

First Nations are not immune from forestry fallout

First Nation population numbers are solid and growing, and therefore all is well in the Northwest from their perspective.

At least that seems to be the view of Anita Cameron, who took offence to my column on the area's falling population numbers as an indicator of just how seriously the forestry downturn has impacted communities in the region.

If only things were going so well for First Nations.

First though, the exclusion of First Nations population numbers from the Municipal Property Assessment Corporation count — her key concern — was meant as no slight against those communities. Property assessment, and compiling voter lists and population counts in those communities is just not part of the assessment agency's mandate. If First Nations wanted the agency to provide those services, I'm sure they would — for a price of course, just as municipalities and the province pay for the data collected in organized and unorganized areas.

More importantly, many First Nations people, whether holding status cards or not, weren't left out of the population count. If they lived in a municipality or a rural area they were counted — the Property Assessment Corporation doesn't track ethnic background as the census does. To them people are simply people — full-time residency is the criteria when doing the population count; Canadian citizenship, being over 18, and school support preference for voting lists.

And they don't just count property owners; tenants (including land lessees), along with spouses and children are included depending on the use for the information collected.

Based on census data from 2006, of the 35,000 people tallied by the Assessment Corporation in their 2010 count about 7,000 would be people who self-identify as First Nation or aboriginal.

The reality is, until the next census numbers are taken in 2011 and released in early 2012, the provincial numbers taken this year are the only current ones available.

Cameron is quite correct in pointing out that a significant proportion of the area's population is of aboriginal descent — roughly 27,000, or 40 per cent based on the national census. If you make a guess at the number of those who didn't acknowledge aboriginal heritage, the percentage is probably closer to 50 per cent. And they are an integral part of the area's economy.

But whether those numbers are increasing is debatable.

The census noted a modest four per cent increase between 2001 and 2006 in total population for the district, but if Cameron had taken more than the brief look as she admittedly did, she'd have read all the qualifiers Stats Canada puts on that number.

Census tallies in First Nation communities are far from exact. Some communities outright refuse to take part explains the census background information, in others the voluntary response rate is limited. For instance, an actual community by community review shows Pikangikum recorded zero population in 2001 and 2,100 in 2006. For Naohtamegwaning (Whitefish Bay 32A) the number was also zero in 2001 and 622 in 2006. Those 2,722 'new' residents alone account for most of the roughly 3,000 total district increase to 64,000 in 2006. In other communities where numbers doubled or more, increased participation in the census rather than a real increase in the population is the more likely reason.

In fact, in most cases the census counts between 2001 and 2006 show either slight increases or decreases in total First Nation community populations — that's stagnation not growth. And that's troubling. Because an even closer look shows the average age in those communities is decidedly young, and in a few years time as those young people finish school and enter the workforce they'll be more likely to leave than stay.

Current numbers bear that out. A review of First Nation populations at the Indian Affairs website — which counts only band members — shows that in communities with road access in the region, 50 per cent and often more of the band members live 'offreserve'. Some make their homes in nearby towns or rural areas, others in bigger regional urban centres like Winnipeg and Thunder Bay, some even further away in Vancouver and Toronto, some overseas.

Why they leave is varied, but one reason is a lack of local jobs.

No different

First Nations communities are no different than the municipalities in the region. The best and the brightest, the ambitious, leave — they always do and only a few return. But leaving too are many of those who would be termed 'the middle class'. They marry, have families, use schools, shop at grocery stores and do the heavy lifting of community involvement. To do that they need jobs, if there are no jobs they'll go where there are jobs. Perhaps with a heavy heart, but they go, and they seldom come back.

That brings us full circle to the forestry crisis.

It gutted the region of thousands of jobs including those for First Nations people. There was no exemption for having a status card when the pink slips were handed out. Whether they worked in a mill, in the forest harvesting trees or in some related service industry, their jobs were gone too.

Some in the First Nations community are actually glad the industry is down although not out. It means harvesting on what they consider traditional land is a moot point. But the downside to that victory is no jobs, and no reason for people to stay. There's nothing on the horizon, not even a larger tourism market or a growth in mining, that approaches the number of stable, well paying jobs lost in forestry.

The reality is that in just the Kenora area there are now about 2,000 youths in the age 15-19 bracket equally split between a half dozen area First Nations and Kenora and its immediate rural area. They need jobs now and over the next five years and there aren't anywhere near 2,000 new jobs in sight. So most of them will leave the area.

For First Nations people, or anyone for that matter, to take some sort of schadenfreude in 20 per cent population declines in places like Kenora or Ignace in the belief it doesn't impact them or their home communities or they are better off because of it, is the height of naiveté.



And any politician, whether on a city council or band council, who ignores that same reality and its ramifications for the region and their own community, does a disservice to themselves and the people they are elected to serve.

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