Cree Nation (MLCN), himself a former police officer; Dan Malone, Public Safety Canada (PSC); and Matt Mirasty, a former RCMP officer, now the Executive Director of First Nations and Indigenous Policing, Province of Saskatchewan.

Caitlin Brown, a consultant with accounting firm MNP said that she has worked for similar feasibility studies with other First Nations policing services, such as in Labrador and British

Columbia. She reported on PAGC's feasibility study and about the data collected, that all PAGC nations and their communities were visited, some of them twice.

Brown said that she has collected data on other Indigenous police services in Canada. A future PAGC SAIPS will require "physical assets and infrastructure," saying that that alone will end up being "a comprehensive document."

David Sanderson said that in January 2025 PSIT members visited the operations of the Nishnawbe Aski Police Service (NAPS) in northern Ontario, the largest Indigenous police service in Canada, indeed, in North America. NAPS started operations 30 years ago and now serves 34 First Nations communities. In the beginning NAPS had only 33 police officers but now has 260, a headquarters in Thunder Bay, as well as regional offices.

"There are boots on the ground 24 hours a day. That is the vision that I see," Sanderson said. "They are an essential service under provincial legislation. They've come a long way; it is something we would like to see."

He said that, comparatively, the File Hills Police Service, in existence now for 22 years, operates with a significantly smaller budget of \$3 million/year, and is "not completely stand-alone." That is because they have continued oversight from the provincial government and the RCMP in many aspects of their police service.

A PAGC SAIPS would be closer to that of NAPS in terms of scale.

Sanderson said that during data collection he conducted interviews with many individuals. One of them included former RCMP Commanding Officer Russ Mirasty who told him that "The police are there to help us," and advised "Be supportive as we build this (PAGC) police service."

continued on page 21



Ron Merasty Photo

Policing and Community Safety Gathering. In the back row, l-r: PBCN Pelican Narrows Councillor, Thomas Linklater; PBCN Deschambault Lake Councillor, Walter Ballantyne; Red Earth Cree Nation Chief Zachary Whitecap; FSIN Chief Bobby Cameron. In front are PBCN Southend Councillor Kevin Morin and PBCN Deschambault Lake Elder, Joan Beatty.

Creating a Self-administered Indigenous Police Service for PAGC communities will be a huge Challenge

continued from page 5

Troy Cooper, Prince Albert Police Service’s former Chief, and now a safety manager with Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation at Pelican Narrows recommended that in addition to police officers in communities, “you need something in between,” and that is a community security officer (CSO) program, staffed with local (First Nations) recruits, and that it would enhance and improve a community’s overall safety.

“Instead of calling the police,” he suggested, people could call such officers, and that they could engage in “intervention.”

Grand Chief Hardlotte said that the CSO program was “something we’ve been working on” since the time Ralph Goodale was Minister of Public Safety (2015-2019). “I hope it is something that goes through,” adding that at Onion Lake Cree Nation they are called “peace officers.”

“They’re trained,” he said of the CSOs. “They are there to complement the RCMP.”

Malone spoke about “Stream 1” self-administered policing agreements, and that they operate under an independent board of directors. The police officers in these police services, he said, are trained to the same provincial standards as municipal police officers and are required to meet those standards.

In self-administered police services, the pay benefits to the police officers account for up to 75 percent of the budget. With the 52-48 split in administrative costs paid by the federal and provincial governments, respectively, the maximum federal contribution to the largest Indigenous police service currently is \$110 million/year.

Caitlin Brown held another presentation about what a comprehensive regional policing model would look like. The goal would be “to provide the best service possible,” she said, considering each community’s specific needs and managing resources responsibly.

Brown said the first requirement will be Governance and Oversight, starting with establishing a board of police commissioners and a policy framework, and then:

2. Leadership Organizational Structure
3. People and Training
4. Operational Capabilities
5. Infrastructure and Technology

6. Funding and Resource Management
7. Community Engagement and Trust

The police board would “set the tone” for the organization, hire the leader (police chief), and make sure that that leader is “representative of the community.”

The First Nations’ leadership role would be to decide how the board is set up, communicate their priorities to them, and hold that board accountable. A board would require “a mix of different expertise including public safety, legal, financial, human resources.”

Brown said other considerations would be that the SAIPS would need legal counsel, that ongoing recruitment would be needed, that the training group is very important, and that mental health and wellness support will have to be available. They would also need investigative capacity and strategic innovation.

While police officers will be the frontline support, civilian support will be required to support the frontline. Additional administrative support may be needed at the regional level and that if communities are not accessible that “you may need to locate them in remote communities.”

A PAGC SAIPS will require about 14 detachments, Brown said, along with 200+ frontline positions, and 30 supervisors.

Any new Indigenous police trainees will likely be trained in Regina, at the Saskatchewan Police College. According to Brent Penner, Executive Director of the Saskatchewan Police Commission, it follows the province’s *Police Act*.

Leadership present at the meeting questioned why a training centre could not be established farther north, and recruitment centres closer to the province’s centre, such as in Prince Albert or Saskatoon. PAGC Senator Roy Head thought that a training centre in the north “is attainable.”

Black Lake Denesuline First Nation Chief Coreen Sayazie said, approvingly, that in their visit to Thunder Bay she observed that NAPS’ trainers were “Aboriginal,” cautioning, “There is too much racism in this province.”

One of the attendees, Mayor Pauline Morin of Sandy Bay, spoke of community conditions and about what



Ron Merasty Photo

Policing and Community Safety Gathering. PAGC Vice-Chief Joseph Tsannie, and Black Lake First Nation Councillor John Toutsaint

a police officer might expect there: addictions, vandalism, no employment and no opportunities, of lacking nurses and teachers, and of the RCMP being short-staffed. “We need security. We need more RCMP,” she said.

MLCN Chief Joyce McLeod said that Elders have told her that they do not feel safe, that they live in fear of gangs and drugs in their community. “This policing will benefit each and every one of us,” she said. “We are always short of RCMP, who are either being relocated, busy, or on holidays.”

She added that PAGC is taking “a very important step here,” and later, “We have to support PAGC in what they are trying to do.”

Eddie Head, Director of Justice at James Smith Cree Nation (JSCN), said that many First Nations have passed BCRs regarding trespassing, with the intent of keeping out drug dealers. He mentioned that Saskatchewan has trespass legislation.

It is *The Trespass to Property Act*, passed in 2009, and amended extensively in 2022, after a First Nation man, Colten Boushie, was killed at Gerald Stanley’s farm near the community of Biggar.

Head said that JSCN has passed a trespass BCR but that it has not been enforced by the police. “Courts have to recognize BCRs if a provincial trespassing law is enforced.”

The RCMP and the province of Saskatchewan have a current 20-year agreement to provide policing services.

It was signed in 2012 and expires in 2032.

It is expected that PAGC leadership will opt for a tribal council SAIPS model where all 12 PAGC First Nations, and their 48,000 members in 28 communities move away from being policed by the RCMP.

The report is in the final draft stages. It will be released, likely, in March 2026, and thereafter the Chiefs will review the final report.

“It’s been 152 years since the RCMP were tasked (in 1873) to serve our communities,” Vice-Chief Tsannie said. “The story will be changing. It might look like we are following the white man’s laws. We will enforce our laws for whoever comes into our territory. If we can, we will have a national training centre for Indigenous communities.”

A concrete form of support from each PAGC First Nation will be required and will be in the form of the issuance of a BCR. They will have to say, ‘This is what we want.’

The October 2026 PAGC annual assembly could see a resolution on a ‘yes,’ or ‘no’ on a SAIPS, but no later than that. The decision could be made before then.

Creating an Indigenous self-administered police service will be a massive administrative undertaking but it appears that PAGC communities and leadership are ready for it.

