

# NAN Chiefs Winter Assembly gets underway

The annual winter assembly of more than 30 Nishnawbe Aski Nation chiefs began on Tuesday and will host Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne on Wednesday.

about 15 hours ago by: Doug Diaczuk



*Nishnawbe Aski Nation Grand Chief, Alvin Fiddler (left) and National Chief, Perry Bellegarde, during the grand entry of the NAN Chiefs Winter Assembly that opened on Tuesday.*

THUNDER BAY - Chiefs from across the Northwest have a busy three days ahead, as they gather to discuss issues affecting First Nations communities and hope to get answers from the premier of Ontario.

On Tuesday, the Nishnawbe Aski Nation Chiefs Winter Assembly opened, with 31 NAN territories participating in the three day gathering in Thunder Bay.

During the assembly, chiefs and leaders will discuss issues relating to infrastructure and housing, cannabis legislation, child welfare, health, sexual abuse, education, the Thunder Bay Seven Youth Inquest.

“It’s a busy three days for our leadership,” said NAN Grand Chief, Alvin Fiddler. “One of the things we wanted to focus on, and we know the many challenges that exist in our communities, but I think we want to talk about is how we will begin to address these issues. We want to talk about solutions, about partnerships, not just with government, but with other organizations.”

“I think the relationship we want to establish the federal government is that we want to be able to have respectful dialogue with, in our case, Ontario and Canada, to talk about solutions, be able to access resources our communities need and address the many challenges that exist in our communities,” Fiddler continued.

On Wednesday, Ontario Premier, Kathleen Wynne will address the assembly and Fiddler said the membership are looking forward to addressing several key issues with the leader of the Ontario government.

“There are a number of issues our chiefs want to raise with her when it comes to our land and resources,” he said. “The fact that there is legislation in place that is acting as a barrier, for example, the Far North Act. That is something we need to address with her government.”

Also participating in the Chiefs Winter Assembly are National Chief Perry Bellegarde and Ontario Regional Chief Isadore Day.

During his opening remarks, Bellegarde said a new fiscal agreement with the federal government is needed with Indigenous people in order to raise the quality of life in First Nations communities.

Bellegarde referenced the United Nations Human Development Index, which lists Canada in the top six nations in terms of quality of life, but added if those same indices were applied to First Nations people, the rating would be 63<sup>rd</sup>.

“You need long-term, sustainable investments in all those key determinants of health,” Bellegarde said. “That’s the whole objective. You have to look at a new fiscal arrangement with the Crown. You also have to fix the bureaucracies that are there to become more effective and efficient so those resources get out of governments hands and get into First Nations government hands so they can have a real meaningful impact on the ground.”

Bellegarde also made reference to an emergency meeting held last week on Indigenous child welfare on the two year anniversary of the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal hearing regarding chronic underfunding of First Nation child welfare agencies.

There are more than 40,000 Indigenous children in provincial care, Bellegarde said, and there needs to be more of a commitment from the federal and provincial government to fix the problem.

“The objective is to keep the children in the home and you want to make sure those precious resources are spent where they are most effective, keeping children and their families in home in their communities,” he said. “Formalizing the relationship with every

province and territory. That's one of the biggest things. The premier is here tomorrow and I encourage the chiefs to ask that question. Where's our bilateral process here to fix the child welfare system here in Ontario. That has to happen, formalize that process, bring all those issues to the table."

The NAN Chiefs Winter Assembly continues on Tuesday with Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne expected to make her address in the morning.