“Our entrepreneurial spirit has been dormant. We must re-ignite that spirit”
To Chief Reginald Bellerose, 49, of Muskowekwan First Nation in southern Saskatchewan, the wave of the future belongs to Indigenous entrepreneurship.

“Our entrepreneurial spirit has been dormant. We must re-ignite that spirit,” said Bellerose, the 13-year chief of the small Anishinaabe community on Treaty 4 territory.

For him, the key is changes to laws that will unleash Indigenous community potential, as well as changing attitudes within Indigenous communities, in governments, and among business investors.

The long-time elected political leader has been promoting business development and community self-reliance for so long that he deserves to be called a business leader in his own right. With his grandfather and uncle serving as chiefs of Muskowekwan and Kawacatoose respectively (a neighbouring First Nation) in the past, Bellerose said he has, “100 years of leadership in his blood.”

While some families are involved in agriculture or other industries, Bellerose said that his family has been involved in leadership, and he claims that as a legacy.

After studying political science and history at Concordia University of Edmonton, he studied project management closer to home at the University of Saskatchewan. Elected for the first time as chief of his community at age 35, he had already held positions in the banking industry and in Indigenous education. He was also a negotiator for a First Nation in Alberta on a power project.

Bellerose said that is how he got his first introduction into mega-projects. He also learned how to negotiate impact-benefit agreements.

“This is what gets me out of the bed in the morning, the politics and the projects,” he said. Besides being chief and a business leader in his community, he is also involved in larger Indigenous economic initiatives. He is chairman of the Saskatchewan Indian Gaming Authority, a representative political body of First Nations involved in gaming.

Bellerose is perhaps best known for his hard work in signing an agreement in early 2017 with Toronto-based Encanto Potash Corp. and the federal and provincial governments to create the first potash mine on First Nation land in Canada. The development led to an application of the First Nations Commercial and Industrial Development Act (FNCIDA) legislation. At the time, there was no regulatory framework for operating on First Nations lands. There were 42 laws governing mining in Saskatchewan alone, he said.

Unlike what we often hear about other First Nations in the news, this First Nation was welcoming a mining development on their lands. Too much negative press is given to First Nations who oppose resource development.

He told the media: “We are pleased and excited to see Encanto commence potash exploration on our Muskowekwan First Nations lands. The economic
potential and benefits resulting from a potash mine has our entire community excited. The exploration agreements the Muskowekwan have with Encanto and the completed exploration program fully respect our treaty rights and stewardship of our land. We look forward to working with Encanto and moving this project forward.”

This enthusiasm for business activity on his First Nation comes from his beliefs and mentality which stresses above all the creation of own-source revenue on Indigenous communities so they are not dependent on the federal government. First Nations, he said, must deal with the residential schools legacy and are also confronted with issues related to chronic health problems, addictions, and grinding poverty. Indigenous communities have a need for re-occurring and intergenerational revenue streams to deal with these challenges, among others.

In their search for own source revenues, he said they were not afraid to work with Bay Street bankers in Toronto, as well as Wall Street financiers in New York City.

“We need to teach these investors that First Nation lands can be brought into the economic mainstream,” he said.

He excitedly declared: “First Nations need to become a much bigger part of the Canadian economy.” The key, he said, is for First Nations to be involved in economic projects in a meaningful way from the outset. They should not be “afterthoughts.”

Commercial investments on First Nations lands, he said, are hampered by unique challenges. The first is the political instability caused by the two-year chief and councillor terms imposed by the Indian Act. With such short political terms, band politicians cannot engage in long-term planning and investment decisions because they are constantly in election mode. Bellerose also pointed out that the “rules of the game” do not favour First Nation parties to economic development. The collective and controlled form of land ownership on First Nation reserves acts to “kill the value of your lands.” Property rights and mineral rights are insecure on reserve lands. Bellerose said the government must work with First Nations to improve the security of their lands.

Indigenous communities, he said, must change practices and processes and reassure outside investors that things have changed.

“Our goal is to increase investor confidence and attract outside investment,” he said. First Nation band governments can help promote on-reserve entrepreneurship and business development by following the advice of the famous Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development, which promotes the separation of politics from business. Bellerose readily admitted that it is “hard for the Nation to be a business entity.”

“You need to let the business do the business and the government do the government,” he said. “Most successful tribes have found the correct balance between politics and business.”

It is a problem, he said, if the board of directors of band businesses are mostly populated by politicians. “There is no room for politics on these boards.”

Bellerose is insistent that First Nations must, “operate at the speed of business, not the speed of government,” when they are seeking businesses to build their own source revenue.
“In my experience, no one comes knocking at your door on your lands. You have to go out and self-promote your lands.”

With the development of the potash mine on his reserve, Bellerose said that resource development on First Nation lands is a delicate issue. On his community, he said he was careful to ensure the community was involved and on-board. On one community vote, he said, 400 community members approved the deal, while 80 did not. To seek that mandate, he said leaders must always engage with their membership and he said that is not always easy. Resource development, he said, always involves an environmental impact.

“You must be very open about the costs. With potash mining, there is a salt pile left. There is a waste part and the tailings management issues. You have to explain that to the people. There will always be benefits, but be open about the costs.”

Bellerose also advised First Nations thinking of getting involved in resource development to, “not skip on the legal advice.” He said that if you get poor legal advice at the outset of a project, you will have mistakes down the road that will prove very costly in the long run. Patient explanation to members is the key. “You don’t want any surprises down the road.”

He said the key for the future of resource development among First Nations is to shift away from simply signing participation agreements and a movement towards becoming full equity partnerships. There is large untapped market of talent on First Nation communities. Rather than companies seeking skilled labour offshore, these local First Nations members should be trained at home.

In the end, this Prairie Indigenous business leader believes these fundamental changes will lead to the entrepreneurial culture you want on more Indigenous communities.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR:
Joseph Quesnel is a research fellow for the Frontier Centre for Public Policy who mainly focuses on Aboriginal matters and property rights. Presently based in eastern Nova Scotia, he is from northeastern Ontario and has Métis ancestry from Quebec.

He graduated from McGill University in 2001, where he majored in political science and history. He specialized in Canadian and U.S. politics, with an emphasis on constitutional law. He also has a Master of Journalism degree from Carleton University, where he specialized in political reporting. His master’s research project focused on reformist Indigenous thinkers in Canada.

He is currently studying theology at the Atlantic School of Theology in Halifax.

In the past while as a policy analyst, he was the lead researcher on the Frontier Centre’s flagship Aboriginal Governance Index, which is measured perceptions of quality of governance and services on Prairie First Nations.

For over two years, he covered House standing committees as well as Senate committees. Quesnel’s career in journalism includes several stints at community newspapers in Northern Ontario, including in Sudbury and Espanola. He also completed a radio broadcasting internship at CFRA 580 AM, a talk radio station in Ottawa, and the well-known Cable Public Affairs Channel (CPAC).

He is a past editor of C2C Journal, an online Canadian publication devoted to political commentary. He wrote a weekly column for the Winnipeg Sun and contributes to The Taxpayer, the flagship publication of the Canadian Taxpayers Federation.

Quesnel’s policy commentaries have appeared all over Canada, including the Globe and Mail, the National Post, the Financial Post, the Vancouver Sun, the Ottawa Citizen, the Montreal Gazette, the Calgary Herald, Winnipeg Free Press, among many other major papers. Over the years, he has been featured as a guest commentator on many radio and television news programs.