

Tears flow at Metis AGM; So do emotion, money at news about Juno Beach memorial

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Many members of B.C.'s Metis Nation couldn't hold back their tears Sunday when honouring those who gave up their lives for Canada.

The 12th annual general meeting of Metis Nation British Columbia wrapped up Sunday at the Penticton Trade and Convention Centre.

The closing session took an emotional turn when details were announced of a Metis veterans memorial at Juno Beach to be officially dedicated on Nov. 11. What turned out to be an impromptu outpouring of emotion ended up raising about \$16,000 to help send Metis veterans to the ceremony in France.

Dozens of conference delegates, many of them choking back tears in memory of fathers and other close relatives, pledged \$100 and more to defray the expenses of the veterans planning to travel to the beach where Canadian soldiers came ashore on D-Day.

Victoria Pruden, director of women, elders and veterans affairs for Metis Nation B.C., said after the new memorial means a lot to the Metis in Canada.

"It's really, really significant for us," she said. "We have many, many Metis veterans who had journeys of their own when they returned from various wars, including World War Two." Pruden said many other Metis families have someone currently serving in the Canadian Forces.

"Today's outpouring of support and the generosity that came through today was overwhelming," she said. "It was amazing." The conference also gave an opportunity to update members on various Metis programs. Pruden said the Metis Nation has developed a solid working relationship with the provincial government.

"We've got some really good relationships happening and we're really pleased with how the Metis Nation Relationship Accord is being fulfilled," she said.

Marlin Ratch, director of the Metis training centre in Abbotsford, told the delegates this marks the final year of the five-year Metis Human Resource Development Agreement. It is to be replaced with the new Aboriginal Skills Employment Training Strategy in April of 2010.

The training centre has had considerable success in helping Metis become better educated and more employable in today's job market.

Although there is a slight increase in funding under the new program, Ratch noted the funding formula is based on 1996 census figures and the Metis population in B.C. has risen since then.

There are now more than 56,000 Metis people in the province.

Conference chair Don Caverley said the B.C. Metis Nation is working jointly with Metis leaders in Ontario and the Prairies to address their challenges.

Caverley also lauded the open dialogue during the conference.

"Some people didn't feel the Metis mandate was going a certain way, but I feel that's really healthy," he said. "They were applauded for at least saying: 'Thank you for listening and let's see if we can work together on some of these issues.'" This marked the first time the B.C. Metis Nation has held its annual meeting and trade show in Penticton, attracting more than 400 delegates.