

Monday, August 29th, 2005

## Give native leaders key role in fight against gangs

By: The Brandon Sun

Westman's aboriginal leaders will get a tremendous opportunity this evening. If all goes well and at least six of the 11 men and women who make up Brandon city council vote the right way, they could be invited, along with other community leaders, to share in a very important job for our city.

Tonight, Coun. Errol Black (Riverview) and Coun. Vince Barletta (Rosser) will put forward a proposal for a task force to deal with organized crime. As everyone knows by now, the Indian Posse street gang has taken root in Brandon in the past several months and it needs to be stamped out in order for citizens to feel safe.

While that hard job will be driven by the police, it also requires a community effort. This is where our aboriginal leaders come in.

They have a responsibility to make sure they can keep the hardcore group of IP — police say there are fewer than 20 in Brandon — from recruiting their youth and getting them to commit all sorts of crimes. It is their responsibility, along with ours, to make sure these young people — many of whom come from disadvantaged backgrounds — have opportunities and alternatives to joining a gang and getting into trouble.

Area native leaders have been relatively silent since it emerged earlier this summer that the IP had arrived. That is unfortunate, as a sudden denunciation of the gang and what it stands for might have gone a long way towards putting the group's members on the run at an earlier point.

Perhaps it is because they haven't been invited to be part of the solution. At last week's community meeting on the gang issue, Brandon Friendship Centre vice-president Robert Ironstand said that so far, his community hasn't been asked to take part.

"Our people are part of this particular problem right now. We have to be part of the solution as well," he said at the meeting.

He's absolutely dead-on. That's why we hope that whatever form this group takes, it includes people like Ironstand as well as leaders from Sioux Valley Dakota Nation, Dakota Ojibway Tribal Services, the Manitoba Métis Federation and the myriad of other groups that are there to help aboriginal people live in our city.

With the aboriginal and Métis population growing quickly, not just in Brandon but all over Western Canada, it's extremely important all leaders find ways to keep these kids from getting in gangs in the first place so our police and justice system aren't tied up with people once they offend.

"We need to approach it by prevention," Ironstand said. "Because [the gangs] are targeting aboriginal youth. They are initiating them and that's where these crimes come from — from the initiation process."

In order for this to happen, it's going to take leadership and lots of it.

It's going to take Mayor Dave Burgess' support — as we wrote here last week, the mayor hasn't done enough to assure people he's taking the problem seriously. This is the perfect opportunity for him to do that.

It's going to take money — every year there is an attempt during council's budget deliberation to spend money on programs to reach young people at risk of getting into trouble. Every year, the majority of councillors either reject spending the money or pare it down considerably. This year, it's obvious that must change.

Most importantly, though, it's going to take will — will from municipal leaders to fight the causes of crime and will from aboriginal leaders to denounce what is happening and find ways to eradicate gang activity from our streets.