

Funding boost for museum

Jean Marie River historic school to be transformed

by April Hudson

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Ttheke'ehdeli/Jean Marie River

The second year of renovations to Jean Marie River's historic log school is about to get underway, furthering the community's efforts to bolster its tourism sector.

The building, which was hand-built by men in the community in the 1950s, is expected to be turned into a hunters and trappers museum, with part of the space dedicated to a coffee shop and part set aside for an arts and crafts store.

The historic building was constructed in the mid-1900s after Jean Marie River petitioned to have a school built, becoming the first indigenous community in the Northwest Territories to successfully do so. A teachers' quarters – locally known as the teacherage – was eventually added to the school.

The school remained open until the 1990s.

The project to turn the school into a museum began last summer with some of the log exterior being revitalized and rotten logs being replaced. Over the next three years, the school's transformation will be helped along by federal and territorial dollars.

On June 8, the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency announced it would be investing \$441,071 over the next three years into the project, which is expected to stimulate tourism in the Deh Cho. Complimenting that will be \$150,000 promised by the territorial government.

A statement from Jean Marie River First Nation Chief Gladys Norwegian, included in the agency's June 8 news release, says the school's renovation came as part of the community's economic revitalization plan, which incorporates traditional Dene culture and lifestyle.

"For our community, renovating the former log school is foremost in honouring the legacy and memory of our fathers who have proven self-reliance by constructing the school so children did not have to leave home at a young age for residential schools," she stated.

Marilyn Hardisty, program co-ordinator for Jean Marie River First Nation, said the community will be starting up a committee to handle the funding as well as the scope of the project.

She said the project may need additional funding depending on what the committee decides.

The committee will also be tasked with deciding on whether to keep the building open year-round or only during the summer months. The original plan, Hardisty said, was to have the



photo courtesy of Jean Marie River

This old photograph of the log school in Jean Marie River shows the building as it was before age wore down the exterior.

building open six months of the year, since it currently has no heating.

"Lately, this past year, there has been talk about having it open year around. So if I'm going to be applying for funds ... that will have to be taken into consideration, if that is the feeling among the membership," she said.

Meanwhile, the contractor Jean Marie River hired last summer is due to return to the community this summer to finish the exterior work.

"Last year, all the logwork was done and protective paint was put on (the building). This year, the plan is to replace roofing and windows if possible," she said.

Exterior work will also include replacing doors and the steps up to the school.

As for future years, Hardisty said the committee will need to decide how to utilize the building's interior space and hire someone with experience to set it up.

They will also need to decide what to do with the teacherage.

"On a casual basis, since work started on this project, I've been asking community members what they want done on that teacherage. Back in the '50s and '60s, the school was used as a community hall, so a lot of the (community's)

interactions happened in the school itself, not the teacher's apartment," Hardisty said.

She said she put the question of the teacherage out to the band's membership during Jean Marie River First Nation's annual general assembly in March.

"The consensus was to keep it as-is," she said.

Hardisty said with June more than half over, she hopes to see construction pick up on the school soon.

"I'm quite anxious for it to get going, although work could take place right up until October," she said.

Seeing it turn into a museum brings back memories for Hardisty, as well.

"It was built by the men, by our fathers. The men had also built log cabins for homes, and none of them are standing today except for the school and the warehouse beside it," she said.

"We want to keep those, from a time when this little community was very self-sufficient. Even though I was a child when all these things were happening, I still remember quite a bit of watching the men build the houses."

The federal funding will be applied through the agency's Northern Aboriginal Economic Opportunities program.