

Fort Severn First Nation

GENERAL DELIVERY
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December 13, 2004

The Right Honourable Paul Martin, M.P., P.C.

Office of the Prime Minister
80 Wellington Street
Ottawa
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Via Fax: 613-941-6900

Dear Mr. Prime Minister:

RE: Fort Severn First Nation School Closure / Serious Mold Contamination

I am writing to you to inform your office about the slow progress of the Department of Indian Affairs to resolve the crisis in our community created by a serious mold infestation in our elementary school. In 2001, an engineering report recommended that our elementary school be condemned. Since then, the situation has rapidly deteriorated. Last winter, another engineering report discovered at least three types of mold existed in the school building at ranges 100 times higher than acceptable limits for human exposure. As a result, the decision of Chief and Council in consultation with the community and parents was to remove the elementary school students from the building until the Department addressed the matter. The school has been closed since June 2004. Since then, more studies have been undertaken by our First Nation and the Department has now asked for yet another study. While the Department is engaged in this process, our children and teachers are trying to learn as best they can in a former restaurant, various residences and other buildings in the community. This situation would be intolerable if it occurred in Toronto, Montreal or Vancouver.

The mold infestation in the school has had a dramatic impact on the social fabric of the community. Many parents have taken their children and temporary moved to other First Nations in Ontario's northwest or to municipalities such as Sioux Lookout or Thunder Bay. Our community has lost a number of senior staff who we cannot replace because of the cost of conducting all of these engineering studies which the Department of Indian Affairs refuses to reimburse us for or for the simple fact of lack of qualified personnel. Our nominal role has dropped with the departure of many families to have their children educated in a mold-free learning environment. However, we are concerned that the Department will use this temporary drop in the nominal role to cut funding to our education budget even after the crisis is over and these families return as we are at the end of a 5 year agreement and this years figures will generate figures for the next five years.

Is there any wonder why there is a mold problem in the school building? Thirty years ago when it was constructed, the then Chief warned departmental officials that they were building on an underwater stream and in muskeg condition. His warning was ignored. We are now living with the legacy of this decision.

Fort Severn First Nation needs a new school. As you can imagine, the climate here on the coast of Hudson Bay in Ontario's far north is extreme. Our winters are cold and our summers are hot. Buildings here deteriorate faster than in the south. The situation has been exacerbated by the mold infestation. According to one of the engineering reports, the mold is eating away at the structural and mechanical integrity of the school. And still, the Department of Indian Affairs is calling for another study.

Your government has committed itself to improvement the quality of education for First Nations children and youth on-reserve. The Minister of Indian Affairs has specifically articulated this commitment to the gathering of AFN Chiefs in P.E.I. earlier this summer. He reiterated this commitment in response to the Auditor-General criticism of the Department of Indian Affairs. Nonetheless, the Canadian Government has a fiduciary responsibility under Treaty #9 to provide for the education of our people. With the mold infestation in the school and the Department's apparent indifference to their health, safety and quality of education of our children and youth would be unacceptable if this crisis was facing any other group in Canada. There are human costs associated with the Department's approach. Many of our parents have taken their children out of the community to continue their education in other First Nations or in cities such as Thunder Bay or Sioux Lookout. Living down south, even on a temporary basis, deprives our students of their culture and heritage, especially their traditional language skills. Those parents who have remained in Fort Severn see their children studying in various spaces around the community such as kitchens and living rooms. The Department is not living up to its Treaty obligations to our students, parents or community as a whole.

I am requesting that you personally intervene in this manner. I invite you to come to Fort Severn and see for yourself the extent of the mold infestation and the impact that this is having on the social fabric of our community. Your office can reach me at the band office at (807) 478-2572.

Your sincerely,

Fort Severn First Nation



Chief Roy Gray

Fort Severn First Nation

CC: Minister, Indian and Northern Affairs