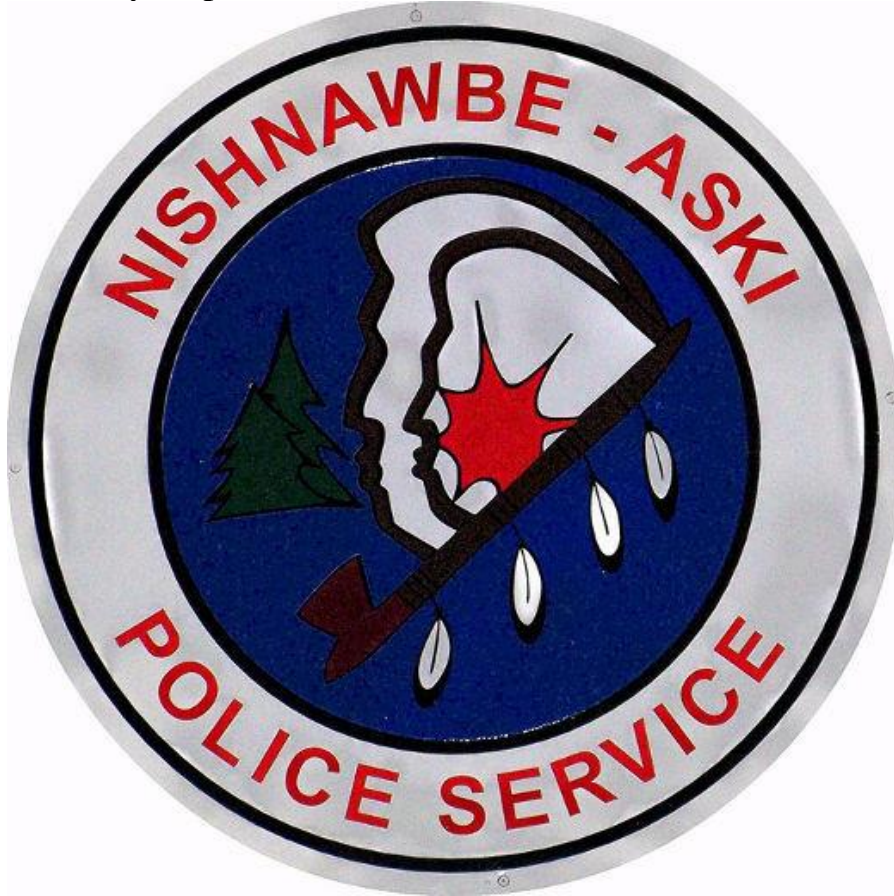

NEWS LOCAL

Police strike averted as NAPS tentative deal reached



By Alan S. Hale, The Daily Press

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TIMMINS - The Nishnawbe Aski Police Service (NAPS) and the union representing its officers reached a tentative agreement just hours before the officers were in a legal position to strike.

The tentative collective was reached after two days of intensive negotiations.

The deal will now be put to the officers for approval.

The Public Service Alliance of Canada, which represented the NAPS officers, is calling the deal a significant victory.

“I am very proud of our bargaining team for all their work and to the officers who stood strong and lobbied their provincial and federal political representatives to fund First Nations policing effectively,” said Sharon DeSousa, the union’s regional executive vice president for Ontario in a statement.

News of a deal came as a relief to the Grand Chief Jonathon Solomon of the Mushkegowuk Council, whose member First Nations are all policed by NAPS.

Those communities were facing the prospect of returning to the OPP for policing — a service which Mushkegowuk had rejected in favour of forming the Aboriginal police service a decade ago.

“It’s certainly a relief and it’s good news for our officers,” Solomon told The Daily Press shortly after the deal was announced. “The government has come to the table to address the issues or officers were facing.”

During the contentious negotiations that took place this summer, the officers were demanding pay equity with their counterparts in the OPP, as well as the addition of more officers to the force so that police in remote communities would no longer be required to go into dangerous situations without backup.

On top of that, they were also calling for upgrades to their insufficient and often poorly maintained equipment and facilities.

Meeting any of those demands appeared to be impossible without additional funding from both the provincial and federal governments, which share responsibility for funding the police service.

Details on how the deal was reached are sparse, but the union’s statements appear to imply their attempt to lobby the governments for additional funding were successful, rather than them compromising on their central demands which were vocally supported by the Nishnawbe Aski Nation’s political leadership.

The Daily Press contacted the Public Service Alliance asking for more details on the deal, but none could be shared on Thursday.

Grand Chief Solomon admitted he doesn’t know exactly what was brought to the table but expects that the governments offered something significant.

“I think they came with something to the table that made the union feel it was a good deal,” he speculated. “I don’t know specifically, but something substantive would have had to have been offered for the union to accept this agreement in principle.”

Presuming the deal is accepted by the officers, the new contract appears to have brought an existential crisis facing NAPS to a close.

Nishnawbe Aski Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler had said during the negotiations that he would see the Aboriginal police force shut down than have it forced to continue operating with unsafe conditions with insufficient equipment, manpower, and facilities.