

Submission to the Anishinabek News –September 2010 Issue
By Jennifer Ashawasegai

Ontario ignores First Nations in archeology digs

THUNDER BAY – Thousands of artifacts up to 9,000 years old have been excavated at a site near Highway 11/17 and shipped off to Lakehead University without consulting any area First Nations.

"I haven't seen anything come across my desk," says Red Rock Chief Pierre Pelletier, who said he will have his staff double-check because the Ministry of Transportation insists that it consulted with First Nation stakeholders.

Fort William Chief Peter Collins also says his community was not consulted and, even if the provincial ministry did send a letter "this is not meaningful consultation."

MTO responded to an interview request by sending an e-mail claiming that First Nations and First Nation organizations had been sent letters Jan. 17, followed up by e-mails on April 1. "The Ministry and its consultants are more than willing to discuss and accommodate First Nations interest in this project," they wrote.

Chief Pelletier says the person in charge of the dig site – about 40 kilometres east of Thunder Bay – told him that MTO told them to consult with us. "He didn't have a clue on how to do that seeing how he was from out west."

MTO hired archeological firm Western Heritage Services Inc. to undertake the dig. The Alberta based company specializes in working in the industry development sector to conduct Heritage Resources Impact Assessments, heritage management and heritage resource development.

Over the past five years, First Nation provincial/territorial organizations have been working with government groups – including Ontario's ministries of Transportation and Aboriginal Affairs – on the heritage and burial Sites working group of the Ipperwash Inquiry Priorities Action Committee or IIPAC.

Nathan Wright, Justice Coordinator for the Chiefs of Ontario and co-chair of that working group says, "Ontario developed a guideline for archeologists to follow. The province is still not following the guidelines. The incident in the Northern Superior region should not have happened."

It's been 15 years since Dudley George was shot and killed by police at Ipperwash Provincial Park. Dudley George was one of a group of community members occupying the park, and protecting a burial site. Among the 100 recommendations of the Ipperwash Inquiry report released three years ago are two pertaining to consultation and accommodation and seven related to heritage and burial sites.

"The provincial government should promote respect and understanding of the duty to consult and accommodate within relevant provincial agencies and Ontario municipalities," reads one recommendation.

The Report recommends that government and Aboriginal stakeholders develop policies acknowledging the sites, and promote First Nations participation in decision making, which should eventually be incorporated into government legislation and policies.

"The provincial government, in consultation with First Nations and Aboriginal organizations, should determine the most effective means of advising First Nations and Aboriginal peoples of plans to excavate burial or heritage sites."

Chief Collins says if MTO wanted to follow proper consultation protocol, they should have met with Chief and Council at Fort William First Nation. "A traditional ceremony would have taken place prior to the excavation," he says, and participation in the project would have included a community member on site for the duration of the dig, which is to wrap up at the end of October.

For now though, Chief Pelletier says the site near Thunder Bay is being closely monitored. "We've been keeping a very close watch on it. In fact we have a community member working with them on a three-month program that we put together with the Union of Ontario Indians, so that we'll have somebody there to document what's coming out of there.