

globeandmail.com

[Print this Page](#)

## The bridge to the future

THE COMING BOOM: DAY ONE OF A 4-PART EXCLUSIVE SERIES ON THE NORTHWEST TERRITORIES

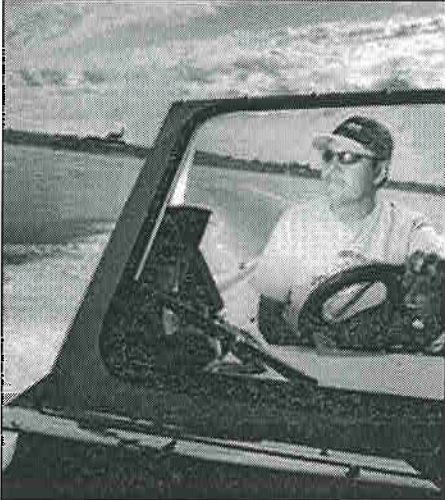


Photo: John Lehmann/The Globe and Mail

'A lot of people don't want to work in diamonds, or oil and gas,' says Michael Vandell, the man spearheading plans for the bridge.

By PATRICK BRETHOUR  
From Saturday's Globe and Mail

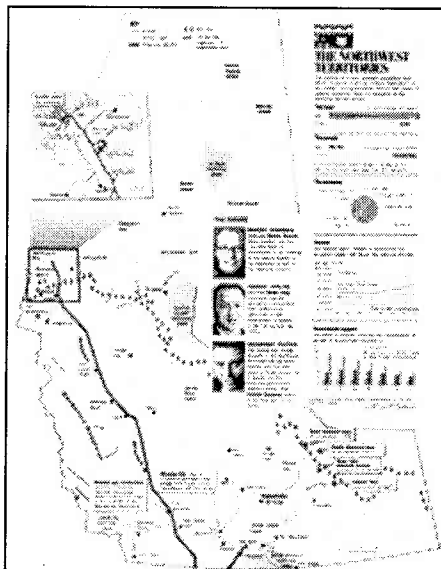
UPDATED AT 3:45 AM EST

Saturday, Sep. 13, 2003

The first bridge over the Mackenzie River will span more than just a kilometre of fast-flowing water.

For centuries, there have been only three ways to cross the Mackenzie: by boat, across ice, or not at all. In warm weather, ferries run across the river, which splits the Northwest Territories in half from Great Slave Lake in the south all the way to the Arctic Ocean. In the depths of winter, traffic rolls across the river on a makeshift ice road.

- See photos by the Globe's John Lehmann But when the thick ice breaks up and the road melts in the early spring, much of



[Click here for full map](#)

3

the Northwest Territories is cut off.

Breakup leaves Yellowknife and a host of smaller communities dependent on supplies that are flown in.

The price of lettuce, milk — anything that comes from the south — soars in those weeks until the ferries can navigate the Mackenzie.

For the 800 inhabitants of tiny Fort Providence on the north bank of the Mackenzie, the \$55-million project will not only create a physical link across the river to southern Canada. It will be a bridge to the modern economy. "This is the only chance we're going to get," says Michael Vandell, the 30-year-old spearheading plans for the bridge as president of Deh Cho Bridge Corp. Ltd.

With the economy of the Northwest Territories set to boom, propelled by mining and energy megaprojects, ferries, ice bridges and yearly isolation are about to become a piece of history, rather than geography.

Aboriginals are joining forces with petroleum companies on a \$5-billion project to build a natural gas pipeline down the Mackenzie River valley, winding 1,300 kilometres from the Beaufort Sea to a terminal in northwestern Alberta. And the diamond sector is booming: Two mines, Ekati and Diavik, are operating northeast of Yellowknife, and a third is expected to be in production by 2006. Over the next two to three decades, the three mines are projected to generate \$25.7-billion in gross domestic product.

The bridge over the Mackenzie is one small part of the much-hoped-for transformation of the Northwest Territories from a virtual colony of the south into a self-supporting economy, with aboriginal communities at the forefront.

And with that transformation comes hope, however fragile. In Fort Providence, the spinoff benefits from the bridge project could save its people from the stark choice of forsaking their community or resigning themselves to a lifetime of unemployment. Elsewhere, energy and mining megaprojects bring the hope of better jobs, more money, and a sense of independence from southern political and corporate dominance. In Fort Liard to the south, hope shows itself in the willingness of a mother to abandon the comfort of her community, band and history to give her daughter a chance at a better life.

That is the promise of the new north. But there are perils, too. Aboriginals are struggling to balance the demands of development on their tight-knit societies, and on the fragile environment of the north. Incomes have started to rise, but crime is rising even faster.

And then there is the constant struggle to make sure that aboriginals will be full participants in the new economy — more than just ditch diggers and cooks, in the words of Mr. Vandell.

x The territory's political leaders are part of that struggle, as the government pushes for a fair share of resource revenues. Without a better deal with the federal government, the territory says it actually will lose nearly \$200-million over 20 years even as billions in energy and mining royalties flow southward.

To spread that message, NWT Premier Stephen Kakfwi blitzed New York, Toronto and Ottawa this week, including a private lunch with the Prime Minister in Shawinigan. Mr. Kakfwi says the push for autonomy is about more than dollars.

"There's a matter of dignity involved here. None of us like the notion that we're living on the benevolence of Ottawa."

Many bridges have yet to be built.

Jobs are scarce in Fort Providence, a former Hudson's Bay Co. trading post that sits five kilometres off the highway leading to Yellowknife. A handful of businesses straddle the hamlet's main street, a dusty unpaved road. A small inn, along with a restaurant, bar and mechanic's shop, lie at one end, with a small general store a few hundred metres farther on. On the main highway on the way to the ferry, there is a gas bar and another café. And that's it for the private sector.

According to the most recent data, about one in seven people live on income support payments from the territorial government, the NWT's equivalent of welfare. For many residents of Fort Providence, life comes down to a hard decision between unemployment or abandoning their community.

Maxine Lacorne is only 18 years old, but she is already faced with the difficult decision of leaving behind her birthplace, family and heritage, or pursuing her ambition of becoming a wildlife officer. For Ms. Lacorne — who will use her savings from working at the diner to help pay for her schooling — the need for a job has trumped the pull of Fort Providence. "Mostly, everyone ends up back here, but I don't want that," she says.

One of those who have remained in Fort Providence is 27-year-old Colin Causca, who has never had a full-time job. He'd like to be a welder, helping to build the bridge, perhaps moving on to Yellowknife after the construction is done. Until then, he spends his days on the Mackenzie River. "It's waiting, waiting for the good training."

Other aboriginal communities in the Northwest Territories have diamond riches, or oil and gas. For the Deh Gah Got'ie in Fort Providence, the bridge is the one opportunity to steer out of economic backwaters.

Fort Providence is already feeling the effects of the megaproject-driven expansion elsewhere in the territory, however. The high pay on offer there is luring away anyone with technical skills, leaving the local equipment shop unable to find a heating mechanic.

The bridge — which will charge tolls only on commercial trucks — will generate about \$100,000 in profit annually for Fort Providence after its fifth year. Financing has already been lined up, so construction could begin as soon as January, if a final deal is struck next month as expected, Mr. Vandell says.

There would be construction work for up to 30 band members, and permanent jobs for six people. The grander ambition is to use the bridge project as a springboard to create a tourism industry centred around fishing expeditions on the Mackenzie. Eco-tourism would be an ideal marriage between the modern economy and traditional hunting and fishing, Mr. Vandell says. "A lot of people don't want to work in diamonds, or oil and gas."

The bridge project is one of the many ways in which aboriginal bands are assuming a more prominent role in the economy of the Northwest Territories.

In other areas, aboriginal-owned corporations — usually an offshoot of the local band — have sprouted up to provide catering and construction services to

resource industries, giving some aboriginal communities tens of millions in revenue.

In Fort Providence, there have been only a few tentative steps in that direction. The band has struck a partnership with the operator of the ferry, a white entrepreneur named Sieg Phillip.

Mr. Phillip arrived in Fort Providence in the early 1960s, a few years after he escaped from East Germany. The hamlet could hardly be called sprawling today, but it has grown considerably since Mr. Phillip's arrival. He says he remembers when it had just one street, a time when the native population spent a good part of the year living in tents.

Over the years, he built up a cluster of businesses, including a hotel, restaurant, bar, café, craft store and mechanic's shop. One of his sons has been running the business, but 40 years of family ownership could soon end. He and the Deh Cho are trying to settle on a purchase price for the businesses, which could be the foundation for the band's plans to build a tourism industry in Fort Providence.

The Deh Cho's plans are modest, compared with the billions that will be spent this decade to extract diamonds in the east of the Northwest Territories or to pipe natural gas from the shores of the Arctic Ocean. The bridge's \$55-million budget is but a rounding error when set against the \$5-billion it will likely take to build the Mackenzie Delta natural gas pipeline.

But the same hopes are at work in Fort Providence and its bridge as in any of the communities that stand to benefit from planned megaprojects. Hopes not only for higher incomes, but for new skills that will allow the band members to be more than just menial labourers. "We're pushing training, and trying to get more than just ditch diggers and cooks," Mr. Vandell says.

He is also mindful of the price of economic development, although he is thinking more of the human cost. He worries that domestic violence, along with alcohol and drug abuse, will mount because of the expansion, although he seems to accept the possibility as a necessary tradeoff. "There's always a negative. It's reality and you can't do nothing about it, it's just going to happen," he says.

He pauses, then adds that the combination of new social spending and the commitment of the people of Fort Providence to help each other could allow the hamlet to avoid the downside of growth. "Hopefully, we won't see too much of that."

Despite the importance of the bridge to Fort Providence's future, Mr. Vandell says the Deh Cho are ready to kill the project if they do not get a large enough share of the economic benefits — if people such as Mr. Causca aren't able to find jobs as welders, for instance. There is more at stake than just dollars and cents, he adds. It's a matter of self-respect for the Deh Cho.

"If the community gets the expression that it's just going to be a bunch of white guys from Edmonton or Vancouver coming to build this thing, then no one is going to come around and push to get a job.

"They're just going to sit there and feel that we're no good because all these white guys are coming in."

It is a common sentiment among the aboriginal communities of the north: Simply being paid to watch southern workers and companies exploit natural resources is

not acceptable.

Mr. Vandell says the Deh Cho are determined that the bridge will be built when they want, and how they want. "If we have to, we'll shut 'er down for a year."

The same mixture of hope and defiance can be found in Fort Liard, 400 dusty kilometres to the south, where another band of Deh Cho is much farther down the path of economic development — but is still struggling to find high-skilled jobs for its members.

"We're relying too much on outsiders, people outside our community, to come here and run our business," says Floyd Bertrand, chief of the Acho Dene Koe.

The hamlet of 600 people is half-jokingly nicknamed the "Tropics of the North," partly because of its comparatively balmy summer climate — the warm winter winds of the chinook occasionally pause here — and partly because it is at the southern extreme of the Northwest Territories, just a short drive north of the boundary with B.C.

Fort Liard, where the speed limit is a leisurely 30 kilometres an hour, is usually a quiet place.

The Liard River gurgles alongside the northern edge of the settlement; across it lies the jumping-off point for the oil and gas exploration and production that has brought two very different kinds of growth to Fort Liard.

The first is an economic expansion that has seen per capita income soar in the past four years by 40 per cent, as band members profit from construction, catering and other activities to support the oil industry.

The other is a crime wave.

Derek Gonet, 18, has already seen the good and evil that growth can bring. He had just finished high school when he landed a job — paying \$42,000 a year — with Chevron Canada Resources Ltd.'s natural gas production operations in August of last year, one of only two Deh Cho from Fort Liard to work directly in the energy industry.

This summer, Mr. Gonet was mugged. "I got jumped there a couple of months ago by a bunch of kids, and they beat me up with sticks and everything. It's getting really rough there."

According to the RCMP, about one in 10 of Fort Liard's residents is in jail, or awaiting sentence. The number of assaults rivals those in Hay River, a Northwest Territories town four times as large.

Almost all of the attacks in Fort Liard can be traced back to alcohol abuse and, with the spending power of income from the oil industry, to drugs, police say.

"Cocaine and marijuana are quite prevalent here," says RCMP Corporal Craig Seafoot.

Bootlegging has grown along with disposable income in Fort Liard, where there is no legal place to buy alcohol.

A \$17 bottle of liquor purchased in Fort Nelson, B.C., can be resold for up to

\$100, Cpl. Seafoot says.

In the rest of the Northwest Territories, the story is much the same.

The number of crimes reported to police has soared in recent years; the crime rate is nearly four times the national average. There is some good news.

Violent crimes, such as murder, are still relatively rare, property crimes have risen only slightly, and the number of drug offences has fallen slightly in the past decade.

So, while the crime rate has jumped by nearly a third in seven years, most of those offences are for less serious matters, according to the territory's statistics department. The vast majority are connected with alcohol in some manner, the department says.

Crime is one offshoot of oil money in Fort Liard, but there is another: hope. Exploration activity in the 1990s, and now oil and gas production, have made the band corporation, Beaver Enterprises, into a major source of jobs and profits for the Deh Cho in Fort Liard.

The signs of new-found prosperity aren't hard to find. Late-model pickups are parked in the driveways of houses crowned with satellite dishes, a dramatic change from even a decade ago.

Mr. Gonet remembers getting a choice when he was a kid of two TV channels, three if the weather was co-operative. Now, his aunt and uncle's house, like so many others in Fort Liard, receives hundreds of channels.

The hamlet has a great deal more creature comforts now, but it's not enough to keep an ambitious youth such as Mr. Gonet at home.

He wants to see the world, or at least the part of it that has an oil industry. His wanderlust kept him from taking a job with the band corporation, by far the largest employer in the hamlet. "If I'd worked for Beaver, I'd probably be staying in Liard all my life," he says.

Despite the wealth that comes from the activities of oil companies, the Deh Cho in Fort Liard are still wary. The band is to decide this fall whether to endorse a new round of exploration for oil and gas. A go-ahead would mean more revenue for Beaver Enterprises and its workers, as well as Chief Bertrand's plans to create scholarships to pay for high-school and post-secondary education for youths.

But more exploration could harm the natural environment, not to mention the already-stressed social environment in Fort Liard.

Whatever the decision on more exploration, life is changing in Fort Liard. Five years ago, Beverley Timbre went off to Fort Simpson to finish high school. After a few months, Ms. Timbre, homesick, retreated to the refuge of her family and neighbours.

Last fall, she set out again to attend school — at 27 — at Fort Smith Aurora College, a 10-hour drive from Fort Liard. She toughed it out this time, completing an accounting and business course.

The reason she did so is a little girl with beautiful long black hair, Ms. Timbre's three-year-old daughter, Precious.

Ms. Timbre and Precious are headed to Grande Prairie, Alta., this fall, where she hopes to earn a business diploma.

Once too afraid to complete Grade 11, Ms. Timbre is now ready to move hundreds of kilometres away to start a new life.

Compared with the plans to build diamond mines, energy pipelines and bridges, Ms. Timbre's ambition is shrinkingly modest. But she and Precious, leaving Fort Liard perhaps for good, are just as much a part of the new north, where the southern ideal of progress is being forged with aboriginal tradition, creating an alloy of the future and of the past.

For Ms. Timbre, the break from her past comes down to eight words, and the love of a mother for her child. "I wanted something better in life for her."

With files from reporters Wendy Stueck and Brent Jang



© 2003 Bell Globemedia Publishing Inc. All Rights Reserved.