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[See table of contents](#)

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Sam Laskaris



Norway House

Larson Anderson had some unfinished business. “I have always believed, given the right circumstances, I could make an impact as a Chief,” Anderson said. “I was a councillor for two terms, from 1994 to 1998. And I had unfinished work that was needed to make Norway House the best First Nation in Canada.” Anderson was confident he could make positive things happen for his First Nation, and though others have also done their part, his successful work in recent years with the Norway House Cree Nation in Manitoba is now receiving plenty of notice. For example, Cando (the national organization that promotes and supports economic development in Indigenous communities across Canada) chose Norway House as the Community of the Year at its 2023 conference. “The road out of poverty is to create partnerships with the Federal and Provincial governments and businesses,” Anderson said following the community’s

triumph. "By working with others, Norway House Cree Nation is opening the doors of opportunity and beginning to control its own destiny. Winning this prestigious national award is positive recognition for our focus and efforts over the past years." (Winnipeg Sun, 2024)

Anderson was involved with numerous other ventures between his time as a First Nations councillor and his return in 2018 as Norway House's elected Chief. He ran his own businesses for a decade. He also went back to school, enrolling at the University of Manitoba's prestigious Asper School of Business. Larson also worked for the First Nations of Northern Manitoba Child and Family Services Authority. "And during that time, we did some financial reviews and we found lots of mismanagement and issues with the board," Anderson said. "So, I ended up getting into politics because all the board members were Chiefs. It wasn't that I wanted to get involved in that type of politics but as part of the job I tried to do what's right and what I feel is fair to the organization. Doing the reviews kind of got me back into politics."

Anderson said that he irked others by asking too many questions. He said that's why he was let go from his position with the Child and Family Services Authority. He returned to his First Nation where he was assigned various positions, including project manager, property manager, and general manager. His inquisitiveness, however, continued. "I ask questions," Anderson said. "That's my nature. If people don't like my questions, then they shouldn't do things that they shouldn't do. I ended up getting into hot water. I lost my job again because of the questions I had."

But this time, being the one to challenge authority proved beneficial for Anderson. "There was a big difference because now there is social media," he said. "Prior to that, there was really no way to question the leadership in any community or reserve. Now you can get your voice out there. So, as I was questioning some of the things that were going on, I started getting more and more people interested in wanting me to come home and get back into politics." And that's what he did shortly thereafter. "I wanted to finish my university degree with courses from Asper as part of general Bachelor of Arts Integrated [Studies] degree," he said. "So, I finished that and I went home and I got nominated [for Chief]. And I won. I beat the two-time [Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs] Grand Chief."

In the half dozen years, he has served as Norway House's Chief, Anderson has had his share of accomplishments. So, what makes him happiest about working for his First Nation? "I would say the increase in the number of jobs that have been created," he said. "In 2018, when I first became Chief, our payroll was \$500,000. That's grown to an average of about \$1 million a year for the past three years. So, if anything, my accomplishment has been getting more people to work. That's how I was raised. And I think that's the best way to get out of whatever rut we're in as First Nations." Through its various ventures, Norway House Cree Nation has about 900 employees. "I would probably say about 875 of them identity as Indigenous," Anderson said. He believes it's critical to have the majority of those employees be Indigenous: "We're Indigenous and we're trying to grow our Nation in Norway House."

In its efforts to diversify, Anderson said Norway House is keen to be involved with business ventures outside the boundaries of its own First Nation. An example of this is

Norway House Cree Nation's purchase late last year of the 200,000 square-foot building on Taylor Avenue in Winnipeg, which served as the headquarters for Manitoba Hydro. "This venture is set to unlock economic prosperity for our Nation, creating numerous employment opportunities and setting in motion a wave of economic benefits that were once beyond our reach," Anderson said. "We look forward to the prospect of collaborative efforts with business partners, government, and other First Nations to collectively enhance our capacities and foster a mutually beneficial future." (Brandon Sun, 2024) Anderson said Norway House Cree Nation is also looking at other projects in Manitoba's capital city: "We're close to finalizing a 100-suite hotel in Winnipeg as well. We're trying to grow our Nation. And the way you grow a Nation, I've learned, is you grow the people. Not the assets. Not the buildings. It's the people we have to grow. That's how you grow a Nation."

Speaking of people, Anderson has gained a reputation for being compassionate. He's always willing to give others the benefit of the doubt. It's something that he has done since owning his own businesses. "People began to know me as someone who gave the individual who was kind of frowned upon or castaway an opportunity to work," he said. "And many people were surprised at how well they could work. And I felt that we should be able to help everyone that wants to do something or work." To this end, Anderson said he is supportive of young individuals who are beginning their work careers. And he offered a message of hope for them: "If you want something in life, if you want to get ahead in life, get a job, go back to school, find something to do. My brother once told me that everyone can do something. There's always something that somebody can do. It's no excuse saying I don't know what to do or I don't know how to do anything. There's no such thing. If you look hard enough you will find something." Anderson said he's done his best to bring the attitude that everyone has something to contribute to Norway House. "As employers or as leaders we need to give them a little bit of slack and help them," he said. "People make mistakes, especially ones that haven't worked for any time during their life. We need to be a little more flexible and compassionate. I think we do that in my community."

Anderson feels there is still plenty of work to be done, especially regarding what he believes is the most important issue that is hindering successful Indigenous economic development: "access to funds, either through equity or financing." He also singled out "government processes that take a long time to get approvals. An example is the addition through reserve process. So far, it's taken five years to add a small parcel of 18 acres of land in the middle of nowhere on Highway 6. It's been five years and we still don't know when the end is going to be." Anderson also noted that funding options for Indigenous communities is a problem from coast to coast to coast. "There is very little funding or grants from Canada, and if approval is received, the limit is too low for a major business like a community's store," he said. "They have this core program where the maximum they will grant you is \$1 million. With a project that is \$20 million, \$1 million dollars does not get you very far."

Anderson realizes not everyone is as fortunate as Norway House Cree Nation. "They delayed this project that we're doing now in Norway House," he said of government officials. "We are building our store but no thanks to Canada. We have

funding elsewhere.” Thus, Anderson believes his First Nation does have the capacity to implement its goals and to have the desired economic impacts. “From where I started until now, yes, we do (have that capacity),” he said. “Especially in terms of the financing side of it. We now fall under First Nations Financial Management Board. So, we are able to get our funding through there at favourable rates. I guess the only thing that we need is more capacity building of our membership so we are able to run the store and things of that nature.”

Anderson also believes it is important to form partnerships with others to alleviate the challenge of finding sufficient employees to run new ventures. He said First Nations should attempt to align themselves with a group, other First Nations, or even individuals in order to work together and make projects go faster. “That way we can share responsibilities,” he said. “If I don’t have enough staff or people that are wanting to work in an area, then other communities might have some. If you take five or 10 from each community and you have 10 communities, that’s at least 50 workers. So, I think the issue lately is staffing. That’s been a challenge.”

One new venture was announced in the summer of 2022. The Manitoba government signed forestry revenue-sharing agreements with three First Nations in the northern parts of the province, including Norway House. “This agreement is a resolution regarding controversial forest harvesting that occurred previously within the area,” Anderson said. “The agreement to replant the forest, define financial contributions, establish a mutually acceptable long-term plan for the sustainable development of the area, and outline a package of employment opportunities will allow Norway House Cree Nation to benefit from the resources in its traditional territory. The Manitoba government has agreed to ensure appropriate consultation in future activities and share the financial benefits of future resource development. Environmental stewardship of our traditional territory is essential for appropriate environmental, social and governance economic activities in Northern Manitoba.” (Thompson Citizen, 2024)

Norway House Cree Nation also earned kudos in mid-2022 when it launched its new economic development department. That has been a goal for Anderson since he first became Chief. The department assists members seeking support to commence their own business. Department officials can also help members draft business plans, assist with filing funding applications, and supply seed money to see plans come to fruition. For example, Jimmy Thunder worked on the development of a comprehensive economic development plan for the Nation while he was director of the department. The mission statement addresses the goals of economic independence through a healthy local economy and a strong presence in the provincial economy. His great satisfaction is “seeing the incremental positive changes in the community already and the long-term benefits coming from the Nation’s investments.” Anderson said the department provides a sense of pride for the First Nation while helping members meet their goals. “People want to be part of the development (of the Cree Nation) and not only working, but also finding ways to contribute by creating jobs and finding some wealth for themselves,” Anderson said. (CTV News Winnipeg, 2024)

Though he was critical of others who were in leadership positions for his First Nation before, Anderson said he has carried over some aspects of their work into his thinking

today. “What I go by is what I learned when I was a councillor,” he said. “Back then that’s how all of our projects were done, by mentorship and apprenticeship programs and the like. We still do that. It’s a little bit different now. We’re doing more on-the-job training. We’ve also bought and run our own housing construction company. We build modular homes and we’re excited to build modular buildings now. So, we’re going to build our own store using our company.”

Indeed, Anderson believes self-ownership is the way to go. “Being able to have your own company, then you have more flexibility,” he said. “You can meet community needs. So, we are planning to put those trade apprentices in place as we go along.” A prime example is the trades building that was constructed at the local high school. “That is run by Frontier School Division,” Anderson said. “We built a facility that is big enough for students to learn how to build houses, two at a time. Through the school year they are learning carpentry, plumbing, electrical, and drywall inside the building. We have a good relationship with Frontier. And we have a good plan moving forward.” Norway House also has plans to expand educational pursuits. “In our Taylor building [in Winnipeg], there’s a 250-seat cafeteria,” Anderson said. “And we started discussions with Frontier School Division again to offer a college diploma for a culinary arts program. In Norway House students can go to Grade 12 and usually that’s where it ends. This way we can actually expand it to a college diploma with the Taylor building opening up by the fall.” Anderson was also instrumental in the construction of another jewel in his First Nation—the Norway House Cree Nation Health Centre of Excellence. “When I got elected in 2018, there was a project on the table that was a \$100 million health centre,” he said. “It took a while for government to approve it, about four months after I got elected. Before they started clapping I said ‘One more thing. I want to build it.’ They were reluctant at first but we signed an agreement with a partner that had deep pockets, so we got the project. We were the first [First Nation] in Canada to build our own health centre.”

However, Anderson doesn’t want to give away too many details on upcoming projects that his First Nation is planning. He’s hoping proposed partners prove to be beneficial: “So far we’ve had a couple of good ones. I can’t say that much about what we are doing today. But if the partners that we’re working with now come to the table and follow our lead, then the sky is the limit. There are enormous opportunities that we have been presented [with]. I alone can do a lot for my community. But I think we can expand that. We can do a lot for all communities if we put away our pride and are left to work together.” Considering its lengthy list of accomplishments in recent years, Norway House Cree Nation will continue to thrive under Anderson’s leadership.

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