

Northern News Services – January 9, 2004

Bridge construction delayed

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Fort Providence (Jan 09/04) - Start of construction on a bridge across the Mackenzie River at Fort Providence has been put on hold until June.

Michael Vandell, president of the Deh Cho Bridge Corporation, said more time is needed to finalize a community benefits plan, which is a requirement for a federal financing commitment. Even if the needed \$5 million in equity is identified within the next few months, river break-up would pose an obstacle, Vandell noted.

Bridge construction was originally slated to begin in November.

However, Vandell said it's expected that the \$55-million, two-lane, one kilometre span will still be completed by 2005 as planned. Regulatory permits should be granted this month, he added.

Project benefits to the community will come in the form of a projected \$47 million in profit from tolls on commercial traffic over 35 years, according to Vandell. The Bridge Corporation is proposing that a portion of that money be invested in a trust fund. The interest from that fund could enhance local programs and services such as housing, education and health, he suggested.

"The shareholders would have the final say, the Dene and the Metis," Vandell explained.

To get feedback, a community consultation session took place in November and another one is scheduled for later this month. In addition, Michael Nadli has been hired to explain the project to residents and to record their wishes and concerns. As well, Vandell said up to 25 jobs will be created for local people. Training programs for driving trucks and operating heavy equipment may be offered within the next few months, he noted.

Margaret Thom, a former band and hamlet councillor, said the bridge is sure to bring benefits to the community.

She suggested that bridge affairs should remain "out in the open" to ensure that all residents have a fair chance to benefit equally.