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Dam spawns on-reserve training centre

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By Helen Fallding

THE Nisichawayasihk Cree will break ground today on a visible symbol of hope for a better future through jobs on northern hydro dams.

The \$8-million Atoskiwin Training and Employment Centre in Nelson House will be the first large-scale on-reserve training centre in Manitoba to prepare young people for construction trades.

"It would be nice to stay in your home town," said William Leonard, 22, who is being sent out to The Pas for electrician training until the new centre is completed in about 10 months.

Leonard hopes to land a job on the 200-megawatt Wuskwatim dam Manitoba Hydro wants to build on the Burntwood River in Nisichawayasihk territory.

The chief and council would like their community to invest in the new dam in return for an eventual share of the profits after loans have been paid off. But well-paid jobs that lead to careers in the trades could be a more immediate benefit of the dam in the growing community, where young people have few other employment options.

The new training centre, designed by the Winnipeg-based architectural firm that designed the Royal Canadian Mint, will be built by Winnipeg's Parkwest Projects.

It will have room for about 100 students at a time, including boarding facilities for aboriginal people from other communities and local people who live in crowded conditions that make study difficult.

The computer lab will become an Internet cafe by night, with dining facilities open to the community during the day.

Training will be offered in trades directly relevant to work on Wuskwatim or other new northern dams Manitoba Hydro has on the drawing board.

However, the centre will also offer business incubation services.

"We've done this with a very long-term view," said Coun. Elvis Thomas. "It does not necessarily depend on whether Wuskwatim goes ahead or not."

The new dam will be shelved if the Nisichawayasihk Cree vote against it in an upcoming referendum.

Manitoba Hydro wants to start construction this winter, providing opportunities for some of the 90 Nisichawayasihk and South Indian Lake people who have already completed some training under an ATEC director hired in early 2003.

Wuskwatim construction is expected to last until 2010, by which time several larger northern dams could already be underway, offering jobs until about 2015. By that time, trainees should be well-established in careers, with skills transferable to other northern construction projects.

The 28,000-square-foot ATEC building, which will include a daycare, features an expansive roof with windows that maximize use of natural light.

The federal government contributed more than \$3 million to the project. The rest was paid by the Nisichawayasihk Cree through existing funds and loans.

Nelson House is about 800 kilometres north of Winnipeg and 80 kilometres west of Thompson.

 helen.fallding@freepress.mb.ca

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