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Bridge decisions expected soon

Derek Neary

Fort Providence (Sep 17/04) - Community support for a Mackenzie River bridge at Fort Providence will be put to the test next week.

The Dene and Metis, who will own the span through the Deh Cho Bridge Corporation for 35 years, will meet on Sept. 23, to vote on a proposed benefits plan.

Michael Nadli was hired last year to meet with community members, explain the parameters of the \$57 million project and record any concerns. A number of public and tri-council meetings regarding the bridge have also been held.

"We've laid everything out now," said Michael Vandell, president of the Bridge Corporation and a Deh Gah Got'ie band councillor. "We presented a resolution two meetings ago, it's basically a resolution to support the project and to proceed with permits."

The bridge corporation is financing \$52 million, and has put up the other \$5 million itself, \$3 million of which came from a federal grant.

Tolls of \$5-\$6 per tonne charged on commercial traffic will generate millions in profit for the community over the life of the project, Vandell said, adding that as traffic increases, profits will rise.

A modest return of about \$200,000 is expected the first year, he said. Repaying the debt will consume much of the revenue over the initial five years, he noted.

If permits can be obtained by Christmas, construction will begin next June, according to Vandell. The project should take 22 months to complete, he said.

Trucks could start hauling gravel as early as February or March.

Local businesses and their joint venture partners will be given first opportunity at contracts they can fulfil. Vandell said his sense is that residents are in favour of the bridge. They are looking forward to the work and long-term benefits as Fort Providence doesn't have any stake in other territorial commodities such as diamond mines, a pipeline or oil and gas development.

The biggest local concern, Vandell said, seems to be potential social impacts from the money that will be flowing into Fort Providence. To address that, a

percentage of the profits from the bridge will be allotted to bolster justice, social services, education and housing programs, he said.

Other community investments being discussed include artificial ice for the arena and paving the hamlet's roads.

The Mackenzie Valley Environmental Impact Review Board will hold its own hearings on the bridge. The first meeting is set for Yellowknife on Oct. 4. Then the board will move on to Fort Providence on Oct. 21.