

Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs (INAN)
Follow-up from the meeting held on May 29, 2023, regarding the Main Estimates for the fiscal year
ending March 31, 2024
Indigenous Services Canada

Denare Beach Update

Mr. Gary Vidal: Thank you, Chair.

As I said, when I was first elected in 2019 I visited this community of Denare Beach. It was brought to my attention that the community was out a significant amount of money by the Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation. The population of Denare Beach is about 800 people and part of their community consists of the Amisk Lake Reserve which is one of the eight communities of Peter Ballantyne Cree Nations. There are 37 properties, part of the Amisk Lake Reserve that are in this community of about 500 properties. Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation and the Village of Denare Beach have a service agreement that consists of water and sewer, fire, animal control, street maintenance, recreation, garbage, recycling. In essence, it's an agreement that basically is in lieu of property taxes and municipal services.

I've raised this issue with your predecessor and his chief of staff starting way back in March of 2020 and many times after. I brought this issue up with your deputy minister on January 24, 2022, shortly after you were appointed minister. I was assured that the ministry had approved this agreement, was aware of this agreement, had approved this agreement, and we received promise after promise of the region being committed to resolving this issue. It still hasn't. That's over three years later, Minister.

On January 2, 2023, the village was owed about \$240,000. That doesn't include the 2023 invoice yet, which will bring the total to over \$300,000. Again, to put this into perspective, the villages total annual property taxes are just over \$500,000, so \$300,000 owing to them is very very significant to their community. At my request, the village leadership has shown significant patience with the process as we tried to work at this behind the scenes. Quite frankly, I think that patience is becoming undeserved. Minister, the leadership of the village has been put in an untenable situation because of the unwillingness or the inability of ISC to ensure that the service agreements that they have approved and funded are honoured and paid. But this community's patience has run out. Denare Beach do not want the promise of more meetings, nor the promise of phone calls or follow-ups, in their own words, they just need ISC to pay the bill. If not, they're going to be forced to shut off the water, stop responding to fire calls, animal control and all the other services in this agreement in order to collect what is due to them.

Minister, my question is actually quite simple.

Can you commit to the people of Denare Beach who by the way who are watching today, that this will be resolved immediately to ensure there is no disruption of service?

In other words, is there a commitment in these estimates to just pay this bill?

Minister Hajdu: Thank you very much.

Through you Madam Chair, what I will commit to the residents of Denare Beach is to continue to investigate what is happening.

Certainly, Indigenous Services Canada would not have a direct agreement with Denare Beach. They would be supporting the community to procure services. We will need to work with the community to determine why the bills remain unpaid.

MP Vidal: I appreciate that, Minister. But just for clarity, I've had that commitment many times over the last three and half years. If we can get some assurance that this will be taken care of it's absolutely imperative. We don't want to see a child mauled by a dog or a fire at a house or any of these horrible things that could happen if services are ended. Let's just make sure it gets done please.

Minister Hajdu: Certainly, we'll connect back with you, Mr. Vidal, to give you more information on this situation.

Response:

Indigenous Services Canada provides funding for the operation and maintenance of properties located on reserve land only. The Department provides funding of \$34,320 annually to Peter Ballantyne First Nation for on-reserve properties covered by the Denare Beach Municipal Type Services Agreement. The First Nation has indicated to the department that the operation and maintenance funds provided by ISC have been paid to the Village of Denare Beach for the properties located on reserve land.

The department understands that billing may be outstanding for some properties located off reserve and owned by the First Nation or its members. However, Indigenous Services Canada does not have the authority and is not funded for these off reserve costs.

In support of self-determination, Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation maintains decision making authority over how funds are expended. Peter Ballantyne First Nation is best placed to respond to questions about non-payment of any off-reserve costs. Indigenous Services Canada is not in a position to respond on behalf of the community.