

Aboriginal business association banquet highlights include auction, speaker

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The focus was on aboriginal entrepreneurs and businesses on Thursday night, as the North Eastern Alberta Aboriginal Business Association (NAABA) held its annual general meeting at the Sawridge Inn and Conference Centre.

The evening was a mix of business and pleasure, with the first hour being spent voting in the new board before the actual banquet began, said NAABA general manager Cheryl Alexander.

Highlights of the evening included keynote speaker Chief Clarence Louie of the Osoyoos Indian Band of British Columbia, and a silent auction benefiting the Wood Buffalo Wellness Society — also known as the Mark Amy Healing Centre — which raised almost \$12,000.

Louie was a perfect fit for the evening, Alexander said, because his national renown comes from a focus on aboriginal business.

“He only does three speaking engagements a month and we felt very honoured that he chose NAABA as one of them,” Alexander said.

“He was a phenomenal speaker and ... he speaks flat out, like he said “a true warrior gets a job” and in his speech he said, of the ancestors, they were all hard workers. ... His first nation is full of young entrepreneurs and working people.”

Alexander added that of the 450 guests that evening — including representatives of the regional council and mayoral office, oil and gas delegates, business owners, and aboriginal and community leaders — she suspected many had come because of Louie’s reputation.

Louie’s visit was also important because it fits with the spirit NAABA, whose purpose, she said, is to connect and align aboriginal businesses and the community.

NAABA is not-for-profit and is comprised of two groups of members: full and associate.

Full members are businesses that are at least 51 per cent aboriginal-owned, and there are about 80 full members at this time.

Associate members can be included in one of four different sub-categories: aboriginal business outside the Wood Buffalo region, of which there are nine members, not-for-profit organizations, which has about 25, oil and gas industry, which has 13 members, and suppliers and general contractors, which has about 63 members.

“One of our (mandates) is to create an environment to help aboriginal business, to help them meet associate members and vice versa because it adds value to both sides,” Alexander said, adding that business can also depend on NAABA to screen valid aboriginal owned businesses for them to partner with.

“Industry looks to us to make sure the members are credible,” she said.

Another benefit for full members is that NAABA is part of the Regional Economic Development Link, a partnership with the Fort McMurray Chamber of Commerce, the Fort McMurray Construction Association and NAABA. REDlink is a great resource, Alexander said, for connecting entrepreneurs, workers and employers.

One special aspect of the evening was the realization of how largely NAABA has grown in its 15-year history.

Alexander said Suncor representative Brenda Erskin’s speech summed up the sentiment perfectly.

“She reflected on when NAABA started there was 50 people sitting around having a breakfast, and about five a business owners at the time sitting on the board,” Alexander said. “And here, 15 years later, there are 450 people enjoying a five-course dinner in the evening.

“How remarkable.”