

LLRIB passes BCR supporting the establishment of an Indigenous self-administered police service for Prince Albert Grand Council



Ron Merasty Photo

LLRIB signs BCR approving the creation of a PAGC Police Service. Front row, l-r: Gladys Christiansen (Executive Director), Elder Bella Sanderson, Elder Angelique Ratt, Elder Abel Charles, Elder Leonard Halkett, Senator Noland Henderson, Elder Sarah Ballantyne. Back row, l-r: Elder Rodney Hegland, Councillor Dean Roberts (La Ronge), Councillor Korrie Ratt (Sucker River), Councillor Keith Mirasty (Little Red River), Councillor Sam Roberts (La Ronge), Chief Tammy Cook-Searson, Councillor Ann Ratt (La Ronge), Councillor Cora Roberts-Ballantyne (Stanley Mission), Councillor Nora McLeod-Charles (Stanley Mission), Councillor Charlene Venne (La Ronge), Councillor Linda Charles (Stanley Mission), and David Sanderson (Moose Lake).

By Ron Merasty

On May 26, David Sanderson, Prince Albert Grand Council's (PAGC) Public Safety Implementation Advisor, and Senator Noland Henderson, met with Lac La Ronge Indian Band (LLRIB) chief, council and elders. The meeting was held at Dakota Dunes Resort at Whitecap Dakota Nation, south of Saskatoon.

Sanderson, a retired First Nation RCMP officer with 33 years' service, and Henderson were there to, hopefully, persuade LLRIB to pass a Band Council Resolution (BCR) supporting, in principle, the creation of an Indigenous self-administered police service for PAGC communities.

Sanderson, a member of Mosakahiken (Moose Lake) Cree Nation, located southeast of The Pas, explained how such a police service will be established.

He referenced a 253-page PAGC study that details how the regional police model will be built. He explained how much it would cost, where they would build, the number of police officers needed, where and how they were going to start, and how long it would take. It is a planned 10-year process with April 1, 2026, the start of year one.

The study, he said, was searching for "long-term policing solutions" for PAGC communities. That study engaged community members, did data analysis and examined best policing practices across Canada from successful and thriving Indigenous police services.

Current policing services are not meeting community expectations, Sanderson said, citing findings

from the study. "This is what we've heard. There's: no police service that's 24/7 coverage; increased safety risk across all regions; communities that call for a culturally grounded accountable policing. People want change is what we heard. People want a say in their policing, people want engagement, people want visibility, people want proactive policing."

Instead, he said, the RCMP "are reactive, limited visibility and relationship building," and provide "delayed response time, especially in north and remote communities."

The reason RCMP may be mainly reactive is that they are experiencing chronic officer shortages. Sanderson said there is high officer turnover, providing the example that the average length of service in communities like Buffalo Narrows and La Loche is 3 years, the average police experience there. "They just don't have the bodies to go there, so, all the calls are reactive, limited visibility and relationship building."

In an example of delayed response time, Sanderson, citing statistics provided by the RCMP, said the Carrot River detachment averages 50 minutes to respond to calls from Red Earth. For LLRIB in La Ronge, the average time was anywhere from 15-20 minutes, noting that LLRIB Chief Tammy Cook-Searson has a good relationship with the local RCMP detachment.

Senator Noland Henderson, himself a former RCMP officer, said that they had been to Red Earth Cree Nation just the day before and that Chief Zachary Whitecap had told them, 'No, it's not 50 minutes,

sometimes it's two hours. Sometimes it's two days."

"There's a desire for a community-based proactive policing," Sanderson said. "They want a proactive policing. They want visibility. They want to build a relationship, cultural awareness, engagement, local traditions, languages. Community members want officers who are familiar and engage with their communities."

He cited the major contributors to crime: substance abuse, drug trafficking, bootlegging, vandalism, and violence, often caused by gangs, that all nations are dealing with those issues, that there is a high crime rate, that the use of "meth is an epidemic right now all over," that "it's hurting our communities," and that there is "a significant increase for calls for service and police."

Sanderson provided a grim statistic that "in Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation (PBCN) alone the crime rate went up 76% within five years."

Turning to the costs of establishing such a police service, he said the study shows what infrastructure (buildings) and vehicles they have, providing an attention-grabbing statistic that to "outfit one police officer is \$310,000. That's how much it costs to outfit one police officer."

Saying that the study "had to take that in account" and needed to provide cost estimates, the report "details how we're going to build it, what steps we have to do to build it, where do we start from here."

The study was as thorough as possible, "because the government's going to come back and say, how much, why do you need this much

money?"

"We have to change the way we do the policing," Sanderson said, informing that as of May 26 six out of 12 PAGC nations had already signed and passed the BCR being proposed to LLRIB, that two more "were in the queue, and I'm hoping if we can get your support today, we'll have nine."

Sanderson talked about other existing Indigenous police services, saying PAGC has heard presentations from: Nishnawbe Aski Police Service (NAPS), which covers the greater portion of northern Ontario; Manitoba First Nations Police Service (MFNPS); and Tsuut'ina Police Service (TPS) from Alberta.

NAPS polices 34 First Nation communities, and close to 50,000 people, Sanderson said, with "the same geographics as our northern Saskatchewan," that they have close to 400 employees and have "a fly-in, drive-in kind of (policing) model."

NAPS officers travel to the communities, police there for 10 days and do a rotation. In Manitoba the MFNPS has 210 police officers in the communities they serve, including in (relatively) nearby Opaskwayak Cree Nation (OCN).

At Tsuut'ina, located on the southwest outskirts of Calgary, 13 TPS officers are funded by their on-reserve casino.

A PAGC police service will need board governance, Sanderson said, to be built by PAGC leadership, with a board chair, suggesting board representatives from all PAGC sectors: Woodland, Athabasca, Plains Cree, and Swampy Cree.

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