

Building Better

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Building Better Homes: Kettle Point First Nation Tackles Building Permits

By: John Kiedrowski and Keith Maracle

Kettle Point is a unique community in southern Ontario, along the shores of Lake Huron, approximately 35 kilometers from Sarnia. It also borders Lambton Shores, a municipality with city status that includes several smaller communities. Both Sarnia and Lambton Shores follow the Ontario Building Code, and employ building permits and inspection services. Kettle Point residents can plainly the differences between the homes in these communities and their own.



Seeing these differences has caused Kettle Point Council to examine its process for building homes. One other underlying challenge faces the community, in the form of a stretch of beachfront cottage properties owned mainly by non-community members, with the land leased by community members. The Council does not have any by-laws that require cottages to be built to the building codes, or any other provincial legislation, such as making sure septic tanks are properly installed. The Council further realizes that as the authority having jurisdiction, they are responsible for all building in their community.

Moving Forward

The Council formed a housing committee to look at the issues and challenges for implementing a building-permit system. Here, a presentation was made to the committee that focused on existing realities. These include:

- Difficult to access home/fire insurance
- Homes not inspected to comply with Building Codes and Standards
- Construction cost overruns - very common
- Renovation of units less than five years adds to financial burden
- Community is not happy with housing conditions
- Homes built with no consideration to zoning
- Cottages are not meeting building-code requirements
- Lost opportunities to generate revenues
- Chief and Council need to exercise authority having jurisdiction

The committee also focused on existing by-laws and how many of these laws may need to be updated and revised.

Communities Wanted!

Does your community want to improve housing conditions? Are you planning to improve how band homes are built? If you've answered yes, FNNBOA wants to hear from you.

Over the past few years, INAC has funded projects in which FNNBOA provides an overview of your building and inspection activities, at no cost to the community.

FNNBOA gets many requests, and resources may be limited. Priority will be given to those who contact FNNBOA first and provide the necessary supporting documents. If interested, please send an email to info@fnnboa.ca or contact Bud Jobin at (780) 523-8357.

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President's Message

I was in the big city doing some last-minute shopping. Actually, it was Mom who needed to pick up some stuff. Of course that meant bargain stores, as Mom is on a limited budget. So I dropped her off and found a parking spot, then hurried to catch up. Ran up to the front door and waited for it to open — and waited, and waited, and waited....

It seems conveniences like automatic doors are now the norm, and when we have to rely on our own wits, we are witless. There was a time when we all knew how, but lately we rely more and more on advanced technology. When my car breaks down, I open the hood, look thoughtfully inside and then phone AMA.

This has relevance to the maintenance issues facing remote communities. Never has the need for training been more evident. FNNBOA first looked at the [Residential Building Maintenance Worker](#) back in 2006 (see our website for a copy). Since then, high-efficiency furnaces have become the new standard, and the homeowner has to rely on heating contractors for repairs. In addition, Heat Recovery Ventilators, once used only in homes on electrical or in-slab heating, are becoming standard. A couple of years back, I had to replace my furnace. In all the years I ran the old one, I never needed a service call. I knew how to light the pilot, change the thermal coupler and adjust the heat. I was stumped though when my new furnace failed, and I contacted the installer. Seems several safety devices on the new furnace automatically shut off the gas supply when the motherboard senses an issue. The installer knew what the issue was when I explained the sequence of flashing lights. The paint I was using in the bathroom (oil-based) set off a gas-leak sensor and the serviceman had to reset the safety switches. New equipment, new set of skills required.

So where does one go for training?

In recent years, the role of the Building Maintenance Worker (BMW) in addressing housing conditions in First Nations and Aboriginal communities has been growing. In 2005, the Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs, in response to the First Ministers Meeting in Kelowna, published a document called the [Transformative Change Accord](#). In this document, the Chiefs pointed out that in order to close the gap in housing and infrastructure, there will be a need to “support capacity development in the area of housing, including building maintenance and standards, and training and employment having to do with housing construction.”

Currently, five institutions provide courses in building maintenance. Three have programs directed at First Nations: Secwepemc Education Institute, Kamloops, B.C.; Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technology (SIIT) and Aurora College, Northwest Territories. These courses are geared to the maintenance realities facing many First Nations communities. Those working in this area are also viewed as jacks-of-all-trades. This is because of the large number of responsibilities a maintenance worker generally has to shoulder. Thus training and updating of skills and knowledge are very important.

However, access to training for the BMW in other parts of the country is tough. Training programs through the Heating, Refrigeration and Air Conditioning Institute (HRAI) are available for members, as are several good courses through the Canadian Home Builders Association (CHBA). Those fortunate to live in Alberta and Ontario have access to PTO's OFNTSC and TSAG. For FNNBOA, with limited funding for training, it really is time to look



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About this issue ...

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inward, and search out opportunities to bring expertise and commitment to the shared goal of improving housing conditions in our communities. Housing managers, building maintenance workers, fire safety officers and building officers share skill sets. If we are to effectively make use of limited capacity funding, the integrated model to improve housing conditions may be the best way to move forward, given the expertise that exists within our FN organizations.

Meanwhile, back at the bargain store ... it finally dawned on me that I had to open the door myself:

Big-box stores have automatic sensors, doormen and entrances for the disabled; bargain stores rely on low overhead to make a profit.

D'oh. My knowledge as an inspector meant that I knew the doors opened to meet egress requirement, and I pulled inwards. Now, where's Mom, and what was she shopping for.....? Reminder to self: Get Mom an ATV safety flag for her walker.

For housing personnel, with limited funding, it really is time to look inward and find shared training opportunities.

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The next step was to develop a process for reviewing homes built in the community. Most are band-built for community members. However, some cottages were built by non-community members, and some homes were built by community members who once resided off-reserve, but have now decided to move back in retirement or to be closer to family members. It is important that any building permit process includes all homes, whether they are built by the band or by an independent party.

In Kettle Point, it is proposed that the building-permit process begin with an application. The applicant can be the band, a contractor representing the homeowner, or the homeowner. The applicant must submit several drawings that have been signed off by a qualified engineer. It is also proposed that the housing department that will accept and manage the application should charge a fee. For example, Lambton Shores charges \$700 per square metre for residential dwellings, including mobile homes and park models; the building permit for a home of 1200 square feet will cost \$2560.

Once the application has been submitted, the proposed building-permit system allows for all the other departments to provide input. Currently, homes are built without complete consultation with other departments. The proposed permit system allows for all departments to review the application and determine what needs to be done in order to allow construction to take place. For instance, the department of public works will review the application to ensure services (e.g., hydro) can be delivered to the site. Fire officials will also review the application; without proper supervision, a new construction site may be at risk for fires. They may also visit the site to make sure it is safe.

After the application has been accepted, construction project can go forward. The housing department will issue a building permit, and throughout the construction process, there will be several inspections. Most importantly, a final inspection will ensure construction meets building-code requirements, and that all work is completed. The housing department will then issue an occupancy permit. If a community member is moving into the house, this also gives the Council an opportunity to mandate that all new occupants take a home-ownership course to understand how to change a furnace filter and other basic maintenance (eg. fixing a loose door knob).

Building Capacity

When creating a building-permit system, there are several issues related to capacity. First, many contractors are from the community and will need to be provided with courses to learn about building to code. In this case, it is proposed that on a few weekends, the contractors take building-science courses. This will also provide an opportunity to introduce the contractors to new building materials and how to install certain items (e.g., windows).

Another capacity issue relates to the administration of the building-permit process. While the housing department has taken the lead for the project, it may not be the best place to manage a building-permit system. It may best be operated out of the department of public works. This also gives the council an opportunity to re-organize some of its departments.

A third capacity issue relates to training. The person managing the building-permit system should have experience in the construction process or be aware of building-permit processes. Finally, qualified staff must work in the building-permit system. This means

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hiring building inspectors or working in partnership with Lambton Shores to provide the appropriate inspections services.

As Kettle Point First Nation moves toward approving and implementing a building-permit process, it needs to consider some capacity challenges. Such a process cannot be implemented in a few days; it may take years, one stage at a time.

