

BY GEOFF McLARNEY

POWER TO THE PEOPLE

The Cree communities of the Mushkegowuk Council depended on Great North Builder's Supplies for jobs and essential goods. When its owner retired, those communities stepped in to fill the void.



The Mushkegowuk Council of Chiefs at their 2019 Annual Mamohitowin Assembly, and Partners of MDC Supply GP, operating Great North Builder's Supplies.

For 40 years, Castle dealer Jack Hood served the Cree communities surrounding Moosonee, Ont., from his store, Great North Builder's Supplies. His retirement in 2018 threatened to leave a devastating hole in the region's economy.

Behind the scenes, however, a backup plan was in the works. The Mushkegowuk Development Corporation (MDC), part of a community-owned organization that promotes the economic infrastructure of the eight member Nations making up Mushkegowuk Council, recognized the store's importance. In fact, as Hood was approaching retirement, "we had already started discussions with him," recalls MDC general manager Albalina Metatawabin. However, she added, "the timing didn't work out for us to take over the store at that time."

But MDC pursued the project, convinced the store to fit with its priorities. A big part of MDC's role is to identify and plug areas of economic "leakage" from the small region it serves.

"Just the connection to employment for any business—just creating one job makes a difference. When this store closed it was a huge impact," Metatawabin says. At

the time, they had seven or eight people on staff.

Although a seamless transition to the new ownership wasn't possible, MDC aimed to limit the store's hiatus, initially planning an opening for last February. While many businesses saw their plans disrupted by COVID-19 around that time, at Great North, "it was more a matter of being ready to open," Metatawabin recalls.

"It essentially became a startup because it had been closed for so long. We had to restock and check inventory. We had to recruit. That caused a slight delay." Ultimately, the store reopened in the first week of March 2020.

"That's a key period for us because the winter road is open at that time, which opens up access to the communities north of Moosonee. So when a lot of other stores are idle, we're busy responding to customers."

From the beginning of their discussions about the business, MDC was interested in resurrecting it under the Castle banner it had borne under Hood. "The appeal of Castle is that it's a buying group, it's non-profit, it has support for its members," says Metatawabin. "The collaboration between members in that sector was attractive."

Great North has largely taken an "if it ain't broke ..." approach to the product mix that served it so well under Hood. "We trust that because they had been in operation for 40 years, whatever they had in place is going to work."

While it's building on a solid foundation, the business is also looking to the future. The MDC has been proactive in seeking customer feedback about the direction of the store, including its merchandise, through a public survey. "The plan has always been to diversify into other areas," Metatawabin explains. "Whether it be food, which is very costly in our region, or mining, which is a huge opportunity." A revival of interest in traditional ways of living off the land has also driven sales of camp supplies, she adds.

Now those needs are met by a business that has a long history in the community and is also owned by public stakeholders.

"It's been a long journey from when we started to the grand opening. That day we had partners, political leadership in attendance," says Metatawabin. "We were able to open doors to other communities. It was full of celebration and positive vibes."